

# FICTION

## Pink

*Bissime S*

“My husband wants to marry you.”

She was stunned by my announcement. She stopped stirring the mushrooms on the burning stove.

“I have always regarded your husband as the brother I never had,” she said.

Laughing cynically, I said: “My husband does not share the same sentiment. He feels a beautiful woman like you should not have brothers. Beautiful women should only have husbands.”

She did not want to be homeless. Our streets can be a harsh place for a young woman like her.

She said: “I have no choice. I have to marry the man I never loved.”

The mushrooms on the burning stove were slowly turning black. I did not switch off the stove. Neither did she. We just let mushrooms burn.

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The first time I met the woman that my husband wants to marry was in a crowded room in a hospital. I was only 10 and she was a new born baby in the arms of a woman with red hair. I said: “She looks like a doll. I want to take her home.”

The woman with the red hair said: “I am not giving away my doll to anyone. You have to make your own doll.”

Everyone in the room laughed.

I asked: “Can I at least give your doll a name? Please.”

The woman with the red hair was kind enough to fulfil my request. I was jumping with joy. Everyone in the room loved the name I chose.

“We shall call her Yasmin,” the woman with the red hair said.

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Life has not been kind to the woman with the red hair. Cancer destroyed her. Cancer buried her six feet underground. The woman with the red hair was my aunty.

At her funeral, her husband, my uncle, cried uncontrollably, like a little child. He tried to prevent her coffin being buried in the ground. He did not have the strength to handle her death rationally. He stood in front of a running train, totally naked.

In his suicide note, he wrote: "Life is not worth living anymore."

Husband and wife were buried next to each other.

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Yasmin was only 14 when she lost both her parents. None of her relatives were willing to take her under their wing.

They did not want the burden of raising a teenager. But I chose to be kind. I did not want the girl I named to be brought up in some rundown orphanage.

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"I have no desire to feed the extra mouth you have brought into our house."

My husband screamed his heart out.

I said: "Yasmin will not eat for free. Yasmin will not stay for free. Yasmin will earn the roof that we are giving her. Yasmin will earn the food that we are putting on her plate. Yasmin will cook for us. Yasmin will take care of our garden. Yasmin will be our servant. Yasmin will be cheap labour."

Hearing the word cheap labour was enough to cool my husband's fiery anger and put a smile to his face. More than anything in the world, my husband loves cheap labour. My husband built his business empire on the backs of cheap labourers.

"Show Yasmin our servant room," my husband said with a smile.

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In a room at the basement of our house, far away from my husband's ears, I apologised repeatedly to Yasmin for calling her a servant.

I said: "It is only a trick to get my husband's permission so you can stay here with me."

Yasmin said: "You have nothing to be sorry about. I understand your predicament perfectly."

I said: "I will never treat you like a servant. You will be like the sister I never had."

Hugging me passionately, Yasmin said: “I would rather be your slave than live with strangers in some orphanage.”

Yasmin was utterly grateful for the kindness I showed.

Yasmin said: “I will pray that God will repay your kindness with kindness.”

Unfortunately, God has not listened to her prayers. My kindness has slapped my face, rather brutally. Never in a million years would I have imagined sharing my husband with the girl I named.

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When my husband first expressed his desire to marry Yasmin, my heart was shattered to a thousand pieces.

I said: “She calls you *Bhaijaan*.<sup>1</sup> Do you know what *Bhaijaan* means?”

Without a trace of emotion, my husband said: “A beautiful woman like her should not have brothers. Beautiful women should only have husbands.”

I used every trick in the book to dissuade my husband from marrying Yasmin. But I failed miserably.

“You are old enough to be her father,” I said.

My husband smacked me, savagely.

My husband shouted: “I still have enough energy in me to satisfy one thousand women.”

His lust for Yasmin was intense. One must never underestimate the power of lust.

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I was given the task to sew Yasmin’s wedding gown. Yasmin loved everything about wedding gowns, except the colour.

She said: “My favourite colour is pink. I believe pink will make me look more beautiful.”

I said: “His favourite colour is red.”

Slowly, Yasmin began to understand that his favourite colour is her favourite colour... His favourite food is her favourite food... His favourite movie is her favourite movie...

Looking at me with pure sadness, Yasmin said: “You are right, *Didi*.<sup>2</sup> I have no favourite colour.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Bhaijaan* means brother.

<sup>2</sup> *Didi* means sister.

My husband's wedding with Yasmin was a grand affair. My husband proudly displayed his young beautiful bride for the world to see.

He could not stop smiling throughout the ceremony. He looked like a proud sportsman who won a gold medal at the Olympics.

Yasmin was in a totally different mood. Her eyes could not stop shedding tears.

