

A close-up, high-angle photograph of a young man with dark, wavy hair. He is looking upwards and to the right with a gentle smile. He is wearing a plaid shirt. The background is a soft-focus blue.

CHAPTER SAMPLER

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PROJECT BOLLYWOOD

MAHTAB NARSIMHAN

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For Tanya. Who gets my stories.

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Chapter One

Salman curled his scrawny biceps in time to the thumping beat of the dance music. He checked himself out in the gym mirror and generally liked what he saw. A handsome, if *slightly*—okay, *very* thin—young man. He had work to do though. He had the same name as a famous Bollywood star. He wanted to be as famous as that Salman Khan. He added squats while continuing to work his arms.

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“Salman, your mother is on the phone,” said Ramesh, walking into his room. He held out the cordless phone. “She said she tried calling your cell phone, but no one picked up.”

Salman grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat off his face. Ramesh, who basically ran the Khan household, turned down the volume on the stereo.

“You could have knocked before coming in,” Salman snapped.

“I did, but how could you have heard me?” said Ramesh. His tone was soft.

Salman immediately felt bad for *his* tone of voice. It wasn’t Ramesh’s fault that he was trying hard to look like his hero, Salman the Star. And the music *had* been loud.

“Hi, Mom,” he said. “Sorry, I was working out and didn’t hear my phone. What time are you and Dad getting home?”

Ramesh started to tidy up Salman’s room. Salman let him, moving toward the window.

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“What? Mom, you promised you’d be home by the weekend. The blockbuster *Hungama* just opened. We were planning to see it all together. Remember?”

Salman noticed Ramesh standing in the doorway. He looked sad. Salman turned away from him, not wanting his pity. He wanted his parents to come home, but apparently that wasn’t happening anytime soon. He placed the handset down and put it on *speaker*. He picked up his weights and started doing more curls.

“These buyers are very demanding,” said his mom. “Your father and I are still negotiating the contract with the lawyers. We’ll be working the whole weekend. I’m sorry, Salman. But why don’t you invite your friends over? You said they loved watching Hindi movies with you.”

“It’s not the same as watching it with my family,” said Salman coldly. “Your business always comes first.”

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“What do you want me to do? Shut down everything and just fly home?” his mom asked, her tone sharp. “You know what that would mean?” Salman rolled his eyes, even though his mom couldn’t see him. He knew what came next. He’d heard it a million times before. “No more expensive gadgets for you. No video cameras, or editing software, or big monitors to screen your movies on. We’ll stay home, live a modest life, and watch movies. Would you prefer that, Salman?”

Salman almost snorted. His parents had several companies that manufactured IT security equipment. These products and services were always in demand. Even if they retired now, they could all live comfortably for the rest of their lives. It didn’t take a genius to figure that out. The fact was, his parents loved the luxuries money could buy, but above all they loved to work. *Thrived* on it. It was as important as the air they breathed. Their son, Salman figured, was more

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like a french fry to them. Fun to eat, but best had in small amounts.

“Okay, Mom, I get it,” said Salman as he started doing some more squats. His mom was still talking, asking the usual questions about school, but he was in no mood to share. She was probably getting a more detailed report from Ramesh anyway.

“Salman? Are you there?”

“Yeah, Mom,” he said. “But I have to go.”

“Okay, love you, sweetheart,” she replied.

“Bye, Mom,” said Salman and disconnected the phone.

He picked up his cellphone. Three missed calls from Mom. None from Dad. Ramesh was the one looking out for him and he’d been rude to him for no reason. He felt bad for a second. He’d make it up to Ramesh later. He texted his best friend, Jason.

Want to hang out tonight?

Jason texted back almost immediately.

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Can't. Have to babysit sibs. Check with Maya and Arman.

Maya and Arman were the other two of their group. If it weren't for them he'd be as invisible in school as he was at home. He fired them each a text. Neither responded.

Maya had so many extra-curricular activities going on, it was a wonder she had time to do homework. Arman was into biking and was making the most of fall. He wanted to get in as much time as he could before the snow made it tough to ride. He was probably out riding now. Sighing, Salman looked at the clock on his phone. He had time for a shower before lunch.

Lunch was delicious. Ramesh, born and brought up in Chennai, had mastered the art of the crispy dosa with spiced potato filling. Even his friends raved about Ramesh's cooking.

“Great food, as always, Ramesh. Sorry I snapped at you earlier,” said Salman when he finished.

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Ramesh nodded. "I understand. It mustn't be easy for you. But your parents have a lot of responsibilities on their shoulders. They have to make sure their employees are also looked after."

Salman felt the familiar irritation rising, and he fought to keep it down. "You don't need to make excuses for them," he said. "I'm fine and thanks to their hard work, I have everything I could need or want."

Ramesh didn't respond. He started clearing the table.

Salman got up and wandered into the media room. It had a giant-screen TV, a perfectly calibrated surround-sound system and soft lighting. It was impressive, but it was just one room in their fourteen-room mansion. They also had an indoor pool, a sauna, and gym. The manicured lawns behind the house were so huge it was hard to believe this place was right in the middle of a big North American city.

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If this were a Hindi movie, their house would have belonged to a villain who had earned all his wealth through terrible and illegal means. But Salman's parents weren't villains. They were just missing. All the time.

Salman flopped onto the cream sofa in front of the TV. Instead of turning it on, he stared at the ceiling.

This house had *everything* a person could want. Except people to share it with.