



*Chapter*  
**TWO**

“What a week, huh?”  
—Liz Lemon, *30 Rock*

Drinking alone was the worst. The main character in rom-coms could always pull it off, casually sitting on a barstool dressed to the nines, ordering a martini and waiting for the love of her life to walk up to her. But as Harsha sat there, hunched over in a too-short-for-comfort red dress, trying to get a piece of nacho out of her teeth, she could only think about her mother’s phone call and the walk of shame she would have to do at the anniversary party, dumped and dateless.

She finished her cocktail and looked around the bar, sighing. This never would have happened to her in college, over eight thousand miles away from her Mumbai home. In California, she was confident in herself and didn’t have such unrealistic expectations to uphold for her family’s sake.

She’d made friends—real friends—without a second thought about what Maa or Papa would think of their family background. She had fond memories of going hiking with them, asking them to pose for her against the breathtaking views of Oakland Hills.

Although she’d still relied on her trust fund money for some

expenses—California wasn't a cheap place to live, after all—her life was a breath of fresh air, and, away from the prying eyes of the God-boles and the media circus that tended to follow them, she no longer had to hold herself back from being her fun-loving, carefree self. It was fascinating how joyful life could be when Harsha wasn't constantly looking over her shoulder or apologizing for a social misstep.

Realizing that, Harsha told her parents, a month before graduation, that she wouldn't be returning to Mumbai—she wanted to make a name for herself instead of living in Papa's shadow forever.

Harsha wasn't surprised when her parents didn't show up to her graduation ceremony because of conveniently timed “work conflicts.” It was all the proof she needed to distance herself from them—and their money—and decide that she didn't need their approval anymore.

And yet, the Universe wasn't done playing cruel jokes. Because the second she got on the plane to Bangalore a week later, ready to prove herself to the world, there Shashank Kapoor was, sitting in the seat next to hers. The perfect parent-approved gentleman. The handsome rich guy in a suit who was happy to listen to her talk about how she wanted to be her own independent self now that she'd graduated.

Maybe Harsha didn't have to face her family at the party at all. She could simply fake her death, move to Paris, and get a fresh start. Meet a nice Frenchman who'd buy her croissants and kiss her in front of the Eiffel Tower.

Except moving back to India was supposed to be her fresh start. Harsha snorted and ordered another vodka soda. Where was a good man when you needed him?

“Harsha?”

She looked to the left and smiled at Veer, who'd just joined her at the bar. He looked surprisingly different out of his black-and-yellow barista uniform, now dressed in a plain red T-shirt and fitted blue jeans. Without the Sunstag cap, his hair was smooth and wavy,

slightly curling at the base of his neck. “Hey,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

He hooked a thumb behind him. “Getting another round of beers for us.”

Harsha leaned back in her seat to spot a booth where two of the other baristas she saw every day were sitting. Maybe they were all close friends. “Isn’t Friday night about getting a break from the people you work with during the entire week?” she joked.

“It is.” He grinned. “Why do you think I’m standing here with you?”

She laughed. “You see me at Sunstag every day, too, so I don’t count.”

Veer’s eyes glinted. “I think I’ll be the judge of that.”

Harsha usually would have enjoyed this interaction a lot more, but right now, she was too mad at men—and humanity—to appreciate Veer’s flirting skills. The bartender slid Harsha’s third vodka soda in front of her, and she took a sip before easing into the itchy barstool that was rough against her bare legs. Then she said, “Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what is it?”

She took a deep breath, then spoke. “Why do Indian men care so much about what their parents think?”

Veer paused, just as he was about to signal to the bartender. “What?”

“For example”—she sipped her drink—“why do they bother dating modern women, telling them sweet nothings, making them feel wanted and chosen, only to turn right back around and decide to have an arranged marriage?”

“I . . . don’t know?” Veer scratched the back of his neck, that very spot where his hair curled. “I’ve never been a fan of arranged marriages.” His scruffy jaw gritted for a second before he quirked an eyebrow at her. “Why do you ask?”

She drank deeply and turned so she was facing him completely. “You know, just asking for a . . . friend.”

Veer leaned both his arms against the bar counter and scrutinized her. His forearms were thick and dusted with dark hair, the muscles straining from his movement. Harsha looked away just as he said, “Is that why you looked so upset at Sunstag this afternoon? Someone broke up with you?”

Harsha bit her lip. A small instinct made her shift her barstool just a few inches closer to him. “I’m surprised you noti—”

“Harsha? Harsha, oh my gosh! Hi!”

*No. No, no, no.* Harsha slid off the barstool, having recognized that voice. That noisy, whiny voice. The voice of her cousin, who was now flashing her expensive diamond ring as a faux hello.

“Hey,” mustered Harsha with a weak smile.

