



# UNMARRIAGEABLE

Pride and Prejudice in Pakistan



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## CHAPTER ONE



*It is a truth universally acknowledged that a girl can go from pauper to princess or princess to pauper in the mere seconds it takes for her to accept a proposal.*

When Alysba Binat began working at age twenty as the English literature teacher at the British School of Dilipabad, she had thought it would be a temporary solution to the sudden turn of fortune that had seen Mr Barkat ‘Bark’ Binat and Mrs Khushboo ‘Pinkie’ Binat and their five daughters – Jenazba, Alysba, Marizba, Qittyara, and Lady – move from big-city Lahore to backwater Dilipabad. But here she was, ten years later, thirty years old, and still in the job she’d grown to love despite its challenges. Her new batch of Year 10s were starting *Pride and Prejudice*, and their first homework had been to rewrite the opening sentence of Jane Austen’s novel, always a fun activity and a good way for her to get to know her students better.

After Alys took attendance, she opened a fresh box of multicoloured chalks and invited the girls to share their sentences on

the blackboard. The first to jump up was Rose-Nama, a crusader for duty and decorum, and one of the more trying students. Rose-Nama deliberately bypassed the coloured chalks for a plain white one, and Alys braced herself for a reimagined sentence exulting a traditional life – marriage, children, death. As soon as Rose-Nama ended with *mere seconds it takes for her to accept a proposal*, the class erupted into cheers, for it was true: a ring did possess magical powers to transform into pauper or princess. Rose-Nama gave a curtsy and, glancing defiantly at Alys, returned to her desk.

‘Good job,’ Alys said. ‘Who wants to go next?’

As hands shot up, she looked affectionately at the girls at their wooden desks, their winter uniforms impeccably washed and pressed by *dhobis* and maids, their long braids (for good girls did not get a boyish cut like Alys’s) draped over their books, and she wondered who they’d end up becoming by the end of secondary school. She recalled herself at their age – an eager-to-learn though ultimately naive Ms Know-It-All.

‘Miss Alys, me me me,’ the class clown said, pumping her hand energetically.

Alys nodded, and the girl selected a blue chalk and began to write.

*It is a truth universally acknowledged that a young girl in possession of a pretty face, a fair complexion, a slim figure, and good height is not going to happily settle for a very ugly husband if he doesn't have enough money, unless she has the most incredible bad luck (which my cousin does).*

The class exploded into laughter and Alys smiled too.

‘My cousin’s biggest complaint,’ the girl said, her eyes twinkling, ‘is that he’s so hairy. Miss Alys, how is it fair that girls are expected to wax everywhere but boys can be as hairy as gorillas?’

‘Double standards,’ Alys said.

‘*Oof*,’ Rose-Nama said. ‘Which girl wants a moustache and a hairy back? I don’t.’

A chorus of *I don’t*s filled the room, and Alys was glad to see all the class energised and participating.

‘I don’t either,’ Alys said complacently, ‘but the issue is that women don’t seem to have a choice that is free from judgement.’

‘Miss Alys,’ called out a popular girl. ‘Can I go next?’

*It is unfortunately not a truth universally acknowledged that it is better to be alone than to have fake friendships.*

As soon as she finished the sentence, the popular girl tossed the pink chalk into the box and glared at another girl across the room. Great, Alys thought, as she told her to sit down; they’d still not made up. Alys was known as the teacher you could go to with any issue and not be busted, and both girls had come to her separately, having quarrelled over whether one could have only one best friend. Ten years ago, Alys would have panicked at such disruptions. Now she barely blinked. Also, being one of five sisters had its perks, for it was good preparation for handling classes full of feisty girls.

Another student got up and wrote in red:

*It is a truth universally acknowledged that every marriage, no matter how good, will have ups and downs.*

‘This class is a wise one,’ Alys said to the delighted girl.

The classroom door creaked open from the December wind, a soft whistling sound that Alys loved. The sky was darkening and rain dug into the school lawn, where, weather permitting, classes were

conducted under the sprawling century-old banyan tree and the girls loved to let loose and play rowdy games of rounders and cricket. Cold air wafted into the room and Alys wrapped her shawl tightly around herself. She glanced at the clock on the mildewed wall.

‘We have time for a couple more sentences,’ and she pointed to a shy girl at the back. The girl took a green chalk and, biting her lip, began to write:

*It is a truth universally acknowledged that if you are the daughter of rich and generous parents, then you have the luxury to not get married just for security.*

‘Wonderful observation,’ Alys said kindly, for, according to Dilipabad’s healthy rumour mill, the girl’s father’s business was currently facing setbacks. ‘But how about the daughter earn a *good* income of her own and secure this freedom for herself?’