Some ignored her tears. Others regarded her tears as tears of joy. They believed that if my husband did not marry Yasmin, the poor beautiful girl would spend the rest of her life as a miserable spinster.

"All brides cry on their wedding day," they said.

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Yasmin was no longer the servant who cooked for me and watered my roses. Her new life was surrounded with luxury, richness and comfort.

Yasmin said: "I have everything, except a smile."

Yasmin reminded me of a bird trapped in a golden cage, silently crying for the freedom to fly into the beautiful blue sky.

Yasmin said: "I have forgotten how to smile."

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Yasmin has difficulty selecting the right candidate from the countless people she interviewed. She had been given the task of searching for a new servant to take over her previous duties.

Yasmin asked: "*Didi*, do you have any suggestions on the selection of our servant?"

Keeping my eyes totally focused on the floor, I answered: "I made the mistake of choosing a beautiful servant. You should not repeat my mistake. Our husband has a weakness for beautiful things."

Yasmin obediently followed my advice. She chose a male servant.

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"Can you teach me to sew?"

I stared at Yasmin for the longest time after she asked the question. I was sitting on the floor of my living room, sewing a blue shawl.

After her marriage with my husband, my relationship with Yasmin was no longer affectionate. Our conversation has become limited, rigid and cold.

"You are a talented seamstress," Yasmin said.

Her eyes were begging for us to be friends, again. She missed the good old days when I was kind and loving to her.

“Come sit next to me and I will teach you everything I know,” I said.

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Yasmin can never be blamed for the marriage between my husband and her. Yasmin did not want to wreck anyone’s marriage. Yasmin had no intention of marrying anyone’s husband.

She is a woman with no choices. She had nowhere to go. She had no door to knock on for help. She was a helpless beautiful woman at my husband’s mercy.

If there is anyone I should be angry with, it should be my husband and no one else. He did not respect his marriage vows to me. He did not control his lust. But I have been brought up not to hate my husband.

“Husbands are born to make mistakes and wives are born to forgive their husbands,” my mother said to me, seven days before my marriage.

Putting an expensive bracelet on my hand, my mother said: “It is your duty to serve, to love and to respect your husband till the day you die.”

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Yasmin was a fast learner. She became a far better seamstress than me. Sewing brought us closer again.

Laughing, Yasmin said: “If our husband decides to take a third wife, I could sew her wedding gown, instead of you.”

Her joke was utterly distasteful. The smile on my face disappeared.

I said: “I pray that you never have to go through what I have gone through. Sewing a wedding gown for the bride that your husband going to marry is the worst pain any wife can endure.”

Looking absolutely distraught, Yasmin said: “I am sorry. It is never my intention to make fun of your pain. Please, forgive me. Please, do not be angry with me.”

Hugging Yasmin close to my heart, I said: “I can never be angry with the woman I named.”

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“I want to buy some sugar. I want to bake a fruit cake for my loving husband.”

Yasmin said these words with much enthusiasm one Saturday morning.

By then, she had been married to my husband for two years. That was the first time I heard her call my husband her loving husband.

I said: "Our husband does not like fruit cake."

Smiling, Yasmin said: "He would like my fruit cake."

Yasmin walked towards the grocery shop that was few doors away from our house. But she never returned home.

The money she was supposed to buy sugar was given to a young boy who was working in the grocery shop, to deliver her goodbye note to my husband.

Yasmin wrote: "I do not want to be sad anymore."

Furious, my husband broke everything in the house that could be broken.

My husband shouted: "I gave her everything that money can buy. She has no reason to be unhappy. She is ungrateful. I will never forgive her betrayal."

His ego was bruised, enormously. He was determined to find her and made her life a living hell.

Screaming his lungs out, he said: "Her story will not have a happy ending."

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"I found Yasmin."

My husband declared this while I was knitting a colourful sweater for him.

"Did you know what happened to her?"

I did not answer him. I was not keen to listen to her story of misery.

With a twisted smile, my husband said: "I have locked her up in an asylum. She will spend the rest of life among the insane. She will slowly become insane, just like her roommates. That is her punishment for abandoning her husband."

I could imagine Yasmin shouting for mercy and my husband completely ignoring her pleas. Heartlessly, my husband slowly walked away and got into the grand car that was waiting for him.

My husband said: "I will never visit Yasmin again. Let her rot in the asylum."

I have decided not to complete the colourful sweater I was knitting for him. I burnt the half-knitted sweater into ashes. It would not have matched my husband's dark heart.

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The stories my husband tells of Yasmin are never consistent. There are times where she is suffering in a mental asylum that is hidden away in some isolated mountain and other times where she is forced to work as a prostitute in a dingy brothel house in some dark alley.

My husband said: "I have sold Yasmin to a notorious pimp. I told the pimp to only give her freedom after she has served a hundred thousand men."

