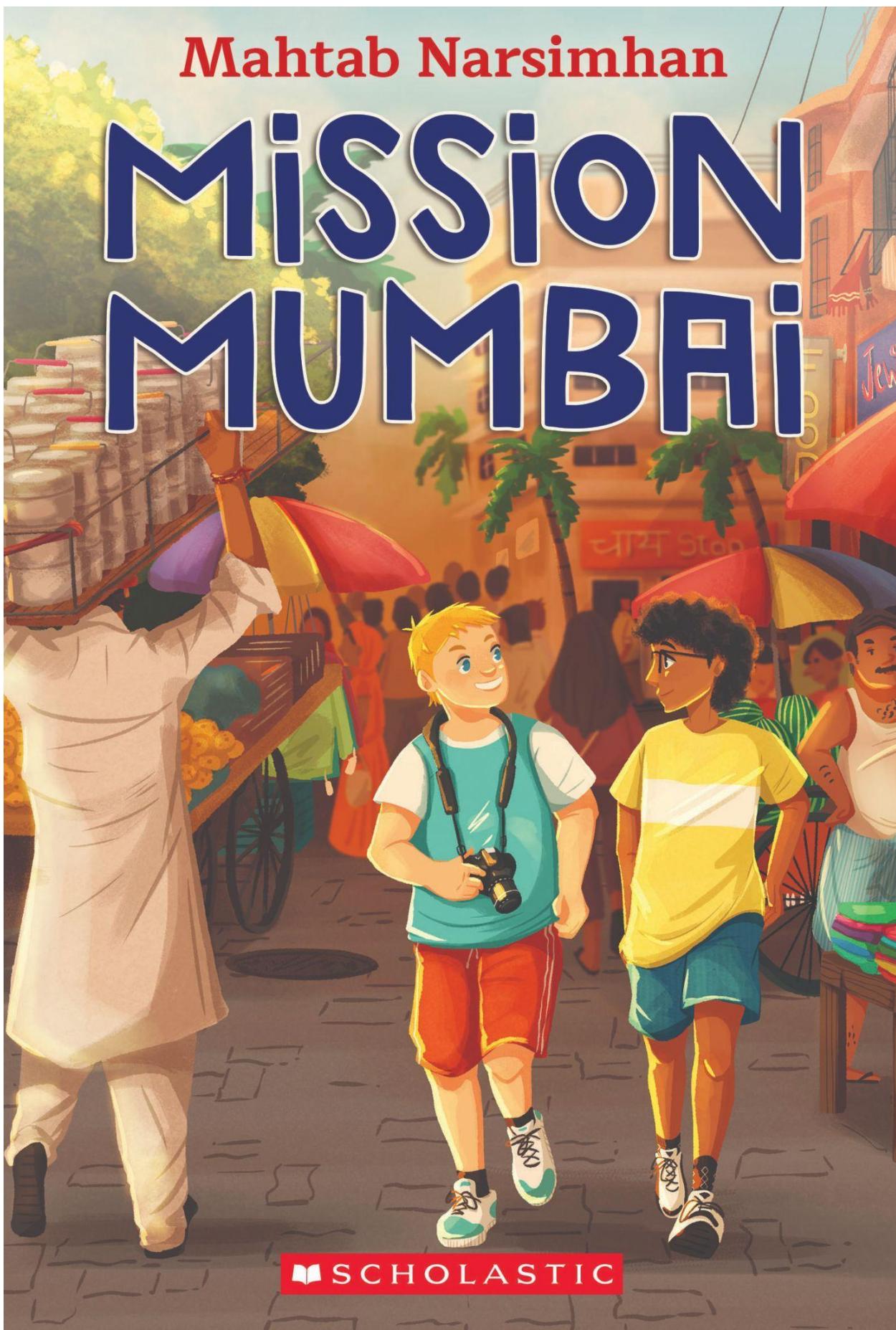


Mahtab Narsimhan

MISSION MUMBAi



 SCHOLASTIC

MISSION MUMBAI
A Novel of Sacred Cows, Snakes, and Stolen Toilets
By
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Chapter One

I wanted a clear shot but there were too many people blocking the way. Clutching a weapon that was highly inadequate for this dangerous mission, I crept toward the beast. It sat still, its crazy eyes glaring at me. I lunged forward and attacked.

