

“I would love to sit at a table with Sara and Elizabeth: two entirely believable characters and a lot of delicious food for thought.”

—Linda Sue Park,

Newbery medalist and *New York Times* best-selling author of *A Long Walk to Water*



Sixth graders Sara and Elizabeth could not be more different. Sara is at a new school that is completely unlike the small Islamic school she used to attend. Elizabeth has her own problems: her British mum has been struggling with depression. The girls meet in an after-school South Asian cooking class, which Elizabeth takes because her mom has stopped cooking, and which Sara, who hates to cook, is forced to attend because her mother is the teacher. The girls form a shaky alliance that gradually deepens, and they make plans to create a cross-cultural dish together and win a spot on a local food show. They make good cooking partners . . . but can they learn to trust each other enough to become true friends?

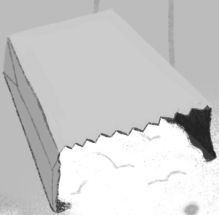
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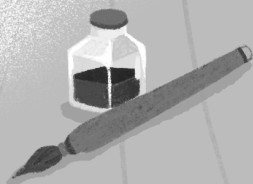
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A Place at the Table



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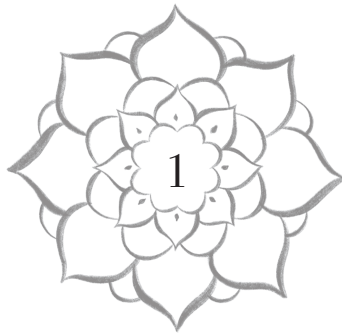
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SARA

COOKING IS PAINFUL. Sitting at the back of an afterschool cooking club I didn't sign up for is even worse. And listening to a bunch of whiny white kids complain about the cooking club is actually excruciating.

Especially because my mom is the teacher.

I look at the clock on the wall. Three thirty p.m. This is going to be a long afternoon.

"Now, class, please settle down and join me at the table," Mama calls politely, her hijab slightly askew, sweat shining on her forehead.

I cringe. I can't help it. Her Pakistani accent is thick, even though she's lived in the United States for almost three decades.

The kids in Mama's class giggle and look at their phones, their bored fingers swiping the screens. They're a small group, twelve middle-schoolers. There are only two boys, even though the flyer Mama spent so much time on specifically said everyone was welcome. A few are veterans, seventh- and eighth-graders who did cooking club with the original teacher,

Chef Elaine. From the way they keep throwing suspicious looks at Mama, it's clear they don't think anyone can replace their teacher, especially not some foreign lady in a hijab.

I stifle a sigh. Everyone stands in pairs in Poplar Springs Middle School's kitchen classroom, where I'll be taking FACS — Family and Consumer Science—later this year. I hang back from the group, near the giant metal appliances. There's an open kitchen with neatly stacked pots and pans where the FACS teacher, Mrs. Kluckowski, does demonstrations. But there are also six cooking stations for kids, each with its own stovetop, oven, and sink. A metal island on wheels stands in the middle of the room. Mama waves and points, finally convincing everyone to gather around. Supplies for the club's first recipe are piled on the island: a brown bag labeled ZEBRA BASMATI RICE, a bucket full of onions and potatoes, a bunch of wilting cilantro, and a few bright tomatoes.

Thank God I'm not part of this stupid club, I think as I stretch out my legs on the floor and lean against the wall. It's an inconspicuous spot at the back of the kitchen, near the metal refrigerator. I make a small pile of my things on the floor: backpack, sketchbook, a can of still-cold Coke. It's not as if I'm trying to disappear, but I won't exactly be upset if these junior chefs don't notice me. Like that would ever happen.

Poplar Springs is a small suburb in central Maryland, halfway between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Some residents can trace their families back generations; others are transient, moving every time they get a new job. There are a handful of

brown people. Most of the Muslim kids go to an Islamic school called Iqra Academy, thirty minutes away. Not all, though; there are two eighth-grade girls I know from the mosque. I sometimes see them laughing in the hallways, but they just nod at me. There's also Ahsan Kapadia in sixth grade, but we don't share any classes. Like me, he's quiet and keeps to himself. Like me, he was at Iqra until middle school.

I sigh again as I think about my school. At least, it *was* my school until this fall. My best friend, Rabia, who I've known since preschool, doesn't understand why I left. To be honest, neither do I. It was one of those decisions eleven-year-old girls don't get to make on their own.

