

The Other One

A **5 TO 1** Novella



Holly Bodger



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One

I stare at my dressing table mirror while the stylist—Pranil? No, Praney—finger-combs gooseberry oil through my hair. It’s my duty as Poster Girl to look good—correction, to look *perfect*. As Mummy likes to remind me, I “must be what every girl in Koyanagar aspires to be: beautiful, smart, accomplished, proper.” I used to resent the time these duties stole from my day. Now that I’m married, I’m grateful for anything that gives me an excuse to stay away from Banevi. How’s that for irony—the girl all others aspire to be wants to be someone else.

Anyone else.

I close my eyes while Praney applies the hairspray. Although he shields my forehead with his hand, some of the mist lands on my lips. I pucker at the taste. It may smell like apples, but it tastes like furniture polish.

When I open my eyes, I startle a little. Mummy has snuck into my room and is now standing a few feet behind Praney. She’s a great deal shorter than him and practically fades into the floral wallpaper behind her. That’s nothing

new. Her sari is another shade of dull green and has a very simple border with no beadwork or embroidery. She has always been afraid of color. Afraid of standing out is probably more like it.

“Your hair has never looked better,” she says as she steps around Praney so she can move a curl off my shoulder. She’s lying, of course. My hair never looks good until the monsoon season has completely passed. How could it? The humidity level is near ninety percent. Even with a hefty dose of gooseberry oil, I’m one rain cloud away from looking like I’ve covered my head with black cotton wool.

Praney steps back, lowering his head out of respect or, perhaps, habit. Mummy pulls some folded yira notes from her choli and holds them out to him. He barely looks up enough to take the money. In fact, he keeps his head bowed until he has stepped backwards from my room. I don’t know how he does this without hitting the wall. Practice, I suppose.

“Is he doing Sudasa’s hair now?” I ask even though I know he’s not.

Mummy makes her way over to my bed, stopping at the footboard. The cerise sari Nani had custom-made for me is draped over the dark wood and onto my silk quilt. Mummy runs her fingers down the Kundan lace border. The embroidery took weeks, I’d bet. Every pearl is perfectly placed, and every glass bead sparkles. I’m quite sure it was made by the same man who did the sari Sudasa wore to my wedding. I still don’t know why he thought she needed those suns of luck. I was the one marrying a complete stranger.

“It’s twenty minutes before nine,” Mummy says, finally acknowledging my question. “There’s no time.”

“There would have been if she’d let him in when he arrived two hours ago.”

Once again, Mummy acts like Sudasa has done nothing wrong. She did the same thing when Praney arrived at half past six. She’d knocked on Sudasa’s door to see if she was ready, but Sudasa had bolted it shut. She refused to open it, yelling something about not wanting to look like a painted elephant instead. Of course, Mummy had pretended this was all part of the plan. She made up an excuse about misunderstanding the booking, and then she pushed Praney off to me saying he’d actually been ordered to do my hair instead. Although he’d smiled and nodded, I don’t think he believed her. Even if I am meticulous about my appearance, I would not have chosen to spend over two hours on my hair for the first day of my sister’s Tests. If I remember correctly, she didn’t even brush hers for mine. Not that it mattered one bit. No one cared how she looked two and a half years ago, and no one will care today. It may be *her* big day, but we both know the people of Koyanagar will be looking at me, judging me. That will never change.

“You should get dressed,” Mummy says as she turns back to face me. “The carriage will be here soon.”

“I’m not the one who needs to be there,” I remind her.

Mummy shoots me a glare. It bounces off my mirror, striking me as intended. “I don’t need the attitude, Surina.”

My blood boils, but then it always boils around Mummy now. It's her fault I'm living this life, after all. If I have to suffer, I want her to as well.

I remove the gold chandelier earrings from the tray on my dressing table, sliding them into my ears as I continue to watch her reflection. She wanders around my room, staring at every picture and pillow as if trying to find something she can criticize other than me. I want to tell her she's in the wrong room. It's Sudasa's turn to be scrutinized. I'm already living my punishment.

I put on my gold bangles one at a time. Unlike my charm bracelet, which was an obligatory gift from Mummy, my bangles were gifts from the people who came to my wedding. These are one of the few traditions that we've kept from the Old Country, probably because they were one of the few that actually worked in the bride's favor.

Mummy stops at my door. "I suppose I should go wait with your husband," she says. She always calls Banevi that—*your husband*. It's as if she thinks I need to be reminded that I'm married, which is stupid. You don't remind prisoners that they're surrounded by bars, do you?