‘Yes, miss,’ the girl said quietly as she scuttled back to her chair.

Rose-Nama said, ‘It’s *Western* conditioning to think independent women are better than homemakers.’

‘No one said anything about East, West, better, or worse,’ Alys said. ‘Being financially independent is not a Western idea. The Prophet’s wife, Hazrat Khadijah, ran her own successful business back in the day and he was, to begin with, her employee.’

Rose-Nama frowned. ‘Have you ever reimagined the first sentence?’

Alys grabbed a yellow chalk and wrote her variation, as she inevitably did every year, ending with the biggest flourish of an exclamation point yet.

*It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a husband!*

‘How,’ Alys said, ‘does this gender-switch from the original sentence make you feel? Can it possibly be true or can you see the irony, the absurdity, more clearly now?’

The classroom door was flung open and Tahira, a student, burst in. She apologised for being late even as she held out her hand, her fingers splayed to display a magnificent four-carat marquis diamond ring.

‘It happened last night! Complete surprise!’ Tahira looked excited and nervous. ‘Ammi came into my bedroom and said, “Put away your homework-shomework, you’re getting engaged.” Miss Alys, they are our family friends and own a textile mill.’

‘Well,’ Alys said, ‘well, congratulations,’ and she rose to give her a hug, even as her heart sank. Girls from illustrious feudal families like sixteen-year-old Tahira married early, started families without delay, and had grandchildren of their own before they knew it. It was a lucky few who went to university while the rest got married, for this was the Tao of obedient girls in Dilipabad; Alys went so far as to say the Tao of good girls in Pakistan.

Yet it always upset her that young brilliant minds, instead of exploring the universe, were busy chiselling themselves to fit into the moulds of Mrs and Mum. It wasn’t that she was averse to Mrs Mum, only that none of the girls seemed to have ever considered travelling the world by themselves, let alone been encouraged to do so, or to shatter a glass ceiling, or laugh like a madwoman in public without a care for how it looked. At some point over the years, she’d made it her job to inject (or as some, like Rose-Nama’s mother, would say, ‘infect’) her students with possibility. And even if the girls in this small sleepy town refused to wake up, wasn’t it her duty to try? How grateful she’d have been for such a teacher. Instead, she and her sisters had also been raised under their mother’s motto to marry young and

well, an expectation neither thirty-year-old Alys, nor her elder sister, thirty-two-year-old Jena, had fulfilled.

In the year 2000, in the lovely town of Dilipabad, in the lovelier state of Punjab, women like Alys and Jena were, as far as their countrymen and -women were concerned, certified Miss Havishams, Charles Dickens's famous spinster who'd wasted away her life. Actually, Alys and Jena were considered even worse off, for they had not enjoyed Miss Havisham's good luck of having at least once been engaged.

As Alys watched, the class swarmed around Tahira, wishing out loud that they too would be blessed with such a ring and begin their real lives.

'Okay, girls,' she finally said. 'Settle down. You can ogle the diamond after class. Tahira, you too. I hope you did your homework? Can you share your sentence on the board?'

Tahira began writing with an orange chalk, her ring flashing like a big bright light bulb at the blackboard – exactly the sort of ring, Alys knew, her own mother coveted for her daughters.

*It is a truth universally acknowledged in this world and beyond that having an ignorant mother is worse than having no mother at all.*

'There,' Tahira said, carefully wiping chalk dust off her hands. 'Is that okay, miss?'

Alys smiled. 'It's an opinion.'

'It's rude and disrespectful,' Rose-Nama called out. 'Parents can never be ignorant.'

'What does ignorant mean in this case, do you think?' Alys said. 'At what age might one's own experiences outweigh a parent's?'

'Never,' Rose-Nama said frostily. 'Miss Alys, parents will always have more experience and know what is best for us.'

‘Well,’ Alys said, ‘we’ll see in *Pride and Prejudice* how the main character and her mother start out with similar views, and where and why they begin to separate.’

‘Miss Alys,’ Tahira said, sliding into her seat, ‘my mother said I won’t be attending school after my marriage, so I was wondering, do I still have to do assign—’

‘Yes.’ Alys calmly cut her off, having heard this too many times. ‘I expect you to complete each and every assignment, and I also urge you to request that your parents and fiancé, and your mother-in-law, allow you to finish secondary school.’

‘I’d like to,’ Tahira said a little wistfully. ‘But my mother says there are more important things than fractions and ABCs.’

Alys would have offered to speak to the girl’s mother, but she knew from previous experiences that her recommendation carried no weight. An unmarried woman advocating pursuits outside the home might as well be a witch spreading anarchy and licentiousness.