I could imagine a pimp with a crooked nose producing devilish laughter while Yasmin, in torn clothes, crouches on the floor, crying her eyes out.

With happiness shining on his face, my husband said: "After a hundred thousand men have used her, she will be useless. She will not be fit to be anyone's wife."

His inconsistencies made me believe that the horrible stories he told about Yasmin only took place in his mind and not in real life. He needed lies to heal his bruised ego.

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Instinctively, my heart told me that the true story of Yasmin is a happy one. Brilliantly, she found a way to disappear that prevented my husband from tracing her, no matter how hard he tried.

I imagined her staying in a gorgeous place with a waterfall and a constant rainbow in the sky. She runs a boutique where she sews the most beautiful wedding gowns in her favourite colour.

"Pink will always make you look more beautiful," she probably says to all the brides who visit her boutique.

Initially, they would be sceptical at her suggestion. But their doubts would immediately disappear once they tested her gown in front of a large mirror.

The blushing bride would likely say: "You are right. Pink makes me look more beautiful."

The blushing bride would produce a sweet smile and in return, Yasmin would produce an even sweeter smile. It is the most beautiful thing to see a woman who has forgotten to smile slowly learn how to smile again.

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"I need a new wife to cure the pain that Yasmin has left in my heart."

My husband made this announcement when we were having dinner. He avoided eye contact with me. He continued eating the food on his white plate while I completely lost my appetite.

Like Yasmin, his new chosen bride, Rukhsana Ghulam Hussain, is a young helpless beauty who is at my husband's mercy.

Her father has a huge debt that is difficult to settle. Her father could end up in prison. Her father went to see my husband, begging for leniency on his debt.

My husband said: “I only give leniency to my family, not to strangers.”

Her father had tears in his eyes.

Smiling, my husband said: “Please do not cry. I will find ways for us to be a family.”

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It was extremely awkward for her father to call my husband, who is 20 years older than him, his son-in-law.

My husband said to her father: “I will look after your daughter like a princess and look after your family like a precious jewel.”

My husband is a firm believer that money can buy any form of happiness under the blue sky.

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My first meeting with my husband’s new bride took place in my living room, thirty days before the grand wedding.

My husband said: “I want you to meet Rukhsana. She will be staying under our roof. I want both of you to get along, like sisters.”

The meeting bordered between awkwardness and pleasantness. Rukhsana and I talked about everything under the sun, from our favourite fashion designer to our favourite actors. We exchanged a few laughs. She loved all the cookies I baked for her.

“You must teach me how to make these cookies,” said Rukhsana with a child-like innocence. We were pretending as if we were best friends, meeting over coffees and cookies, exchanging stories and gossip. We were trying our best to avoid discussing the big elephant in the room – her pending marriage to my husband.

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One Friday morning, I found a big parcel on my door step. It had no name. It had no address. With much curiosity, I unwrapped it.

It was a beautiful painting of a woman who looked like me, sitting on the floor of what looked like my living room, with a needle in her hand, sewing a beautiful red gown.

With a big smile, I hanged the painting on the wall of our living room, facing our dining table. I love everything about the painting except for one thing. I just wished the gown I was sewing was pink, instead of red. I wanted a touch of her in the painting.

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“Who sent you the painting?” My husband asked, while eating his dinner.

I told him that an uncle of mine who was living in Europe had commissioned a painter to draw his favourite niece.

“It’s his birthday present for me,” I said.

It was the first time I lied to my husband, in my entire life.

My husband said: “It’s so beautiful. I cannot take my eyes from it.”

If my husband has known the true identity of who sent the painting, he would have torn it into a thousand pieces.

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“I have no intention of stealing your husband. I am sorry.”

Rukhsana finally confessed her true feelings about marrying my husband during our fourth meeting. Her grand wedding with my husband was three days away.

I said: “You stole nothing. You did nothing wrong. My husband has a weakness for beautiful things.”

With tears, Rukhsana said: “I have no choice. I have to marry the man I never loved.”

This time, there were no burning mushrooms on a fiery stove.

Instead, there were some burning incense sticks in my living room, producing the sweet smell that Rukhsana and I were breathing. I would never forget the sweet smell of pain for the rest of my life.

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My husband stared intensely at the wedding gown I have sewn for his bride-to-be for the longest time. His favourite colour was nowhere to be found.

Shaking with fear, I said: “I think pink will be more suitable for Rukhsana. Pink will make her look more beautiful.”

Kissing my forehead, my husband said: “I love the wedding gown. You are right. Pink will make Rukhsana look more beautiful. I can’t wait for Rukhsana to wear it.”

I was no longer shaking with fear.

I said: “I am glad you love the wedding gown.”

Still holding me tightly to his chest, my husband said: “Maybe pink should be my new favourite colour.”

I smiled, with a few tears dripping from my eyes.