

Ch. 1: Wednesday, Early Evening

The Tampa heat hit Emma as she stepped out of the yoga studio, squeezing through her damp sports bra and making her wish she'd brought an extra shirt. She took a grateful gulp of the breeze wafting off the bay and up the Hillsborough River—warm, but better than the sweaty sauna behind her. A sideways glance confirmed her best friend, Rani, looked effortlessly cool despite the same workout. Typical.

She elbowed Rani lightly as they headed toward Emma's condo. "I still think it's weird you don't know the Indian names for the poses."

Rani's eyes left the sidewalk ahead, her full lips stretching into a smirk. "My parents used Hindi to keep me from understanding them, not Sanscrit."

Emma's brows furrowed. "I thought you understood Hindi."

"I do," Rani admitted, flashing a mischievous smile. "Don't tell my parents."

"What was supposed to be secret?"

"Bickering, mostly, or talking about me." Rani shrugged, her purple and pink sports bra highlighting her energetic presence. Emma felt a twinge of envy but quickly suppressed it.

"Bad things?" Emma's folks had always been encouraging—even after the split. Two Christmases, two birthdays, and competing bounties for good grades? She hadn't minded. A friendly rivalry, akin to twins playing one-on-one basketball in the driveway. An occasional elbow, but in the end, they'd hug it out. Or worse.

"No," replied Rani. "Those they said in English."

"Jeez."

"Yeah. Immigrants aren't big on positive reinforcement." Rani grimaced but her brown eyes sparkled with their usual amusement and irony.

"I've heard that about Asian parents."

"Tiger moms."

"Isn't that a Chinese thing?" Emma asked, confused, as they rounded the corner to her building's entrance.

"China ran out of tigers ages ago. Now they have to import all their endangered animal dongos."

"Oh my god!" Emma glanced around, hoping not to see anyone she recognized, or worse yet, recognized her.

“They think it’s an aphrodisiac. For men. If the ‘tiger moms’ were drinking the penis tea, maybe they’d deserve the label.”

“Can you stop saying penis?” Emma’s voice dipped into an urgent stage whisper as Rani started reaching for the glass and steel door that opened into the lobby.

For Rani, it was like chum in the water. “Penis!”

“I’m not playing this game, Rani!”

“You could stand to play with some penises.” Rani laughed loudly, her confidence filling the space. “Come on, Emma. Lighten up a bit!”

Emma eyed the light above the elevator warily, waiting to be scandalized. “Please, Rani, my neighbors...”

They piled into the elevator, and Rani promptly started tapping the close button as if it were a game controller. Emma frowned at her. “You know it’s a placebo, right?”

“Sure, but pressing it makes me a Jedi,” Rani quipped. “Elevator mind-tricks. Except I’m tricking myself. My own personal penis tea.”

The doors slid shut, and Emma let out a slow exhale. She adored Rani, but sometimes her friend’s unfiltered mouth left Emma on edge—especially if neighbors could overhear.

The elevator doors opened with a soft chime, and the cool, gray hallway stretched ahead of them. Emma always thought it smelled faintly like new paint, a reminder of the tower’s relentless, sterile modernity.

On the fourth floor, Emma led Rani down the short hallway to her unit. After a quick beep of the security pad, she pushed the door open. Her condo was modest—a single bedroom, one bath, plus a kitchen-living space. Once, the windows framed a sliver of the bay’s shimmering blue. Now, they reflected the stark, mirrored surface of a new tower—a constant reminder of what she’d lost.

Inside, Rani immediately clocked the beach chair in the corner where her ex-fiancé Colin’s La-Z-Boy used to be. “You know, if we just stuck a tiki umbrella on that thing, we could run a beach bar out of here.” She tossed her gym bag onto Emma’s mismatched couch. “Who needs a real sofa, anyway?”

The mismatched couch cushions sagged slightly, and a single potted plant in the corner had gone brown weeks ago. It wasn’t a disaster, but it wasn’t a home, either.

Emma’s cheeks warmed. “It’s temporary.”

“Girl, it’s been ten months,” Rani shot back gently. “We might need to stage an intervention at IKEA.” She raised a brow. “Or you could just let me push you in one of their glorious carts.”