‘Just remember,’ Alys said quietly, ‘there *is* more to life than getting married and having children.’

‘But, miss,’ Tahira said hesitantly, ‘what’s the purpose of life without children?’

‘The same purpose as there would be with children – to be a good human being and contribute to society. Look, plenty of women physically unable to have children still live perfectly meaningful lives, and there are as many women who remain childless by choice.’

Rose-Nama glared. ‘That’s just wrong.’

‘It’s not wrong,’ Alys said gently. ‘It’s relative. Not every woman wants to keep home and hearth, and I’m sure not every man wants to be the breadwinner.’

‘What does he want to do, then?’ Rose-Nama said. ‘Knit?’

Alys painstakingly removed a fraying silver thread from her black shawl. Finally she said, in an even tone, ‘You’ll all be pleased to see that there are plenty of marriages in *Pride and Prejudice*.’

‘Why do you like the book so much, then?’ Rose-Nama asked disdainfully.

‘Because,’ Alys said simply, ‘Jane Austen is ruthless when it comes to drawing-room hypocrisy. She’s blunt, impolite, funny, and absolutely honest. She’s Jane Khala, one of those honorary good aunts who tells it straight and looks out for you.’

Alys erased the blackboard and wrote, *Elizabeth Bennet: First Impressions?*, then turned to lead the discussion among the already buzzing girls. None of them had previously read *Pride and Prejudice*, but many had watched the 1995 BBC drama and were swooning over the scene in which Mr Darcy emerged from the lake on his Pemberley property in a wet white shirt. She informed them that this particular scene was not in the novel and that, in Austen’s time, men actually swam naked. The girls burst into nervous giggles.

‘Miss,’ a few of the girls, giddy, emboldened, piped up, ‘when are you getting married?’

‘Never.’ Alys had been wondering when this class would finally get around to broaching the topic.

‘But why not!’ several distressed voices cried out. ‘You’re not *that* old. And, if you grow your hair long again and start using bright lipstick, you will be so pret—’

‘Girls, girls’ – Alys raised her amused voice over the clamour – ‘unfortunately, I don’t think any man I’ve met is my equal, and neither, I fear, is any man likely to think I’m his. So, no marriage for me.’

‘You think marriage is not important?’ Rose-Nama said, squinting.

‘I don’t believe it’s for everyone. Marriage should be a part of life and not *life*.’

‘You are a forever career woman?’ Rose-Nama said.

Alys heard the mocking and the doubt in her tone: who in their right mind would choose a teaching job in Dilipabad over marriage and children?

‘Believe me, Rose-Nama,’ Alys said serenely, ‘life certainly does not end just because you choose to stay—’

‘Unmarried?’ Rose-Nama made a face as she uttered the word.

‘Single,’ Alys said. ‘There is a vast difference between remaining unmarried and choosing to stay single. Jane Austen is a leading example. She didn’t get married, but her paper children – six wonderful novels – keep her alive centuries later.’

‘You are also delivering a paper child?’ Rose-Nama asked.

‘But, Miss Alys,’ Tahira said resolutely, ‘there’s no nobler career than that of being a wife and mother.’

‘That’s fine.’ Alys shrugged. ‘As long as it’s what you really want and not what you’ve been taught to want.’

‘But marriage and children *are* my dream, miss!’ Tahira gazed at Jane Austen’s portrait on the book. ‘Did no one want to marry her?’

‘Actually,’ Alys said, ‘a very wealthy man proposed to her one evening and she said yes, but the next morning she said no.’

‘Jane Austen must have been from a well-to-do family herself,’ said the shy girl, sighing.

Alys gave her a bright smile for speaking up. ‘No. Jane’s mother came from nobility but her father was a clergyman. In their time, they were middle-class gentry, respectable but not rich, and women of their class could not work for a living except as governesses, so it must have taken a lot of courage for her to refuse.’

‘Jane Austen sounds very selfish,’ Rose-Nama said. ‘Imagine how happy her mother must have been, only to find that overnight the good luck had been spurned.’

‘It could also be,’ Alys said softly, ‘that her mother was happy her daughter was different. Do any of you have the courage to live life as you want?’

‘Miss Alys,’ Rose-Nama said, ‘marriage is a cornerstone of our culture.’

‘A truth universally acknowledged’ – Alys cleared her throat – ‘because without marriage our culture and religion do not permit sexual intimacy.’

All the girls tittered.

‘Miss,’ Rose-Nama said, ‘everyone knows that abstinence until marriage is the secret to societies where nothing bad happens.’