When she leaves, I make my way over to my bed—my real prison cell. I slip into my cerise petticoat, pulling the drawstring waist until it's fitted but still comfortable. I don't have the same option with my choli. Nani ordered it using my regular measurements, and while my ribcage and shoulders haven't changed, my chest certainly has. I'll be lucky if I make it through the day without it tearing at the seams.

I tuck the plain end of my sari into my petticoat and then wrap the fabric once around my waist. Next, I carefully make the folds so they're precisely five inches wide, just like Mummy showed me when I had my Ritushuddhi ceremony after I turned thirteen. She told me this was the most important part of the sari. "If your pleats don't have swish," she said, "you might as well be wearing the dining room drapes." That's likely the real reason she's so meticulous about the draping of her own sari. She doesn't want people looking at her because it's sloppy. Mummy doesn't like people looking at her for any reason. That's why she married someone who liked to be the center of attention. Well, that and she had no choice, much like me.

Once I'm satisfied the pleats are perfect, I affix them slightly to the left of my waist with the largest safety pin I have. Although I've never been nervous about a pin holding before, I am today. My stomach seems to be expanding like a wet sponge, and the last thing I need is to have it exposed to everyone in Koyanagar. Not yet.

I wrap the sari around my waist one last time and then drape the pallu over my shoulder and arm. I turn sideways in front of the mirror and frown. I know I look the same, but I cannot help but wonder if someone will see a difference. Will they notice the way my face looks rounder and my cheeks more flushed? Will they be able to tell that I'm nauseous every moment I'm awake? I've tried very hard to hide it from everyone in the family. Everyone except Nani. There's no point in trying to deceive her.

As soon as I've slipped on my beaded juti shoes, I make my way to the entrance of our penthouse, taking my place between Mummy and Banevi. I tell myself, "Don't look at him, don't look at him, don't look at him," but like usual, I cannot stop myself from seeing what I don't want to see. Unlike Mummy, he makes no effort to not stand out. His hair is exactly as it was when he rolled out of bed, and his kurta is so wrinkled, he might as well have slept in that, too.

"You look nice," he says loud enough for everyone to hear. Score one for the obligatory compliment.

"I'm supposed to," I whisper through gritted teeth. "We're *both* supposed to."

The bite in my words is wasted. Banevi's problem is not that he doesn't understand how I want him to look, to behave. His problem is that he believes he's already doing it. Compared to living in a slum, I suppose he has improved a thousand-fold. Unfortunately, he still has a million-fold to go before he'll ever impress me.

I turn away from his smile, staring at the clock above the door instead. Five minutes pass, then ten, eleven, twelve... Mummy fiddles with her charm bracelet, turning it around and around her wrist. Nani checks her watch over and over again. After the tenth time, she sighs and then waves at Mummy. "Go, Nalini. Knock on her door again."

Mummy doesn't move at first. She already reminded Sudasa that the carriage would be here precisely at nine o'clock. She told her last week when she

booked it, and last night when we finished supper, and again this morning when she tried to convince her to let Praney in. Sudasa knows and clearly doesn't care. She's probably sitting in her room composing another one of her poems where she's some kind of symbolic animal in a state of misery. What is it with her and animals? I know she wants to show Papa that she's a poet like him, but can she not feel like a girl for once?

When Nani widens her eyes to a glare, Mummy makes her way down the corridor. She taps on Sudasa's door as light as a dripping tap. Then she waits.

The door does not open.

Pressing her forehead to the door, she whispers something I cannot hear. I can see her smile though, and I know immediately that she will not succeed. When it comes to Sudasa, Mummy is a gentle breeze trying to masquerade as the cyclone Nani wants her to be. But she cannot be a cyclone. She's soft where Nani is hard. Humble where Nani is proud. Forgiving where Nani is vindictive. Well, except when it comes to me. When it comes to me, Nani is the one who wants me to have the best while Mummy is the one who wants me to suffer.

When Mummy's request still does not elicit the response she desires, she just stands there and stares at the unmoving door. After several minutes pass, she turns to Nani with a shake of her head. Nani's neck turns red all the way from her chin down to the opening of her white choli. She flicks her hand in the direction of the door, making her gold bangles jingle up and down her wrist.

Mummy turns to Papa with a pleading look in her eyes. He'll get Sudasa to come out. Everyone in the room knows that.

