

Sinful Vows in Monsoon Season

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I loved Rahas. I held him. Every chance we had, he was mine, and I his. Even in the moments away from him, I felt him near me. We loved in the coolness of winter and the heat of monsoon season.

"Madina," he would whisper to me, always before kissing me goodbye. "My beautiful Madina." He called me beautiful, and his wife never found out.

Painted henna hands of an Indian bride marked my future, and he knew I was to be married; the world could see that. I tried to stop myself from sinking further into his charm. But he wouldn't stop loving me. We were stuck. A wonderful, lovely, passionate stuck, like a shoe in dirt made soft by the heavy rains, where you are frustrated by the situation, but can't help loving the rain kissing your face.

Prajin and I were arranged to be married a week from the day we met. I liked Prajin, yes, but I didn't love him. He was kind, and he listened to me even though I did not have much to say. My younger sister Aarsi told me she thought the match was a smart one; that she would hope for one just as good for her. Yet my feelings for Prajin all came down to one conclusive and unavoidable fact: he wasn't Rahas. Prajin didn't look at me the way Rahas did. Prajin didn't have high status in the community. Rahas owned several banks throughout Delhi; Prajin was just the market butcher's boy, and I would just be his wife, another Indian woman put in her place. Cook, clean, and give the in-laws grandchildren to spoil, all the while making sure this new generation sticks true to its culture. It wasn't a life for me.

A day before the wedding, Rahas and I said goodbye, this time for forever. We stood beneath an awning in the market as the monsoon raged.

"This can't be," I cried into Rahas' chest. "I can't be married tomorrow."

"I know, I know," Rahas said as his arms wrapped tighter around me. "You must, though. Your parents have arranged it... everyone from your family and his are expecting it."

"They'd never expect the bride not to show up. How many weddings have you attended where the bride runs away?"

"Two." He kissed me. "Two American weddings. Zero Indian."

I sighed and fell deeper into his love, despite our intentions and pressing need to end the affair.

"Madina. You'll always be beautiful, Madina."

He put me in a taxi that afternoon. I cried the whole way back, but no one could tell; I was soaking from the rain when I arrived home and my tears easily blended in. As the rain subsided in the afternoon, the family began to celebrate, and continued to do so into the night. They tuned into Bhangra beats and danced even after Prajin said goodbye to our swaying lot of relatives. They whooped and hollered as he leaned towards me before leaving. He gently kissed my forehead.

"Madina. I cannot wait to call you my wife."

I averted my eyes and looked down to hide my disappointment in the arrangement, but everyone took it as the proper action for a shy Indian bride. Show no affection until the marriage is complete. Even then, I was afraid I would be too lost in memories of Rahas to remember my role as Prajin's wife.

The next morning, I awoke to the heaviest downpour I had ever seen. I sat for an hour at my bedroom window, my henna hands touching the glass, my forehead pressed against it, looking down and watching as the wedding tent was secured into the ground

by a team of wedding planners. As I trudged through my muddy thoughts, Aarsi burst into my room.

"Madina! Prajin's father has just seen a crazy sight!" I did not turn from the window, but asked her what my future husband's father had seen.

"Do you remember meeting Rahas Sagoo, the bank man, when we set up an account last year?" I snapped my head around.

"What about him?"

"Do you remember him?"

"Yes, yes! I remember clearly! What about him?"

"He's married, you know." She said it definitively. I knew she had figured out my secret. Yesterday's events began to run through my head as I tried to write this new character, Prajin's father, into the story. Prajin's father must have seen Rahas and me yesterday. But how? Where had we been? Stupid! We'd been in the market, probably only doors down from the butcher's. He had told everyone and now the wedding would be called off; I knew Rahas and I would be destroyed, separately and as one.

"Aarsi... yes, I know. Of course he is, but please, listen to me—"

"That's not all! He was seen with another woman!"

"I assumed you would say that—"

"Why would you? Let me finish my story."

"No, Aarsi. Let me explain—"

"I'll shout over you if I have to. Rahas was seen with another woman, kissing her and hugging her, inside the jewelry shop Prajin's father has just come from!"

"Jewelry shop?" Rahas and I had never been to a jewelry shop.

"Oh, yes. Sorry to spoil the surprise, but you're getting some beautiful golden bangles for a gift."

"When was this?"

"Just now. Perhaps an hour ago."

All my jumping to conclusions halted as I pondered what Aarsi had just told me.

"Is he positive it was Rahas in the store?"

"He's sure of it."

I felt relieved. My affair was still secret. No one would know, and if Rahas told anyone, who would believe him now? Now... now that he had been with someone else. My relief was quickly flooded by hurt. And anger. And extreme jealousy. Rahas had been with another woman. Not me. Not his wife. Another other woman. Any love I had for him washed away like the top level of soil taken under siege of the monsoon.

Prajin and I were married that night. My shy, Indian bride eyes kept sneaking glances at Prajin in hopes that I would find something to love about him, and over time, I would. But as we vowed to be solid rocks for one another amidst pouring monsoon rain, I, instead of feeling relieved about the situation with Rahas, or angry, hurt, or jealous, felt nothing but guilt for the things I had done, and the fact that Prajin would never completely know me. He took me as his wife, an adulteress and a liar. Beautiful Madina I may be until my looks fade, but sinful and secretive I will always stay.