

A Marriage of Secrets

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Introduction: A Dream of Eternal Love

I always believed marriage was a sacred bond, a promise of trust and love that could weather any storm. Growing up in a bustling Bangalore, the air thick with the scent of cardamom and diesel fumes, I saw marriage as the ultimate anchor. I would watch my parents on their small balcony in the cool, blue light of dawn, sharing a single clay cup of steaming chai. The roar of morning traffic would begin its daily assault, vendors would start their melodic calls, but my parents existed in a quiet bubble. Their partnership, a silent understanding spoken through shared glances and easy laughter, was a beacon of stability in the chaos of my world. They navigated life's challenges together, their love a steady, warm flame against the flickering uncertainties of life. That image, scented with ginger tea and morning dew, was etched into my soul.

When I finally joined a matrimonial site at thirty, I carried that dream with me. The screen of my laptop glowed with a sterile, artificial light, a stark contrast to the vibrant, chaotic world outside my window where kites of every color danced against a saffron sunset. I scrolled through endless profiles, each a small, curated window into a stranger's life, the quiet clicking of the mouse the only sound in my room. I was searching for a partner to build a life with, to share the quiet comfort of dawn and the sweet burden of dreams, maybe even to start a family. I longed for the easy rhythm I'd seen in my parents, a love that was both a sanctuary and an adventure.

Rashmi Bongi seemed like the answer to that hope. Her profile picture showed her in a brilliant emerald green sari, her smile as radiant as the jasmine flowers woven into her dark hair. She was beautiful, her voice on our first call was kind, and most importantly, she was approved by her strict, discerning father. She fit perfectly

into the life I had so carefully envisioned. Six months after our wedding, a celebration of marigold garlands, sacred fires, and promises whispered under a canopy of stars, I thought we were on our way to that forever. I believed our foundation was built on the solid rock of tradition and mutual affection. But some truths, hidden in the deep, cool shadows of promises, have a way of seeping through the cracks. They are like a persistent, unwelcome scent you can't quite place, growing stronger until they unravel everything you thought was real. This is the story of how my dream, so vividly colored and carefully built, collapsed into dust—and how, from the rubble, I found a way to keep going. Hindi translation has been provided at the end of the book.

Chapter 1: A Call That Changed Everything

The office hummed with its usual late-afternoon lull, a monotonous symphony of clicking keyboards and the low drone of the air conditioner pushing out stale, refrigerated air. I sat at my desk, the harsh fluorescent lights overhead flattening the colors of the room into a dull, corporate palette of grey and beige. My focus, however, was on the small island of vibrant color on my desk: the framed photo of Rashmi and me on our wedding day.

Six months. It felt like a lifetime and no time at all. In the photo, she was breathtaking in a traditional lehenga of crimson and gold, the fabric so richly embroidered it seemed to shimmer even in the still image. Garlands of fragrant, fiery orange marigolds were draped around our necks, their heady scent so potent I could almost smell them now, a phantom fragrance cutting through the office's blandness. I remembered the weight of her hand in mine, the soft rustle of her silk, the flash of a hundred cameras capturing a moment I thought was the start of everything.

We'd met through an online matrimonial site, a modern solution to an age-old quest. Her father, a formidable man with eyes that seemed to assess your entire net worth in a single glance, had approved of me. I was a government employee, stable and secure, earning over ₹1 lakh a month, with no skeletons rattling in my closet. I was, in his eyes, a sound investment. Rashmi was beautiful, her laughter like the chime of temple bells, and her kindness a gentle balm. My family adored her, my mother fussing over her as if she were the daughter she'd always wanted. Life felt perfect, a smooth, paved road stretching towards a golden horizon. Just days after the wedding, she had whispered her secret to me in the soft darkness of our bedroom, her breath warm against my ear. She was pregnant. Overjoyed, I had held her close, imagining the sounds of a child's laughter filling the warm, sunlit rooms of our home.

Then the phone rang. Its sharp, digital shriek sliced through my reverie, an unwelcome intrusion. I glanced at the caller ID—an unknown number. Probably a misdial or a sales call. "Hello?" I said, my voice neutral, expecting a colleague from another department. "Is this Badari Sharma?" A man's voice, flat and devoid of inflection, came through the line. "Yes, speaking. Who is this?" "My name is Ankit." He paused, letting the name hang in the air. "I need to talk to you about your wife. About Rashmi."

My stomach tightened into a cold, hard knot. The low hum of the office seemed to fade, replaced by the frantic thumping of my own heart against my ribs. "What about her?" I tried to keep my voice steady, but a tremor of unease, cold as ice water, snaked up my spine. "I'm her ex-boyfriend," he said, and the floor seemed to drop away beneath me. "There's something you need to know." "What are you talking about?" I snapped, my grip on the receiver

tightening until my knuckles turned white. I could feel a sweat break out on my brow, the air in the office suddenly feeling thick and suffocating. "The day before your wedding," he continued, his voice relentlessly calm, "Rashmi and I were together. Intimately."

The room spun. The fluorescent lights overhead blurred into streaks of white. The photo on my desk seemed to mock me, a snapshot of a lie. "You're lying," I breathed, the words tasting like ash in my mouth. "I'm not. I have proof. Photos, messages on my phone. She told me she was pregnant. She said she wanted it to be my child, even if she married you." "Why? Why are you telling me this now?" I choked out, each word a painful effort. The air was thin, my lungs burning. "Because you deserve to know the truth. She made a fool of you. She made a fool of me. Meet me tomorrow. I'll show you everything."

I wanted to slam the phone down, to shatter it against the wall and pretend this conversation never happened. I wanted to dismiss it as a sick, malicious prank. But a sliver of doubt, sharp and poisonous, had already lodged itself in my heart, gnawing at the edges of my perfect life. "Fine," I heard myself say, the voice sounding distant, hollow. "Where?" He gave me the name of a cafe and a time. I ended the call without another word, my hand trembling so violently I could barely place the receiver back in its cradle. I stared at the wedding photo, at Rashmi's radiant smile. The brilliant colors suddenly looked garish, the gold like brass, her smile a beautiful, terrible mask. My perfect life, once a solid, towering structure, was beginning to unravel, thread by fragile thread.

Chapter 2: The Meeting

The next day dawned grey and oppressive, the sky a blanket of bruised purple clouds that threatened a downpour. The city's usual