It takes Mummy a moment to realize this fact and to look away because of it. She cannot possibly ask him to succeed at something she has failed. Not in front of Nani. Nani is all about the illusion of control. Even if you don't have it, she says you should fake it until you do. That's what the women in State Council did when Koyanagar first became its own country. They'd gone to the President of the Old Country with a theory on how to fix the problems caused by the gender imbalance that had grown to six boys for every girl. They'd hoped he would take their ideas about valuing girls and implement them across the country. They did not expect him to laugh at them and say, "If you think you know so much about running a country, how about you form one of your own?"

Perhaps they should not have been surprised. He had a population of a billion and a half people, half of whom were starving in the slums or the jails. Perhaps he thought it would be easier to get rid of the hundred thousand people in Koyanagar. Or, perhaps he thought the women would fail. Perhaps he thought, "I'll tell those crazy women to do what they want. They'll be back begging this time next year."

He wasn't the last man to learn that Nani never admits she's wrong. Koyanagar could literally be crumbling into the Arabian Sea and she would still be acting like she had things under control. Like she said, it's all about the illusion after all.

Nani sighs again, only this time, it's so exaggerated her white hair actually flickers on her wrinkled forehead. She might as well take a seat. It's not like we're going anywhere anytime soon. Sudasa knows they cannot start the Tests without her. I bet she's reveling in the power. I bet she's sitting in her room with a big smile on her face while the time ticks away. She always likes to tell everyone she's the obedient one because that is the meaning of her name, but she's only obedient when forced. Unlike Mummy, who always looks apologetic, or Papa, who always looks like he's floated off to another world, when Sudasa concedes, you can tell she's not happy about it. She's like an unlit match. You just know that something, someday, is going to set her off.

Mummy returns to Nani's side. "You know how she is," she says as if we all know and all think's it's adorable. "She'll come out when she's ready."

When *she's* ready? The nausea I've been fighting all morning is replaced by a burst of rage. Everyone in the family woke up early to prepare for this day—this day that is all about her. It may be too much to ask her to be grateful for our support, but the least she could do is acknowledge it.

I march over to her door and bang with my fist. "Can you stop thinking about yourself for five seconds?" I yell. "We're all standing here waiting."

Sudasa's door opens almost immediately. "I never said you had to come," she says with her signature scowl.

I look her up and down. Her hair is in the same braid she slept in, and although she's wearing the navy blue sari that Nani had custom-made for the

day, it doesn't look like she put much effort into the draping. The intricate silver trim is twisted on her shoulder, and the folds that are supposed to fall between her feet are more like random bunches. It looks like she tossed the sari on the floor and then rolled into it like lamb into a kati roll. Come to think of it, she probably did.

She pushes past me on her way to everyone else. I follow. "I never said I wanted to," I call out.

"Fine," she snaps, glancing back at me. "Stay here then. I'd rather bring Asha anyway."

When Banevi opens his mouth—presumably to garner more points by offering to sacrifice his seat in the box—every muscle in my neck goes tense. I glare at him, hoping he will keep his mouth shut for once. He doesn't see that his attempts to impress Nani are falling on deaf ears. Aside from giving her a great-granddaughter, nothing he can do will ever impress her. He'll always be "that tanned market boy"—the one who ruined everything.

There are times when I'm tempted to tell Nani it's Mummy's fault he's here. I cannot do that though. I already know what Nani will say. She'll say it was still *my* choice, not Mummy's. And she'd be right. It was my decision to heed Mummy's request. My decision to rip out my own heart and stomp it to the ground.

Nani turns to Sudasa, speaking before Banevi gets the chance to embarrass me again. "The box has only five seats, and Surina must attend. If

you want to bring that Asha girl, tell your father not to come. It's not like *he* can help you."

That silences Sudasa for good. She may hate being separated from Asha, but she doesn't hate it nearly enough to go to her Tests without Papa. She's what the old country called *A Daddy's Girl*. An oddity in our family—and country—for sure. His favoritism didn't used to bother me because I thought she had Papa and I had Mummy.

Now, I know that I have no one.

Two

We're late arriving at Mehra Hall—the former theater that was recently renamed after Nani. Part of our tardiness is because of Sudasa's antics at the penthouse, and part is because our carriage has to move slowly through the crowds. They're not as thick as they were for my Tests, but they're close. This must be because the President is here. The people of Koyanagar cannot possibly care what happens to Sudasa or to the seven other random girls whose Tests are today. Koyanagar has been running these Tests every two weeks for the past twelve years. They're predictable and mundane now, much like my life.