Like which afterschool clubs to be present at, apparently.

I've already gotten narrow-eyed looks from the other kids. I think a couple of them are sixth-graders too, new to Poplar Springs Middle, like me. I feel their questions hanging in the air like heavy steam. I bet they're dying to ask who I am, if the lady in the headscarf is my mom or my aunt. As if all Muslims know each other.

Then there's Mrs. Kluckowski, short and barrel-chested, wearing a brown blouse and a plaid skirt that reaches almost down to her puffy ankles. Frizzy hair frames her frowning face. She stands near me at the back of the room, writing in a small notebook. Finally, she gives Mama a stern look and walks away.

No worries. I'm a master at ignoring people. You have to be when your parents get dirty looks at the mall and somebody shouts, "Go back home!" a couple of times a year. You definitely

have to be when not even one of your close friends from elementary school is in this new, very large middle school. I think of Baba's favorite quote from that eighties show he loves, *The A-Team*: "Pity the fools." And if that doesn't work, ignore them.

Unfortunately, ignoring is difficult right now. "Class, let's get started," Mama practically shouts. Her accent is more pronounced, with the *T*'s and *R*'s harder, so I can tell she's getting annoyed. She holds up a wooden spatula. "Can anyone tell me the correct name for this utensil?"

"What's she saying?" A tiny girl with freckles and a thin, dark ponytail whispers so loud that everyone starts giggling again.

I feel a frown digging into my forehead. These girls really are the height of disrespect. If Rabia were here, she'd walk right up to them, hands on hips, long braid swishing like a whip from under her hijab, and tell them to knock it off. I feel a little sorry for Mama. She's chewing her lip, ruining that pink lipstick she put on at the last minute. She looks as if she's about to drop the spatula and run away.

I'm not about to rescue her. Mama literally dragged me to this detestable cooking club because she thinks I'm not old enough to stay home alone.

"I'm in sixth grade, Mama," I'd protested. "I'm old enough to stay alone for an hour without burning the house down."

To be honest, I'd wanted to shout at her, but thought better of it. It would've been rude, and Pakistani parents like mine don't care much for their kids' impolite American ways.

“We never talked back to our parents, not even once!” Baba likes to say in his proudest voice.

I don’t think that’s anything to brag about, but clearly he does, so I always try to be respectful. Yet how have I been rewarded? Here I am, sitting on the graying floor of this freezing metal kitchen, listening to a bunch of complaints from girls who don’t know how to boil an egg.

Okay, I’m guessing about the egg-boiling part. I don’t care how many classes they took with Chef Elaine—most of them don’t look like junior chefs, with their polished nails and confused faces as Mama tries to explain the different types of utensils. Mama told me last week that the old teacher left suddenly and took the binder of club recipes with her. When Mama took over, she had to come up with lessons from scratch.

“Spatula!” Mama says grimly. “It’s a spatula!”

“We know,” one girl scoffs. She’s wearing a tight white T-shirt with a smiling cupcake emoji on it and the words SWEET STEPHANIE’S in sparkly silver font. I recognize her. She has her own cupcake business. I’ve seen her in the cafeteria, handing out samples when the teachers aren’t looking. She probably knows how to make eggs ten different ways. If anyone in this awful class has an ounce of cooking experience, it’s her.

She’s never offered me a sample. Good thing I don’t like cupcakes.

I grit my teeth and look away from Stephanie’s superior smile, away from Mama’s flustered face. At least I’ve got my

drawings. Thank you, past me, for packing my sketchbook and pencils at the last minute.

I insert my earphones and press PLAY on my iPod. Selena Gomez always puts me in a good mood. I pull a red pencil from my case. The garden I'm drawing has only one red rose, right in the center, and I want it to be perfect.

I hear Mama over Selena Gomez's melodious voice. "The first thing I'll be teaching you to cook is rice with potatoes. In my language, we call it *tahari*. It's very simple and quick."

"Tahari? I thought he was a fashion designer," Stephanie blurts out.

More laughter.

"I hope it's plain rice," the freckled girl with the too-loud whisper says. "Like, not spicy?"

Mama tries to smile, but it's causing her quite a bit of effort. "It won't be too spicy, but you did sign up for a South Asian cuisine class," she says, very sweetly.