Neha was her only family member who lived in Bangalore, unlike the rest of the Godboles, who occupied Mumbai—the one downside to moving here. Luckily, she hadn’t run into her until now. Neha pulled Harsha in for a hug, which Harsha did not return, and then added, “Oh, you haven’t met my fiancé, have you?”

The engagement had happened while Harsha was still in California, so she thankfully never had the pleasure. “Nope,” Harsha said, raising her eyebrows at Neha’s future husband. *Hmm.* Tall, handsome, rich, and probably obnoxious, given that Neha had decided to marry him.

“Rohan, Harsha. Harsha, this is Dr. Rohan Jha. He’s a neurosurgeon. Congrats on graduating—sociology, was it?”

“And photography,” Harsha clarified.

“Right, congrats, tough field,” Rohan said, shaking her hand stiffly, then looked at his wristwatch as though greeting her was a waste of his time. Yep. Neha’s type, for sure.

Neha’s gaze fell on Veer, and the very slight gap between his and Harsha’s barstools, and she held her hand out. “Oh, hello. I’m Neha Godbole, Harsha’s cousin.”

“Hi,” he greeted her back. “I’m Veer—”

“Oh, I know who you are.” She simpered, then turned to Harsha. “Harsha, good to see you being serious about dating. After all

those *flings* you had in America”—Neha let out an exhale—“it’s nice that you’ve finally moved on from boring white boys.”

Harsha’s eyes widened, and she stared from her cousin to Veer, who had stood up from his barstool, looking just as confused as she was. “Neha, Veer is—”

Neha went on, clapping her hands. “And you’re coming to my parents’ anniversary party! Your first family event in nearly six months, with a boyfriend this time. How exciting! Rohan, isn’t it exciting?” She turned to her fiancé, who stifled a yawn in response.

Harsha’s palms went clammy with sweat, and she wiped them on her short dress. “Did Maa tell you about that?”

Her cousin beamed at her. “She gushed to everyone in my wedding prep group chat about how well things are going in your new relationship.” Her eyes went to Veer again, and Harsha realized, with a deathly lurch, that Neha thought the man standing next to her at the bar was her boyfriend. The boyfriend who no longer existed. The Universe obviously hated her.

Veer sat back on the barstool, frowning. “I’m sorry, but Harsha and I—”

“—are so excited about the anniversary party,” Harsha said, speaking over him before she could stop herself. She wound a hand around Veer’s own and ran her other palm along his warm, muscley forearm. “And your wedding, of course.”

“Your first plus one! I’ll have to go in and update your RSVP—it must have gotten lost in the mail?” Neha added with a smile, though her eyes narrowed.

“Sorry about that,” Harsha said. She rested her head on Veer’s shoulder and forced out a sigh of pleasure. “We’ve been busy.” She could feel his dark eyes on her, a searing gaze that made her want to disappear into the crevices of the earth and never surface, but she ignored him and held on tighter.

“So what do you do, Veer?” Neha asked, cocking her head.

“He works at Sunstag Café,” Harsha said, then held back a wince. *Oh, fuck.* She knew without a doubt what Neha, with her classist, uber-rich upbringing, was going to say next.

“A barista?” said Neha, with a split-second wrinkle of the nose. “That’s cute.”

“He works *for* Sunstag as the district manager.” The lie fell out of Harsha’s mouth, although she knew it was wrong to say it, and Veer stiffened next to her. She tried to ignore the churning in her belly. Ordering all those vodka sodas—and nachos—might not have been the best idea.

“I *guess* that’s an upgrade.” Neha frowned. “Well, it’s been great catching up, Harsha, but I have got to get out of this dingy bar. The things we do for our friends, right? We’ll see you both soon!” After giving Harsha a painful kiss on the cheek and shaking Veer’s hand the couple walked away, whispering together.

The second they were out of sight, Veer pushed away from Harsha, scowling. “What the hell was that about?”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you,” whispered Harsha, letting go of his hand and running her fingers through her hair. “She’d never have let me hear the end of it if she found out Shashank and I broke up.”

Veer’s eyes narrowed. “Why would she care?”

“Because she’s two years younger than I am, she works for the goddamn UN, and she’s marrying McDreamy in less than two months.”

“Well, sorry that being with a barista would be so embarrassing.” Veer took a step back and folded his arms.

“You don’t know her,” Harsha said, pleading. “She’d have said something rude to you. I was just trying to—”

“She didn’t need to. *You* did, on her behalf.” Veer shook his head at her, sighed, and went back into the crowd.

Despite the guilt and embarrassment she felt, Harsha watched him walk up to the other baristas, considering the idea that was starting to form in her head—and it was a good one. Veer was handsome, now that she thought about it. Cute smile. A good physique. He wasn’t an actor, but he could be with some training.

The anniversary party was in one month, and every single one of the Godboles was expecting Harsha to bring her perfect boyfriend, including her cousin. Maybe she could still make that happen . . .

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