When Banevi opens the carriage door, four guards use their lathis to hold back the crowds. The guards are dressed in the standard regimental black uniforms with gold buttons and braiding. I cannot help scanning each of their faces. Even though my head knows it to be impossible, my heart cannot accept that I will not find Shahid's brown eyes smiling back at me. My heart is stupid. It should know as well as anyone that I will never see his eyes—his smile—again.

Taking Sudasa's arm, Nani leads our group down the red carpet that runs from the street to the building's entrance. Men reach out toward Sudasa's sari, desperate to make contact with the fabric. Many believe it's good luck for their sons—that touching her sari will increase the chances of their sons being chosen as her husband. I'm tempted to tell them not to bother. Do they really want them to have the kind of future Banevi has with me? A nice home with a wife who dreams of another at night? I'm not sure it's easier starving for love rather than food. It certainly doesn't feel that way.

A man behind the rope manages to slip his hand between the guards so he can tug the side of Sudasa's skirt. He's older and has deep scars under his cheekbones that make his face look even hollower than it already is. Sudasa turns toward him as if about to shoo away a fly, but the guard jumps in front of the man, stopping her from seeing what happened. When she continues down the carpet, the guard slams the man back with his lathi. My stomach lurches as I hear the sharp crack of bone before the man is swallowed by the pushing crowd. I have to look away so I don't get sick. I know the guards will take care of him later. When everyone else has gone inside, they'll throw his body on a cart and take him to one of the anonymous funeral pyres by the sea. That's what they always do with the casualties from the Tests, from the Wall.

That's what they told me they did with Shahid.

Continuing down the carpet, we pass through the guarded door that's reserved for the eight girls and their families. We stop in a large reception area

that's dimly lit with crystal chandeliers. There are red velvet chairs all around the outside of the room, and in the middle, there's a round table covered with snacks and refreshments. I'm hungry—I'm always hungry lately—but when I inhale, the smell of something fishy brings my nausea back in full force. I cover my mouth with my hand and run to the bathroom so I can throw up again.

After I've emptied my already empty stomach, I run my hands under the freezing water and then press them against the skin at the back of my neck. The temperature difference is almost shocking. Why am I so hot lately? It's the middle of September and it's barely ten in the morning. It will surely rise another twenty degrees before the end of the day. What will I do then?

When I exit the bathroom, I find Banevi waiting patiently by the door as if I'd specifically ordered him to stay. Another point for him. He reaches for my arm, and while every single part of me wants to move away, I know I cannot. There are eyes on me here—people who expect me to be living the Koyanagar dream I've claimed to have achieved. These people expect to see the Poster Girl and her prince and that's what I must give them.

Holding my elbow tight, Banevi leads me to the box they've assigned to Sudasa. It's the closest one to the left of the stage and has a chandelier much like the ones in the reception area. Sudasa is already seated in the front middle chair with Nani on her left and Mummy on her right. Papa is behind Mummy, which means I have no choice but to sit directly behind Sudasa.

I'm lowering myself into the armchair when I feel a stab in my stomach. I cannot help but wince. The pin I used to fasten the front pleats of my sari has come undone. I remove it from my skin and slip it into my purse. I'll have to return to the bathroom so I can re-fasten it after the first Test. I cannot have people seeing me in a sari without folds. Worse, in a sari that does not hide the bulge in my stomach. Not before I know for sure.

Glancing over her shoulder, Sudasa rolls her eyes at me as if she thinks I'm annoyed about my view. I'm not at all. I'm actually quite happy to be hidden behind her for once. It's exhausting always being the center of attention, not that Sudasa would understand. No one put her face on a poster when she was seven years old. No one told an entire country of despondent people to believe in her face, her smile, her future. No one ever made her feel like failing to be perfect would mean failing an entire country.

When Nani hisses at Sudasa to turn around, she slumps into her gold chair like she's already bored. She doesn't even perk up when the President takes the stage. I'm tempted to slap her on the side of the head. She has no respect for these Tests. She sees this entire process as something she's being forced to do, like when Nani tells her to eat more so people don't think we're poor. Sudasa may hear the President's words, but she doesn't truly believe in Koyanagar and its Tests, which is ridiculous. I didn't end up with the husband I wanted, but even I still believe. It was my fault—what happened—after all. If I'd played by the rules from the beginning, Shahid may have tried harder on the final day. His

second to last Test was a proper table setting and he was raised in a penthouse with four sisters. He should have been able to do that in his sleep. He probably would have had I not told him his win was guaranteed.

Had I not given him a reason not to try.

