

CHAPTER SAMPLER

MAHTAB
NARSIMHAN

orca currents



Embrace the Chicken

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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In this high-interest accessible novel for middle readers,

Shivani is horrified when her mother volunteers to cook traditional Indian food for her school's annual fundraiser.

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For all my fellow immigrants

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Chapter One

Shivani played with her curry and rice. Usually she couldn't resist the chicken drumsticks melting off the bone into the thick gravy. Or the sweet-spicy smell of coconut milk and *garam masala*. But today she could barely eat a mouthful.

Why was life so complicated? It had been hard enough leaving Mumbai, her apartment and all her friends. It had taken months to find her way around

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here, to stop feeling like an outsider. She finally had a best friend. And now this.

She might as well get it over with. Even before she asked the question, she knew Papa's answer. *Let me be wrong this once*, she prayed.

"Matter what, Shivani?" Ma asked, in her usual broken English.

Shivani took a deep breath and put down her fork. Her parents were both staring at her. Only Anita continued eating, without a care in the world. Moving to Canada, making new friends in a new town, getting used to a whole different lifestyle—nothing seemed to bother her younger sister.

Shivani avoided looking at Ma as she spoke. "We have a school meeting tomorrow night. At eight. It's about a fundraiser. We're supposed to bring a parent. You'll come, won't you, Papa?"

Papa scratched his nose and let out a big burp. "Rupal, my dear, your cooking is to die for." He flashed a warm smile at Ma. She slapped his hand playfully.

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“Papa, please!” said Shivani. “You’re not answering my question.”

“I am appreciating your mother’s cooking,” he said. “And you should too.”

“I do, Ma,” said Anita, taking a short break from shoveling food into her mouth. “I could kiss your hands every day.”

“Hello? Fundraiser meeting?” Shivani said, frowning at her sister. “Will you come, Papa?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t make it. I was happy that I could go to a few parent-teacher events this year. But I’m very busy at work these days. Your mother will have to go with you.”

“No!” said Shivani. The word burst out. She glanced at Ma. The look in her eyes made Shivani want to crawl under the table and stay there. “I’m sorry, Ma. I *really* am, but there will be a lot of talking and asking questions and you...your...” Her words trailed away. The curry and rice on her plate was now a cold puddle of brown, flecked with white.

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“I talk,” Ma said softly. “No too good, but I am listening also.”

Shivani shot a pleading look at Papa. “Please, can’t you come just this once? I’ll massage your scalp with oil and pull out the hairs from your ears, without complaining.” Papa had a tough time getting Anita to do this, or Ma. This ought to sway him.

Papa shook his head. “It’s time Ma started getting more involved with your school matters. You will both need to help her. We all have to settle down in Canada, and that includes Ma. You girls are learning English very well because you are around it all day. Same with me. But your mother needs to get out and meet other people. And you must be patient. I will take you up on your kind offer of hair removal, if it still stands.”

Shivani sighed. Now she was stuck with a gross job, and she didn’t even get what she wanted. Why did they have to immigrate to this small town where they were the only Indians? Where there wasn’t even an Indian restaurant, let alone an Indian grocery shop?

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Papa had to drive Ma all the way to Toronto for her spices. They should have moved there.

“Can’t Ma do all that after the meeting?” said Shivani, breaking the silence that hung over the dining table like a monsoon cloud.

Shivani thought of the boys she liked in her class. Ryan was cute, but he still hadn’t noticed her. It was just a matter of time. If Ma came to the meeting and opened her mouth, he’d notice her, all right, and run in the other direction. No, Ma had to stay away until Shivani was sure she’d made it into the “cool” crowd.

“I come tomorrow,” said Ma. “Argument finish.”

“You’re both horrible!” yelled Shivani. She jumped to her feet, pushed the chair back and raced to her room.

If pleading didn’t work, maybe some drama would. It always did in the Bollywood movies!

Shivani might actually die of embarrassment.

Even though she left Mumbai only a few months ago, Shivani isn't feeling like such an outsider anymore. She likes her new school, and she finally has a best friend. But when her mother volunteers to cook for the school's annual fundraiser, Shivani is horrified. She is sure her mom will completely embarrass her. What if she cooks one of the "stinky" dishes that Shivani loves but is too ashamed to eat in front of her friends?

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