"I can't eat spicy food. It makes me . . ." The girl sticks out her tongue, panting like a dog. Stephanie laughs. Is this a cooking class or a comedy club?

Time for some intervention.

I lean forward and stare the loud girl down until her eyelids flicker. Then I notice the girl next to her elbowing her in the side. She's in sixth grade too. I recognize her from language arts class. Elizabeth something.

She has wavy brown hair with bangs so long, they threaten

to cover her glasses. Elizabeth and her friend are a total mismatch. For one, the loud girl is way shorter than Elizabeth. Her name-brand jeans and fleece are the preferred uniform of Poplar Springs students, and if she weren't so outspoken, she'd blend in with everyone else. I have to admit, I prefer Elizabeth's style. She wears brown corduroys and a Harry Potter T-shirt. It's black, with gold letters that read *WHEN IN DOUBT, GO TO THE LIBRARY.* — *HERMIONE GRANGER.* She must be a little bit brave to wear something so book-nerdy.

Mama sighs very obviously, her cheeks puffing. "The good thing about spice is that you can adjust it to your taste," she says, patting her hijab in a gesture I recognize as nervousness. "Now, first thing is to soak the rice in water. Does anybody know why we do that?"

I can answer that. I've been watching Mama cook since I was tall enough to stand by myself in the kitchen. I knew the names of all the spices on Mama's spice rack before I could read: salt, paprika, turmeric, cumin, coriander, mint. The list is as long as it is colorful.

When I was old enough to go to kindergarten, Mama had time to open her own catering business. Suddenly our kitchen went from one pot on the stove to three or sometimes four huge cauldrons of steaming food cooking all hours of the day. Biryani and chicken korma on the stove. Samosas in the fryer. Dahi bara in the fridge. It's like living in a restaurant, only I never get

to leave. That's why I hate cooking. I have to scrub my hair for hours to get the smell of the spices out.

Mama is still looking around expectantly. The students all gaze back in silence, a few of them frowning as if she, their teacher, has no right to ask questions. Really, does nobody know why rice must be soaked before cooking?

I jab the PAUSE button on my iPod. Time to speak up, if only to save Mama some face. "If we soak the rice, it becomes softer and cooks faster," I call out loudly.

They all turn to look at me, mouths open—especially Stephanie, who thinks tahari rice is a fashion trend, and the loud one with the dark hair.

"Who is that?" the girl says to Elizabeth. I stare right back.

"Shhh, Maddy! Listen," Elizabeth whispers.

Mama raps a hand on the metal island to get everyone's attention. The clang from her wedding ring makes a few of them jump.

"Thank you, Sara," Mama says. "Everyone, this is my daughter, Sara. She will be spending our club time doing her homework. Quietly."

I nod and try to cover my sketchbook with my arms. Great. Now everyone knows my mother dragged me along, and that I was doing everything but homework.

Mama throws me a *Sorry* look and continues. "Let's measure two cups of rice in this bowl."

As the kids gather around my mother, I start up my music again. Before I can look down at my drawing, I notice Elizabeth watching me. Not in a mean way. More like she's curious. I hate people staring at me as if I've got a horn growing out of my forehead. I have to resist the urge to cross my eyes or make a face at her. It's not like we've ever officially met, even though we share Ms. Saintima's language arts class. Sometimes I see her in the halls, but Poplar Springs is so different from Iqra Academy, like a big, noisy circus where all the performers know each other except me. I don't talk to anyone most days. I keep my head down and rush from one class to another.

I suddenly miss Rabia like a craving for that mint chutney Mama used to make when I was little. I haven't seen her since school started.

I notice that the edge of my tunic sleeve is wrinkled, and I smooth it carefully. My eyes shift down to my drawing. The garden seems ugly now. Whose idea was it to draw a single rose in the center of all these white lilies?

Oh, yeah. Mine.

I feel someone's gaze on me. I sneak a peek, looking up at the kids gathered around the cooking island. Elizabeth again. She raises her right hand to her glasses, and I notice she's wearing bracelets, her only jewelry. One has a Star of David charm. It glints in the fluorescent kitchen lights like it wants to be noticed. When she sees me looking back at her, she smiles a little.

Ugh. The last thing I want to be is friendly right now, stuck in this hot kitchen with a bunch of rude kids making Mama nervous. I glare at Elizabeth until her smile slips and she looks away.

Good. Message sent and received.