If anyone is to blame for Sudasa's attitude toward Koyanagar, it's Papa, not me. He has probably filled her head with stories of places where girls are not commodities ready to be sold or stolen. He has probably told her stories of his time in England—a land with real princes. I don't know what the big deal is. I've read about some of these princes and they all seem like pompous jerks who want to make all the decisions for everyone. Why would any girl want a boy like that?

The President finishes her speech and then leaves the stage for the Director of today's Tests. I feel a different kind of illness when she stops in the spotlight. It's her—the same woman with the half-moon glasses who was in charge on my first day. I laugh. Although I should be shocked, nothing shocks me anymore. When she'd appeared on the stage for my first Test, I'd believed she was randomly selected. They're supposed to cycle through all the older women in Koyanagar so no one suspects a bias. How wrong I was about that and about everything else. I'd believed the five boys competing for me were randomly selected from the Registry just like the eight governing laws said they would be. I'd thought I was the luckiest girl on Earth when Shahid appeared in the middle of the stage in a dark green kurta that made his eyes glow. It never occurred to me that Nani had put him there. We'd tried so hard to hide our feelings for each

other. Our penthouses used to share the same floor so we saw each other all the time. I greeted his sisters and mother, but never said a word to him, not even if we ended up alone in the lift for the entire ride to the fifty-fifth floor. People would have wondered if I'd talked to or even smiled at him. Girls were never to speak to strange boys. Girls like me were never to speak to *any* boys. I was the role model, the girl all others aspired to be. In appearance, at least.

In my heart, I was flawed. So flawed.

From almost the moment we first met, I could think of nothing but him. I knew I was bound to marry the boy who won my Tests and there was nothing either of us could do about it, but still, I convinced myself there would be no harm in us secretly communicating. I came up with a system which I outlined in the first note I snuck into his schoolbag. He'd hide his message at the far end of the fence that separated our schools. These were to appear on Monday mornings, which gave me an excuse to stroll by the fence at lunch hour. I saw him watching me occasionally. His break was at a different time, but the boys sometimes went outside for physical training. Test training was more like it.

I couldn't risk returning to the fence more than once a week so I left my notes inside a plant next to the lift on our floor. Mine always appeared on Fridays at the end of the school day. Nani was at State Council then.

Our messages started off as small notes that said things like, "How was your day? Check Good or Bad." They grew to long letters eventually and stayed that way for nine and a half years. We wrote about school, and our families, and

our friends. He'd always wanted to be an artist so he often decorated the margins of his letters like the borders of a sari. They were beautiful—his letters, his words.

Him.

On the Friday before my Tests, I did the hardest thing I'd ever had to do at the time—I wrote him a goodbye letter. I knew I'd be engaged by the following week, and I could not allow myself to betray my fiancé. I was the Poster Girl for Koyanagar. I had to act like I wanted to marry the boy chosen for me even if my heart had already chosen who it wanted.

When I went to my Tests the next Monday and saw Shahid on the stage, I wanted to jump on my chair and yell and scream. I thought my greatest dreams had come true. There were three thousand boys eligible to compete for me. What luck that he would be one of the five chosen! But then I saw the way the Director with the half-moon glasses nodded at Nani. I knew something wasn't right. Unfortunately, Mummy did too. She glared at Nani and said, "What did you do?"

I pretended I didn't know what she was talking about. Partially because I didn't want to admit Nani must have known about my feelings for Shahid, and partially because I didn't want to admit what it meant if she had truly interfered. Instead, I stared at the stage with the same forced smile I'd perfected over the past decade. I promised myself that I would not share the burden of Nani's actions. I had not asked her to put Shahid there after all. I had not even told her I knew him, let alone that I loved him. Whether she'd cheated or not was

irrelevant. I'd done my duty for my country. I deserved some happiness. I deserved love. I deserved Shahid.

Oh, how wrong I was.

Three

The first seven hours feel like they take seven days. Nani nods off for most of them. Even I miss the two girls after the lunch break. I jolt awake when our box is illuminated, signaling the start of Sudasa's Tests. The contestants make their way onto the stage and I almost burst into laughter. Even a blind person could see that Sudasa's first contestant is our cousin, Jaldhar. He may be wearing a mask and a cheap, navy kurta, but he still stands out like a rose in a field of weeds. How many boys in Koyanagar can afford a black diamond for their ear? Not many I'd guess.