The stick landed on the cow's backside with a loud whump. She jumped up with a plaintive moo and bolted, udders swinging, crap bombs exploding in her wake. The stench mingled with the smell of rotting garbage in the midday heat, making my eyes water. I ignored it all, my Nikon camera whirring, capturing close-ups of the animal.

People scattered as she ran. The road was almost usable now. That is, if you avoided the puddles of poop. I got some pictures and cleared the road—mission accomplished! I looked around, waiting for a congratulatory thump on my back. Rohit's flat (not apartment as he kept correcting me) in the heart of Mumbai was just a few steps away at the elbow of the L-shaped lane. I glanced at the second-floor window, hoping Rohit had seen my heroic stunt, but he was nowhere in sight. Even though I was older (and wiser) by a good four months, his mom had made him promise he'd keep an eye on me during my very first trip to India. I'd tried to explain to her that it was the other way around—I was Sam taking care of Frodo in the *Lord of the Rings* of life. All I got for my efforts was a pat on my back and a "We shall see, Beta," from Mrs. Lal.

An ominous hum filled the air. I whirled around. A rapidly swelling crowd started gathering, screaming stuff I didn't understand. Angry faces moved closer, pointing at me and glaring. The whiff of stale food, sweat, and cow dung assaulted my nose. My blood turned icy even though my scalp was hot enough to fry an egg. What was *wrong* with these people? I'd moved the cow so they could use the road and they were mad at me? It *must* be the weather. No one could stay sane in ninety-eight-degree heat without an air conditioner and a cold can of root beer.

Rohit still hadn't made an appearance. "Good people," I pleaded, folding my hands in a *namaste*. "I come in peace. What's the problem?"

They shuffled even closer, continuing to stare at me. Sweat trickled down my back. The cow plunked down in the middle of the road and mooed. It had the effect of a war cry. The mob charged.

I barreled through a weak spot in their defense, for once glad I was so big. I pushed aside a skinny boy who tried to grab me, and hurtled toward the safety of Rohit's flat—my home for the next three weeks. If I survived the next *three minutes*.

"Rohit, HELP!" I screamed as I raced up the steps to the second floor, my camera clutched tight in my slick hands. I was so loud my parents in New York could have heard me. Feet pounded up the stairs behind me as I thumped on the door and jammed my finger onto the doorbell. Rohit's flat had one of those weird deadbolt locks that needed a key, and I hadn't bothered carrying one. The door flew open just as a swarthy man reached the landing below.

"STOP!" he called out.

In your dreams. I pushed Rohit aside, jumped in, and slammed the door shut. Trembling, I sucked in a lungful of cumin-scented air. Somewhere in my panicked brain it registered: Mrs. Lal was making lunch and it was going to be another gastronomic adventure.

"Open up!" said a gruff voice from the other side of the door. Thoughts of food evaporated.

"What's going on?" asked Rohit. He pushed his glasses up his long nose and peered through the keyhole.

"You gotta save me, Ro, my bro. These people have lost their marbles."

"Dylan, what happened?" asked Mrs. Lal as she stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel.

"Er . . . you see, there was this ugly Warg monster on the road, like the one Bilbo rescued Thorin from in *The Hobbit* and—" Rohit was shaking his head imperceptibly and I stopped. Mrs. Lal liked facts. She wasn't high up on the imagination scale.

“Dylan, speak,” said Mrs. Lal, snapping her fingers. “That man is going to break down my door if we do not open up soon.” She was a small woman with a large voice. Even Mr. Lal avoided arguing with her.

“There was a cow in the middle of the lane,” I blurted out. “Traffic was going around it. I felt sorry for them.”

“Oh no,” said Rohit, his elbows jerking inward. It was this really weird tic he had, and he looked like he was about to do the Chicken Dance around the flat. “Tell me you *didn’t*.”

“Yeah . . . I tried to move it.” I looked from son to mother, omitting the minor detail that I’d also wanted some good action shots.

“Hey, *Ram*,” said Mrs. Lal, smacking her forehead with her palm. “This is going to be very, very bad. Rohit, didn’t I *tell* you to keep an eye on him? You *never* listen to me.”

She glared at him. Rohit glared at me. I had no one beside me so I glared at the wicker sofa. The pounding on the door was deafening. It sounded like a million angry people out there and only a flimsy door was between us.

“How did you move the cow?” said Mrs. Lal, flinging the towel away and tucking the edge of her saree into her waist. Battle stance. Those men better watch out. My money was on Mrs. Lal.

