

THE NEW BRIDE



“Oh, how pretty she is!” Bibi couldn’t help noticing. “A Pure Persian Beauty.” With big almond shaped blue eyes, a straight nose, rosy cheeks and a small full-mouth, she was straight out of a beautiful dream. Her long, golden curls cascaded to her waist and her slender, tall frame made her look so graceful. She was such a pretty picture, *Mesmerising, Marvellous & Magnificent!*

Zainab was her name. *But what was Zainab doing here? Why had she come all the way from Iran to India? Why had she chosen India? And why this house only?* Bibi looked on with a puzzled mind and lots of questions in her heart.

Dadi-Amma, Badee-Maa, Ammi, Bhabhi-Jaan, the entire female fraternity of the clan was present there. Zainab was being introduced to all of them, one by one. Though she smiled and said *Salaam*, it was clear that she was not able to grasp anything. She just stared at the faces and said nothing in return. Some of the family members came forward to hug and bless her, which she humbly accepted, but her expressions remained the same.

Bibi was not introduced to Zainab. She saw the entire show from behind the curtain of her room, which was across the *dalaan*. Her eyes were fixed on Zainab. Her eyes were searching for answers. She knew that something like this was about to come. The last three years had not been good. She was fully aware and conscious of her own flaws. She was ordinary- with no beauty or brains. This alliance had taken place more because of her father’s status, rather than her credibility. She could not give this family, the one thing they desired for long. She felt like a useless piece of

furniture, dumped in a corner of the house. She was non-existent here, continuing to do the daily chores silently. Except for a few visits made by her husband to her room, every once in a while, when his urge was high and he had no other way to vent it out. She was a mere piece of flesh for him. He had never bothered to ask her about her feelings, her pains or her sorrows. He had no expectations left from her.

Two years ago, the *Hakeem* had announced it. "*Bibi would never be able to bear a child.*" There was nothing left for her to do or say. She had lost her respect in the house the same day. But she continued to live in hope, praying to Allah, day and night. Nothing was impossible if Allah had his way. It was her faith that was keeping her alive. But, Zainab's arrival had dashed her hopes completely.

Her husband's visits to Iran had indeed proved to be quite fruitful. The business was booming and now he had also managed to acquire a beautiful bride for himself, who would soon give him a son. *But why had Zainab chosen him? Had she no better choice in Iran?* Bibi kept wondering.

For the next few days, the household was abuzz with Zainab's arrival. She was gifted clothes, jewellery, a silver *paandaan* and much more. All eyes were hopeful again and Zainab was their hope. But there was sadness in Zainab's eyes, which only Bibi could see - a sense of loss, apprehension and anxiety.

After a few days, the much awaited news was declared. Zainab would soon be giving the family what they had wished for long- a Child. It was celebration time in the house. Everyone was elated and overjoyed. But Zainab sat quietly in her room. She did not talk or come out. Often while passing through the *dalaan*, Bibi could hear her sobbing. Sometimes when she came face to face with her, she could see Zainab's swollen eyes. The crying increased day by day.

Bibi knew that Zainab felt lost here, searching for an identity. She did not belong to this place. Her world was different. She was not meant to live here. She wanted to go back to her country. But no one understood her, except Bibi. Only Bibi could feel her pain because both of them were sailing in the same boat. This house was alien to both of them. One did not belong here and the other was not accepted here.

Zainab's health began to deteriorate. She was becoming pale and weak. The *Hakeem's* visits to the house increased. She was fed on loads of medicines and herbs.

None of the efforts proved fruitful. Bibi heard *Ammi* talking to *Bhabhi-Jaan* one day, “*If we could save the child atleast.*” This was what everyone wanted. Zainab’s well-being was not of concern to anyone.

Weeks passed, but with no luck. Finally, the Hakeem again had something to announce. The child could not be saved, but Zainab could survive.

Strange are Allah’s ways indeed. While everyone prayed for the child to live, Allah decided to save Zainab instead. It was really a miracle.

In a few days, Zainab was able to walk again and sit in the sun during the cold winter mornings. Still, she continued to look pale and meek.

Days soon turned into months, Zainab’s strength was back and the sobbing started again. The cries became louder now and were no longer confined to the four walls of Zainab’s room, instead they became a matter of concern for the entire family. All efforts to pacify Zainab proved in vain. She was getting rebellious, shouting for freedom. Bibi continued to watch quietly, wondering about the outcome of such histrionics.

One fine morning, Bibi noticed a *tonga* at the door and a few packed suitcases in the *daalaan*. Soon, Zainab came out of her room, covered from head to toe with *hijaab*. It was clear now that the *tonga* had come for her. She was going back to Iran.

No one in the family came forward to say goodbye. Zainab too said nothing to anyone and moved slowly towards the exit door. This was a scene in complete contrast to the one when she had arrived in this house.

Suddenly, Zainab halted at the *chaukhat*, as if she had forgotten something and turned around to look at Bibi. She came towards Bibi, held her hands and looking into her eyes, whispered with a smile: “*Khudahafiz Bibi.*”