This is not the only thing that makes him conspicuous, of course. He has a habit of continuously cracking his knuckles like he's preparing himself for a fight. He also possesses an arrogance unseen in Koyanagar's boys. His shoulders are always wide, and his chin is always high enough to show that he believes everyone else is below him. We have Nani and Mota Masi to blame for this attitude. He was only five years old when Koyanagar was created, barely old enough to understand what they meant when they told him that, no matter what

the new laws said, his future was guaranteed. They said he would never end up at the Wall, never end up as the servant to a girl. They didn't say why, but it was obvious they'd meant him to marry Sudasa. Nani was constantly pushing them together, trying to create love where like didn't exist. She had to. Nani's husband had died when Mummy was barely ten years old and they had been forced to live in a slum. After a few hellish months, Mota Masi had sent them money for a bus, and then she'd given them a room in her apartment in Koyanagar and helped Nani find work. She'd introduced them to the right people—rich and famous people like Papa. She'd changed their lives. Nani owed her a great debt for that. What better repayment than Sudasa?

When Nani points at Jaldhar and says, "That one will give you girls," Sudasa's mouth drops open. I cannot believe this setup is a surprise to her. Is she really that naive? The five boys are chosen from the Registry—the same Registry that Nani keeps in her safe in our penthouse. The same one she treats more dearly than her own family. Plus, Sudasa was here in this very box when Mummy realized that Nani had specifically chosen the boys for me. And yet, she still shakes her head and says, "It's not possible."

"Anything is possible," Nani replies, and she's right: anything is possible for *her*. She has this entire country wrapped around her little finger. She gets to choose not only who competes, but also who they compete against. For my Tests, she chose four stupid boys to compete against my Shahid. No doubt she's done the same here. One of the boys doesn't look a minute over fifteen, and one of the

others cannot even stand straight. He won't have a chance tomorrow. If he survives at all, that is.

I turn to look at Mummy, wondering if she will protest again. She was strong enough to confront me on the second day of my Tests, but will she do the same here, especially after what happened to Shahid? Will she tell Sudasa that she must play fair, even when playing fair would mean going against Nani again?

Apparently not.

Mummy says nothing. Instead, she sits silently while the Director asks the ten questions about the politics of Koyanagar. Jaldhar knows all the answers but one. He has been well prepared for this day. Or, at least I think he has until they ask the question about the banana and he just stands there with a blank look on his face. How can he not know about the belief that eating certain foods will help conceive a girl? That's why I haven't eaten a banana in years. Everything is cream and milk and cheese. I cannot wait until I have my own baby girl. Then, I will never again have to taste another piece of cheese and I will never again have to taste Banevi's mouth on mine. I'm not sure which is worse. Both make me want to be sick to my stomach.

Jaldhar finally buzzes in, but it's too late. The young boy beats him to it for this question and for the four that follow. Jaldhar's frown grows with each subsequent loss until he finally points at the young contestant and yells, "He's cheating! Contestant Five's telling him the answers!" That wakes up the entire theatre. We've had a few dissenters in the past twelve years, but I've never heard

of a boy being accused of cheating. It would be a stupid risk to take, especially during the first Test and with so many people watching every move.

When the fifth boy says there are no rules preventing him from helping another contestant, I hear Mummy gasp and Papa laugh. Sudasa tries not to smile, but I can see how badly she wants to. This is precisely the kind of thing that makes it ridiculous for her to call herself obedient. She's the first one to push the boundaries of the rules, the first one to be impressed by someone else who does. If she was asked to pick her husband from that stage right now, I have no doubt she'd go with the fifth boy. No doubt at all.

The Director consults her rulebook and then announces that the fifth contestant is correct. There really are no rules preventing him from helping another—not for now at least. Nani will surely have that rectified by week's end.

Jaldhar's nostrils flare and he looks like he wants to march over to the other side of the stage and strangle the fifth boy right then and there. He's tough, but I think he'd be out of his league on that battle. The fifth contestant may not be much taller than Jaldhar, but where Jaldhar is thin and pale, he has muscles that stretch his kurta tight. Whether he's from a farm or the streets, he probably knows what it means to fight to stay alive. I'd be surprised if Jaldhar knows what it means to fight for his turn with the bathroom mirror.

The Director moves on to questions about art and poetry. Although Sudasa's face turns red, Jaldhar's grin returns. Thanks to Nani and her secret favors, the corridors of our penthouse are lined with original Menons. Sudasa is

always going on about how much she loves the colors. As for the poems, everyone knows she adores William Blake. His words are the secret language she and Papa share—one they don't want to allow anyone else to know. We know about it though. We know how it feels to be left out of it.