“I hit it with a stick,” I said.

“Tell me this is a joke,” said Rohit, his eyes goggling behind his glasses.

“No,” I squeaked. “Just a little tap on the backside and now these weirdos are out for my blood. What did I do wrong?”

“You have a criminal inside,” the gruff voice called out. “Give him to us.”

“Take Dylan to the bedroom and do not show your faces till I call you,” Mrs. Lal said. “Go. Now.”

Rohit grabbed my arm and dragged me off just as his mom opened the door. The landing was boiling with people and my heart quivered like Jell-O. Mrs. Lal stood tall, all four and a half feet of her, barring the way.

I peeked out the bedroom window, gauging the distance to the ground in case the mob overpowered Rohit's mom and I had to jump. We'd just gotten to India and I was already in trouble. Mom's words echoed in my mind.

"Dylan, remember you're their guest. Please behave yourself."

I stared into her brown eyes, knowing exactly what she was trying to say: Be respectful, don't let your imagination run wild, and don't overeat. She knew how carried away I could get with all things fantasy—mostly books and movies—and good food.

"I'll try my best, Mom," I said.

She smiled and patted me on the back. She was British and rarely gave in to any PDA. "I know you will."

"I suggest you also think about what I told you, young man," Dad said. "I expect you to join a soccer team in the fall. And if Rohit has a gym at his place, use it regularly. You can get a head start on the season by losing a few pounds."

"That's enough, Neil," Mom snapped. "Your son is going to have a good time with his friend. Can you let him enjoy his trip, and lecture him later?"

"You spoil him, Rosemary. Just look at him—all he wants to do is eat and take pictures all day. What kind of future does he have?"

"So why don't you step up and help?" Mom replied, her voice shrill with emotion. "Oh wait. It's because Mr. Hotshot Moore has time for everyone in the world but his family!"

And that's when I left, their angry voices following me all the way up to my room on the second floor of our massive brownstone.

The door to Rohit's flat banged shut, bringing me back to reality. Mrs. Lal called out, "Dylan, Rohit, come here, please."

My heart stopped galloping. I wouldn't have to jump out the window after all. I swiped my sleeve across my sweaty face and stepped out of the tiny bedroom.

"Yes, Mrs. Lal."

"What is it, Ma?"

Her face was a thundercloud. "*Do not hit any animals on the road ever again.* Most of them, especially the cow, are sacred in India. Hindus worship cows. Am I making myself very clear?"

That explained the heightened emotions among the populace. I put on an I'm-very-sorry look.

"When you hit a cow, it is as if you're slapping one of their mothers. It is considered a huge insult."

"But Mrs. Lal, it . . . she, er . . . their mother was sitting in the middle of the road churning out crap by the cartload, and obstructing traffic. I was only trying to help."

"Cows have right-of-way in India," she said in a tight voice. "I explained to them that you did not know. Now, if *Rohit* had been caught hitting a cow . . ." Her voice trailed off, horror etched on her face as she gazed into the distance. Within moments that penetrating gaze was back on us. "I thought I told you to keep an eye on Dylan, *henh*, Rohit? This is the first time he's visiting India and you let him *hit a cow*?"

The shrill whistle of the pressure cooker shattered the ominous silence. We played pass-on-the-glare again.

"Sorry, Ma," said Rohit. His glasses slid to the end of his sweaty, shiny nose. He flicked the edge of the frames with a finger and they shot back up again.

"Sorry, Mrs. Lal," I echoed. "Won't happen again. I'll be very good to all animals from now on."

"Keep an eye on your friend," she told Rohit, wagging a finger under his nose. "If he gets into any more trouble, *you're* going to be in hot water. You used to listen to me but three years in the States have made you Mr. Know-It-All. I have lots to do before your cousin's wedding and I don't have time to babysit twelve-year-olds. At your age, your father and I—"

“I know, Ma, I know,” said Rohit, his voice getting squeaky and high-pitched, which happened when he was stressed or angry.

She retrieved the towel from the floor, slapped it onto her shoulder, and walked into the kitchen. I flopped down on the sofa and stared at the fan. It rotated, sluggishly trying to push the thick, hot air around the room. It didn’t make a difference—it was hotter than ever.

“That was crazy!” I said. “I’m sorry I got you in trouble.”