‘That’s not true.’ Alys looked pained. She thought back to the ten years her family had lived in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, where she’d studied at a co-ed international school and made friends from all over the world, who’d lived all sorts of lifestyles. Though she’d been forbidden from befriending boys, many of the girls were allowed, and they were no worse off for it. Like her, they’d also been studious and just as keen to collect flavoured lip balms, scratch-and-sniff stickers, and scented rubbers, which she’d learnt, courtesy of her American classmates, were called erasers, while a rubber was a condom, which was something you put on a penis, which was pronounced ‘pee-nus’ and not ‘pen-iz’. Alys’s best friend, Tana from Denmark, stated that her mother had given her condoms when she’d turned fifteen, because, in Scandinavia, intimacy came early and did not require marriage. Alys had shared the information with Jena, who was scandalised, but Alys had quickly accepted the proverb ‘Different strokes for different folks.’

‘Premarital sex is haram, a sin,’ Rose-Nama said, ‘and you shouldn’t imply otherwise to us, Miss Alys.’ Her eyes widened. ‘Or do you believe it’s not a sin?’

Before Alys could answer, the head peon, Bashir, knocked on the door.

‘*Chalein jee, Alysba bibi,*’ he said, ‘*phir bulawa aa gaya aap ka.* Mrs Naheed requires your presence yet again.’

Alys followed Bashir down the stairs, past classrooms, past the small canteen where the teachers’ chai and snacks were prepared at a discount rate, past a stray cat huddled on the wide veranda that wrapped around the mansion-turned-school-building, past the accountant’s nook, and towards the head teacher’s office, a roomy den at the end of the front porch with bay windows overlooking the driveway for keeping an eye on all comings and goings.

The British School Group was founded twenty years ago by Begum Beena dey Bagh. The name was chosen for its suggested affiliation with Britain, although there was none. However, it was to be an English-medium establishment. Twelve years ago, Naheed, a well-heeled Dilipabadi housewife, decided to put to use a vacant property belonging to her. She sought permission from Beena dey Bagh to open a branch of the British School, and so was born the British School of Dilipabad.

Naheed had turned her institution into a finishing school of sorts for girls from Dilipabad’s privileged. Accordingly, she was willing to pay well for teachers fluent in English with decent accents, and, just as she’d all but given up on proficient English literature teachers, Alys and Jena Binat had entered her office a decade ago.

Alys entered the office now, settled in a chair facing Naheed’s desk, and waited for her to get off the phone. She gazed at the bulletin boards plastering the walls and boasting photos where Naheed beamed with Dilipabad’s VIPs. They were thumbtacked in place to allow easy removal if a VIP fell from financial grace or got involved in a particularly egregious scandal.

Naheed's mahogany desk held folders and forms and a framed picture of her precious twin daughters, Ginwa and Rumsha – Gin and Rum – born late, courtesy of IVF treatments. Gin and Rum posed in front of the Eiffel Tower with practised pouts, blonde-streaked brown hair, and skintight jeans. Naheed's daughters lived in Lahore with their grandparents; she'd opted to send them to the British School of Lahore rather than her own British School of Dilipabad because she wanted them to receive superior educations as well as better networking opportunities. Gin and Rum planned to be fashion designers, a newly lucrative entrepreneurial opportunity in Pakistan, and Naheed had no doubt her daughters would make a huge splash in the world of couture and an equally huge splash in the matrimonial bazaar by marrying no less than the Pakistani equivalents of Princes William and Harry.

Naheed hung up the phone and, clearly annoyed, shook her head at Alys.

'Rose-Nama's mother called. Again. Apparently you used the "f" word in class.'

'I did?'

'The "f" word, Alys. Is this the language of dignified women, let alone teachers?'

Alys crossed her arms. Naheed would not have dared speak to her like this when she'd first joined the school. Ten years ago, when Naheed had realised that Alys and Jena were Binats, her tongue had been a never-ending red carpet, for the Binats were a highly respected and moneyed clan. However, once Dilipabad's VIPs realised that Bark Binat was now all but penniless – why he'd lost his money was no one's worry, that he had was everyone's favourite topic – they devalued Bark and his dependents. As soon as Mrs Naheed gleaned that Alys and Jena were working in order

to pay bills and not because they were bored upper-class girls, she began to belittle them.

‘Alys, God knows,’ Naheed said, ‘I have yet again tried to calm Rose-Nama’s mother, but give me one good reason why I shouldn’t let you go.’

Alys knew that Naheed had tried to hire other well-qualified English-speaking teachers but no one was willing to relocate to Dilipabad. The sole entertainment for most Pakistanis was to eat out, and the elite English-speaking gentry in particular believed they deserved dining finer than Dilipabad offered.