Jaldhar practically laughs when the Director asks the final question. She wants the contestants to guess whether Sudasa would prefer riding or cricket. The answer could not be more obvious if Sudasa had ridden her horse into the theater today. She's obsessed with horses. She and Asha are always at the stables, and Jaldhar knows this. Nani has sent him to ride with her countless times. I've heard Sudasa beg Nani to stop. She said Jaldhar was mean to the horses. She even tried to convince her that he'd deliberately maimed one. Nani gave her no mind. As far as Nani is concerned, horses, much like people, were made to be commanded.

Sudasa writes her answer on the card in front of her. She keeps it facing down so none of us will know what it says before she holds it up for all to see.

Jaldhar doesn't bother to buzz in before he says, "I bet she loves riding." He doesn't try to cover the fact that he knows her. If anything, he seems to be going out of his way to show it.

Nani doesn't seem to care either. She turns to Sudasa with a smug grin. I've seen that grin many times before. It's the one that says a lot more than she knows best. It's the one that says she will *always* know best and she will always

get what she wants as well. She's probably right. I proved her wrong once, and I'm still paying the price.

Shaking her head at the Director, Sudasa holds up her card. Nani takes in a sharp breath, her eyes growing as wide as saucers. Papa starts to cough. It's probably the only thing he can do to stop himself from yelling, "Well done!"

I look at Jaldhar. His face is red and his jaw is tight. I can tell he's going to explode, and even though I don't like him, I almost wish I could stop him the same way I'd wished I could have stopped Shahid.

I was too late then as I am now. Jaldhar yells out, "She lies. She hates cricket!"

Nani refocuses her glare. She may be desperate to repay her sister, but she's not desperate enough to tolerate a boy who steps out of line. The Director isn't either. She scolds Jaldhar, threatening to send him to the Wall if he speaks out again. Although Jaldhar lowers his head, it's obvious he isn't sorry for what he said. He's only sorry he got called out on it.

Sudasa rushes out of the box with the bag of rocks gripped in her hand. She's probably desperate to get away from Nani, from her rage.

When she gets to the stage, she stops in front of the fifth contestant. Although it only takes a moment for her to put the single rock on his podium, she remains in front of him for much longer than that. I have to fight the urge to stand up and yell at her. Doesn't she know what her life would be like with a boy

like that? Hasn't she sat at our table while Banevi shovels food into his mouth with his dirty fingers? Hasn't she seen the way he sits, heard the way he speaks? Being married to a market boy is like being married to a hungry dog. They never stop begging for more, and we never stop wishing we could put them on a leash and leave them outside.

When the Director clears her throat, Sudasa moves onto the boy in the middle, placing two rocks on his podium before moving onto Jaldhar. Jaldhar reaches out to take his five rocks and Sudasa immediately snaps her hand away. Stupid girl. She will have to let him touch her soon enough. She might as well get used to it.

Four

In the carriage ride home, Mummy tells Sudasa how proud she is that she got through such a difficult day. I clench my teeth. Sudasa can do no wrong in her eyes. Then again, no one would care if she did. I'm the one who's expected to be perfect in looks, in actions, in beliefs. She gets to just be herself, warts and all.

Nani is not so complacent. Grabbing Sudasa's arm, she hisses, "She will not do that again."

Sudasa says, "Do what?" as she pulls her arm away.

I shoot her a warning glare. Did she really just do that? It's one thing to take her time getting ready for the Tests, and it's another to lie about her answer in the final question, but to openly question Nani? She has gone too far.

When Nani accuses Sudasa of lying and embarrassing our family, Sudasa still doesn't back down. She says, "Do you mean my cousin?"

Nani still doesn't concede. Instead, she pretends to be fascinated by some blind beggar on the street. She puts little effort into her counter-argument that Sudasa has no cousins.

Sudasa practically yells, "Cousin, second cousin. Same thing. I know that's Mota Masi's grandson, and I know he didn't get there by coincidence. You can force me to do these Tests. You can even force me to marry the winner. But I will never pick the one you want. Never!"

Folding her arms across her chest, Nani begins to play with the charms on her bracelet. I hold my breath. Sudasa is in for it now. Nani only plays with her charms when she's about to play the martyr card, and no card on the planet trumps Nani's martyr one.

"I said Never once too," Nani says before she goes on to remind us of her drunk of a husband, who left her and Mummy to starve to death. I expect her to continue in her usual manner—to make Sudasa feel like it's her fault that Mummy has scars from where she was attacked by slum rats the size of dogs.

