

Rida & Madiya

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Illustrated by
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BLOOMSBURY

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for our newsletters

Sister Blister	5
Sister Glister	13
Sister Enlister	31
Sister Persister	47
Sister Disaster	57
Sister Trickster	67
Sister Twister	75
Sister Assist Her	83
Sister Tongue-twister	89



Chapter One

Sister Blister

Rida and Madiya ‘Madi’ Ahmed were like chalk and cheese. Rida was taller and older with bronze skin while Madi was smaller, younger and paler. Rida was serious whereas Madi couldn’t take life seriously for even one minute (Rida had made sure to count). They had different interests, different grades and different approaches to everything. They were like magnets whose forces always repelled. One magnet was eleven years old and the other was six.

In fact, the only similarities between the two were that they had the same mother and, in turn, that meant they lived under the same roof.

Rida and Madi also shared a room. But there was a spare room in their household, and if Rida

got into the secondary school of her and her stepdad Ābu's dreams, it would be hers. Rida couldn't wait to have it as her own.

"Please can I take the top bunk now?" Madi asked. Although *whined* might've been the more appropriate word.

Rida, in the middle of writing in her diary, stopped swinging her legs over the edge of her bunk and sat up. "No," she said, after pausing for a moment to fake thinking about it. "The top bunk is mine."

"But–"

"I like my mattress. And there's no way you could swap the two by yourself. Also I've seen you scribble things on your headboard. I don't want to sleep near those doodles."

Madi pouted in confusion. *Those were works of art!* She thought. *Or art – whichever was the right word.* "But–" To make herself heard, she climbed on her armchair. She was exactly in the centre of the room, directly beneath the lightbulb. Madi fought an itch on her forearm. She realised her new eczema ointment had rubbed off already.

"Madi," Rida cut in. "If you could actually swap the mattresses, then be my guest." Rida chuckled and then continued writing in her diary.

The lightbulb came on above Madi's head.

In came Ābu. He smiled at the cluttered room and sight of his two daughters. Naturally, he knew that Madi was about to give in to her troublesome ways. "Good afternoon," he said, feigning caution.

Madi ran over to him. "Your favourite daughter says 'Good afternoon' back," she exclaimed whilst bear-hugging his legs.

"Oh yeah? Where is she?" he joked.

Madi gasped and started crawling up her father like she had done on the beanstalk in her school play. "She's right here!" she growled.

Ābu chuckled. "Rida! How's the air up there?" Meanwhile, Madi had turned into his backpack.

"None of anyone's business," Rida answered. With a younger sibling like Madi, Rida had quickly learnt that privacy was a possession you had to clutch tightly.

“Oh, it’s just her daily love letter to Eitan Abrams,” Madi said nonchalantly.

Rida burned red with embarrassment. Anger bubbled inside her too. She slammed her diary shut, then slid down her bunk and ran for Madi. “How many times have I told you?” she yelled.

“OK, time out,” Ābu said. He tugged at his golden hair. This was the tricky part of parenthood. He loved them both and it became burdensome when they fought.

“*Stop* reading my diary!” Rida screamed.

Ābu dodged Rida’s punches and kicks. Madi squealed with giddiness and threw her head back. Her light brown hair took on the shape of a curtain behind her back. Ābu had become her protective giant *and* a beanstalk. She was having too much fun.

“Enough,” Ābu warned.

“But she’s always like this! How does she even know how to read? She clearly lies at school!” Rida exclaimed.

Madi frowned and stilled. It wasn’t her fault that she couldn’t keep up with the teacher and the other kids in her class. She could do what they could, only slower. And yes, it took her a whole night to read a page of Rida’s diary (Madi had a torch and a blanket and had expected it to be filled with ghost stories, unaware that it was a diary that contained Rida’s secrets). As time went on, she’d gotten used to Rida’s handwriting and the words she used (there were some repetitive, lovey-dovey words).

“Madi, can you see that Rida is upset?” Ābu asked. Madi apprehensively nodded.

Ābu gently set her down. “Good. Could you apologise?”

Doe-eyed Madi looked at Rida, who was wide-eyed and panting. Madi crossed her arms over her T-shirt that said “‘bed’ is shaped like a bed because even the word knows it’s important”. Madi had had trouble understanding that but once she did (with Ābu’s help), she had loved it and now used the phrase in her day-to-day life.

“Sorry, Rida,” Madi said.

Rida just shrugged.

“No shrugging,” Ābu said. “You know I don’t like shrugging. Rida, your turn. Let’s go.”

“I’m sorry I shouted. And kicked. And punched. And said you couldn’t read. You can – sorry.”

Ābu nodded, satisfied. “Will either of you do it again?”

“No,” they both said, deadpan.

“Good,” Ābu triumphantly said. “Rida, can I talk to you about the stall?” He led her out of the bedroom.

Madi smirked. Ābu hadn’t made it clear what doing ‘it’ again was. So, of course she’d continue reading Rida’s diary. How else would she learn more about her quiet sister? And learn to read fancy handwriting?

But first things first: Rida had challenged Madi to switch the top mattress with the bottom. Madi rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

*

Two hours later and the bed was like a capsized ship – half afloat and half not – amongst a sea of clutter and clothes.

If that wasn’t enough to show for her efforts, Madi was covered in blisters and carpet burns that worsened her eczema.