“You could have been hurt.” He sounded mad and a little scared. “You’re *banned* from solo trips. From now on, wherever we go, we go together.”

“Like Frodo and Sam,” I said, winking. “Cool.”

“It’s not funny, Dylan,” said Rohit. “If anything had happened to you . . .” His voice trailed away and his twitch intensified. “I’d never be able to forgive myself.”

“Lighten up, Ro. No way a cow-obsessed mob could hurt me. But honestly, you were supposed to be watching from the window, so it’s just as much your fault.”

Rohit opened his mouth and shut it again. That part was true. If he’d warned me, I wouldn’t have *touched* the sacred Mother, let alone whacked her with a stick.

Delicious smells filled the flat, making my mouth water. Back home I’d been over to Rohit’s place often enough to know his mom was a great cook. Now that I wasn’t going to be torn limb from limb, I realized how hungry I was. I couldn’t wait till lunch. But there was still so much to see and do. This was my first, possibly last, visit to Mumbai. I couldn’t see my parents ever coming here. Not after what was probably happening back home. I refused to dwell on it or I’d be depressed for the rest of the day.

“Let’s go for a walk,” I said. “We have three weeks to explore this place and we’re sitting here arguing. Besides, gotta get some exercise so I have more room for lunch.” Rohit stared at me, twitching as if he were trying to pull up his shorts with his elbows. I’ve always been the one dragging Ro around.

A scrawny guy with skin the color of milk chocolate stood next to our teacher, Mr. Tintpulver, surveying the class with an almost defiant gaze. But his nervous twitches and tics were drawing whispers and sniggers from the class. I knew exactly how that felt. I'd gone through the same thing when I'd been the new kid. The bullies would only move on when someone newer showed up. I felt sorry for the guy. The next few weeks were going to be torture for him.

“Dylan Moore!” Mr. Tintpulver’s voice brought me back to reality.

“Yes, sir?” I replied, thinking, Crap, crap, triple crap. Why me?

“I’d like you to be Rohit’s guide for the next two weeks. Show him around, introduce him to your classmates, and make him feel welcome. Okay?”

“Sure,” I muttered. There was no point arguing with Mr. T. He was old, but strict and stubborn. And super smart, but he’d slipped up this time. Pairing the twitchy new kid with the most unpopular nerd in class was social suicide for both of us.

Turned out that it was the best idea Mr. T ever had. Ro and I found out we had a lot in common—similar interests and pet peeves. We both loved to read, hated team sports, and didn’t have brothers or sisters. I wanted to know more about India and what life outside of America was like, and Rohit was an expert. He wanted to fast-track integrating into the American culture and lifestyle, and I was happy to help.

At one point I’d said, “You know, this reminds me of one of my favorite friendships of all time—”

“Frodo and Sam in Lord of the Rings,” Rohit had cut in.

I’d stared at him in silence. At last, a kindred spirit who loved Tolkien and—I’d come to find out later—all things fantasy. And who needed a friend just as much as I did. Ro and I had been best friends ever since.

“We’re going out, Ma,” Rohit said, popping his head into the kitchen. He jammed his feet into his shoes without bothering to untie the laces. “Listen,” he said, his voice dropping to

a whisper, “please don’t get me into any more trouble. Ma is already stressed about having to face all our relatives here without Papa. I just want to get through this trip and go back without having her blow up at me twenty times a day.”

“So what? She calms down just as quickly,” I said. “You just need to know how to handle her better.”

“When *you* do something stupid, I’m the one who gets yelled at,” said Rohit.

“Me?” I said in mock horror. “I’m mostly awesome except when adventure calls. And this place is like an exotic movie location. How can you hold me back at a time like this?”

“Oh yeah?” said Rohit. “A hundred bucks says you won’t make it to the end of our trip in this *exotic location*. You’ll be screaming to go home in a week!”

“You’re on, bro! Keep your money ready.”

He punched me on the arm. I punched him back and got ready to grab him. Ro was such a lightweight that most times he toppled over with the lightest of taps from me.

“I’m used to winning,” he said.

“So’m I.”

“Lunch will be ready in an hour,” Mrs. Lal called out from the kitchen. “Rohit, keep *both* eyes on Dylan. I promised Rosemary I’d keep her child safe.”

I rolled mine as I grabbed my camera and an apple from the fruit bowl. Mother and son were overreacting. What trouble could a street-smart New Yorker get into in Mumbai?