“Maybe someday.” Emma tried not to fidget, suddenly aware of the stale vibe her place gave off. The same vibe she’d been living in since Colin packed up and left for Minnesota. “But I’m not exactly rolling in free time. Work’s insane right now.”

Rani rolled her eyes, heading toward the bathroom. “You’re an accountant, Emma, not an ER surgeon. I’m sure you can spare an hour to look at furniture that isn’t made of plastic tubing.”

Emma followed, stepping over the threshold into her bathroom, which Rani had once dubbed a “disgrace to modern plumbing.” The water pressure was indeed subpar, but she’d adapted. Rani, however, refused to adapt.

“I swear it gets weaker every time.” Rani snapped on the light, peering at the showerhead like it was a suspect in a criminal investigation. “Or maybe I’m just stronger—goddess routine and all.”

Emma leaned against the sink. “It’s not that bad.”

“You’re drenched in sweat from yoga, and you’re about to take half a shower.” Rani turned on the faucet, narrowing her eyes at the pathetic stream. “I rest my case.”

Emma bit the inside of her cheek. She did hate the trickle that passed for running water, but it was hardly priority number one in her life. At least, that’s what she kept telling herself. The truth was, Emma had adapted to the weak stream not because it was fine, but because it was easier than facing the hassle of fixing it. That was the story of her life these days—adapt, settle, repeat.

She was about to muster some half-baked defense when Rani flicked off the faucet and spun around.

“All right, let’s talk solutions.” Rani planted her hands on her hips, still in her neon sports bra. “I have a contractor in my phone—Marco. Dependable, great with renovations—and, as a bonus, easy on the eyes. The kind of guy who knows how to fix things, you know? Let’s get this place fixed up so I stop having to shower under a glorified garden hose.”

Emma’s stomach did a tiny flip, though she wasn’t sure why. Maybe the idea of letting a stranger tear up her bathroom felt momentous, like a physical stand-in for the changes she refused to make in her actual life.

She tried to laugh it off. “I don’t even know if I can afford that right now.”

Rani shrugged. “He’s reasonable. Plus, it’s not like you have to gut the place completely. A new shower head, maybe some tile. Just…freshen it up. Take a little risk.” She paused meaningfully. “It might help you feel like you again.”

Emma swallowed. It had been a long time since she’d considered what “feeling like herself” even meant. She used to find happiness in small details—a pastry’s texture, the pink glow of a Florida sunset—but those pleasures felt unreachable lately.

Rani's expression softened, humor giving way to real concern. "Look, Em, I know you're still hurt. But if changing your environment even slightly can kickstart something bigger..."

Emma let out a slow breath. "You always know how to get under my armor, huh?"

"Don't I, though?" Rani smirked and patted Emma's shoulder. "Anyway, we can talk to Marco, or you can do your own research. Just promise you'll consider it."

Before Emma could reply, Rani bent down and began peeling off her leggings, tossing them onto a small pile of laundry in the corner. "Mind if I shower first?"

Emma laughed softly, stepping out of the bathroom. "By all means, see if you can coax more than a trickle out of that thing."

Rani's voice floated after her as she reached for the shower. "I might just call Marco myself—tell him we have a plumbing emergency." She paused dramatically. "And by 'we,' I do mean you."

Emma rolled her eyes and sank onto her sofa, ignoring the squeak of the worn cushions. Despite Rani's relentless banter, Emma felt a faint pulse of excitement at the idea of fixing something—anything. Maybe a better shower wouldn't solve her heartbreak or her disillusion at work, but it was a start.

She heard the water sputter on, along with Rani's indignant huff. A quiet smile tugged at Emma's lips. Perhaps letting a calm, reliable contractor into her life wasn't the worst idea.

By the time Rani emerged—towel-clad, hair dripping—Emma had dried her hair and changed into some bar-ready apparel.

Rani, wrapped in towels, gave Emma a wide grin. "I see you're ready to go on safari."

"Born ready," Emma replied, voice brimming with mock bravado.

"Easy, tiger," Rani replied. "I've still got to check your closet."