She doesn't do this. Instead, she shakes her head and says, "You want to pick a tanned boy? End up like your didi?"

Her words are like a slap across the face—something I've only felt once from Nani. She says, "Tell her, Surina," as she motions to the front of the carriage where Banevi is seated with the coachman. "Tell her what it's like to be married to a market boy. One who's missing half his teeth, who can barely hold a fork. Whose family begs you to take food off your table to put it on theirs."

I open my mouth to deliver the same lie I give whenever someone asks me if I'm happy, but I cannot do it this time. I cannot pretend I love Banevi, that he is my prince. He is no more a prince than the horse that pulls our carriage.

I stare at my charmless bracelet instead, hoping Nani will stop. She doesn't.

"See?" she practically spits. "I told her to choose wisely, now she's the one without a baby girl in her arms."

I stare at my lap, hoping she will leave me be now that's she dealt her lowest blow. I've already suffered enough, haven't I? My father doesn't know I exist. My mother acts as though she wished I didn't. The only person who loved me—who I loved in return—is gone. I've had to spend two and a half years pretending to be happily married to a boy who disgusts me instead. What else can there be?

"Tell her," Nani screams at me in a way that tells me there is more to come—there always will be if I want to match her suffering. "Tell her how you made that rich boy, that boy from our floor—the one with the four sisters—lose in the final Test. It was your choice and you picked chess, a game of war, when I told you to choose cards, a game of luxury."

I open my mouth, but have no words to speak. She's right. She told me to pick cards. Shahid would have won at cards. Like most boys with sisters, he played them every time his family gathered with another. But that was precisely why choosing them would not have been fair—not as far as Mummy was

concerned. She wanted me to choose something that did not give him—or Banevi, the only other contestant left—an advantage.

Nani goes on. “Tell her how you’d promised him an easy win. How he protested a little too hard when he didn’t get it. How he was sent to the Wall and jumped off Agnimar cliff instead.”

My desire to speak dissolves with the tears on my cheek. How can I possibly explain what happened to Sudasa? How can I tell her that I’d gone home after the first day of my Tests and had told Shahid that our future was certain? He was in first place already and we knew he’d do well at the physical Tests. With the right choices from me in Tests four and five, his win was guaranteed. We would be husband and wife before the month’s end.

How can I tell her that I’d invited him to sneak into my bedroom that night? That we did things that were meant only for married couples. That we both believed we would be one soon.

How can I tell her that it wasn’t until the middle of the second day that Mummy had made me swear I would not cheat? I would act like the perfect model I was meant to be when I was chosen for Koyanagar’s posters. Most of all, I would not turn into Nani.

How can I tell her why Shahid acted the way he did when I awarded Banevi the final five rocks? How can I tell her how I’d begged Nani not to punish Shahid for his protest, how I’d begged her to let his family buy him a good position instead?

Even if I could tell her those things, how could I possibly tell her that Nani found out I was pregnant a few weeks after my wedding? She'd taken me to see a female doctor hoping we were in for good news, only to find out it was the exact opposite. I'd barely been married a month and was already almost three months along. Worse, I was carrying a boy. A little Shahid who would never see the light of day. That was the day she slapped me across the face for real. At the time, I thought it was the worst thing she could do to me. I was wrong.

So wrong.

How can I tell Sudasa that it was my fault Shahid jumped off Agnimar cliff a few days later? I may not have been the one who sent him a letter telling him what I'd done to our son, but what did it matter if it was me or the doctor or Nani? It was still my responsibility. I killed him: the boy I loved with all my heart.

I suppose, I killed my heart that day too. I turned myself cold. Angry. Unfeeling. I became the model Nani had always wanted.

The one who was just like her.



About 5 TO 1

Part *Homeless Bird* and part *Matched*, this is a dark look at the near future told through the alternating perspectives of two teens who dare to challenge the system.

In the year 2054, after decades of gender selection, India now has a ratio of five boys for every girl, making women an incredibly valuable commodity. Tired of marrying off their daughters to the highest bidder and determined to finally make marriage fair, the women who form the country of Koyanagar have instituted a series of tests so that every boy has the chance to win a wife.

Sudasa, though, doesn't want to be a wife, and Contestant Five, a boy forced to compete in the test to become her husband, has other plans as well. As the tests advance, Sudasa and Contestant Five thwart each other at every turn until they slowly realize that they just might want the same thing.

This beautiful, unique novel is told from alternating points of view—Sudasa's in verse and Contestant Five's in prose—allowing readers to experience both characters' pain and their brave struggle for hope.

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