‘Alys, am I or am I not,’ Naheed’s voice boomed, ‘paying you a pretty penny? It is not as if good jobs are growing on trees.’

The fact was, over the years Alys had been offered lucrative teaching positions in other cities, and then there was Dubai, where single Pakistani girls were increasingly fleeing to find their fortunes, but she was unwilling to leave her family, especially her father.

‘It was a crow,’ Alys said. ‘Rose-Nama and her mother should educate themselves on context. A giant crow flew into the classroom and startled me and—’

‘Alys,’ Naheed said, ‘I don’t care if twenty giant crows fly into the classroom and start singing “The hills are alive with the sound of music”; you absolutely may not curse in front of impressionable young ladies. Rose-Nama’s mother is right – if it’s not cursing, it’s something else. Last year you told students that dowry was a “demented” tradition. Could you not have used “controversial” or “divisive” or “contentious”? You of all people should be sensitive to diction. Then you told them that divorce was not a big deal! Another year you told them that they should be reading Urdu and regional literature instead of English. An absurd statement from an English literature teacher.’

‘Not “instead”. I said “side by side”.’

‘Yet another time you decided to inform them that if Islam allowed polygamy, then it should allow polyandry. This is a school. Not a brothel.’

Alys said, stiffly, ‘I want my girls to at least have a chance at being more than well-trained dolls. I want them to think critically.’

Naheed pointed above Alys’s head. ‘What is the school motto?’

Alys spoke it by rote. “‘Excellence in Obedience. Obediently Excellent. Obey to Excel.””

‘Precisely,’ Naheed said. ‘The goal of the British School Group is for our girls to pass their exams with flying colours so that they become wives and mothers worthy of our nation’s future VIPs. Please stick to the curriculum. I’m weary of apologising to parents and making excuses for you. Also, I know you value your younger sisters studying here.’

Alys gave a small smile. Qitty, in Year 12, and Lady, in Year 10, attended BSD at the discount rate offered to faculty family, which, all the teachers agreed, was not as generous as it could be.

‘I may not be able to protect you any longer,’ Naheed said. ‘Begum Beena dey Bagh’s nephew is returning from completing his MBA in America, and things seem to be about to change. For one, the young man plans to abolish the uniform. Can you imagine our students turning up in whatever they choose to wear? Anarchy!’

Alys understood Naheed’s concern. She and her husband had the monopoly over the British School of Dilipabad’s uniform business – winter, spring, autumn – and the loss would be an expensive hit to their income.

Mrs Naheed’s gaze fixed upon the driveway. Alys turned to see a Pajero with tinted windows and green government number plates driving in. The jeep stopped and the driver handed the

gate guard a packet. Minutes later, Naheed tenderly opened a pearly oversize lavender envelope embossed with a golden palanquin. All smiles, she drew out equally pearly invites to Dilipabad's most coveted event: the NadirFiede wedding, the joining of Fiede Fecker, daughter of old-money VIPs, to Nadir Sheh, son of equally important VIPs, though rumour had it that drug-smuggling was responsible for the Shehs' fast accumulation of monies and rapid social climb and acceptance into the gentry.

'Such a classy invitation,' Naheed said, tucking the invites back in.

Alys disliked the word 'classy', a favourite of those who aimed to be arbiters of class. She knew that Naheed was hoping the Binats would not be invited, despite their pedigree, since Alys and Fiede Fecker, a graduate of the British School of Dilipabad, had been at loggerheads over incomplete assignments and projects never turned in.

'Alys, the *namigarami* – the elite of Dilipabad – have spoken,' Naheed said, fingering her invite. 'Our duty is to send their daughters home exactly as they were delivered to us each morning: obediently obeying their parents. We are to groom these girls into the best of marriageable material. That is all.' Naheed signalled to Bashir, who had been dawdling by the threshold, to get her a fresh cup of lemongrass tea and, in doing so, dismissed Alys.

Alys rejoined her Year 10s, bracing herself for Rose-Nama to demand her views on premarital intimacy. But Rose-Nama was busy scolding the class monitor, a timid girl Mrs Naheed had appointed because her father had given a generous donation to renovate the science laboratory. Mercifully, the bell rang as soon as she stepped in, and Alys, gathering her folders and cloth handbag, headed to the Year 11 classroom.

‘Girls,’ Alys said to Year 11, ‘open up your *Romeo and Juliet*. Let me remind you that Juliet is thirteen years old and Romeo around fifteen or sixteen and that they could have surely experienced a happier fate had they refrained from romance at their ages, which may well have been Shakespeare’s cautionary intent for writing this pathetically sad love story.’