

CHAPTER 1

Zanzibar

MEHWISH WOKE WITH a frown on her face. Her father's words of the previous night still clung to her memory like a twisted limb on an old tree. He dropped a bombshell on her during supper, managing to slip the unwelcomed information in as nice as you please, right between the second course of *pilau* and the third course of *biryani*.

Her stepmother Salme, whom Mehwish despised, was pregnant. Mehwish nearly choked on her food when she heard the disturbing news. She ran from the supper table, barely able to hold back a flood of tears. That night she cried herself to sleep.

Mehwish was no fool. She was well aware that her father had physical needs. It was obvious those needs were met when she looked into the faces of several of the slaves scattered about on his ten *shambas* (plantations). Offspring created with slaves were of no consequence to Mehwish. They were little more than leaves blowing in the wind, easily forgotten.

Her father hadn't warned her of his intention to wed. By the time Mehwish was apprised of his association with the woman that would become her stepmother, it was already a *fait accompli*. The knowledge that her father had remarried had been a bitter pill for Mehwish to swallow. However, the fact that his new wife was already breeding, after being wed less than six months, did not sit well with the pampered little princess at all.

Mehwish envisioned that in four years' time Salme would push out an

equal number of brats. With each new birth, Mehwish's connection with her father would grow more tenuous until it diminished and eventually died.

The mere thought was extremely disturbing. She was now wide awake with a dirty taste in her mouth, a spirit filled with meanness, and the inexplicable ire of one far older than her thirteen years.

She covered her eyes with her forearm, more to block out the memories of the night before than to shield against the rays of sunlight burning through the sheer curtains covering her bedroom windows.

Though the hour was late, Mehwish remained in her bed, listening to the routine sounds the slaves and house servants made as they went about their daily tasks in Serengeti. These mundane sounds coming through her open bedroom window blended with the potent scent of cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla, cloves, and pepper. They only moderately soothed the rough edges of her temper while lending the sense of security that accompanies that which is familiar. She'd slept late. It was time for her to get up and face whatever the day might bring. She swung her legs over the side of her custom-made canopy bed. The bed was so high her feet could not reach the floor.

Binta, the African slave woman who had served as Mehwish's wet nurse, nanny, and surrogate mother since the day she was born, sat in a corner humming a familiar Kiswahili tune as she busily hand-stitched an elaborate appliqué on the collar of one of Mehwish's silk night-rails. Mehwish's mother died in childbirth. Binta was the only mother she had ever known. Binta looked up from her sewing with a smile on her face.

"Well, good morning, sleepy head. 'Bout time you got up. Did you sleep well? Would you like to break your fast?"

When she noticed Mehwish was still too grumpy to engage in any banter, she returned to her sewing. That fact was born out when Mehwish merely grunted in Binta's general direction and ignored her, choosing instead to quietly pace her opulent bedroom in her bare feet.

Binta watched Mehwish under hooded eyes as she moved from one item to the next, first touching a gold hair brush, then a crystal ornament on her dresser bureau. Last, she toyed with an exquisite pair of black diamond ear bobs her father recently gifted her after a trip to South Africa.

She couldn't help but worry about Mehwish. Sometimes her young charge did and said things that were disturbing. The master and mistress had been wed for several months, and still Mehwish had not warmed to her father's new wife. Binta wondered if she ever would. She was even more fearful that Mehwish's impetuous nature would create discord between the master and mistress. Binta quietly watched Mehwish pace until she couldn't take it anymore.

"If you keep on pacing like that, you're liable to wear a hole in the floor, little missy," Binta said in that sugary sweet tone of voice that reminded Mehwish of a beautiful song. "Got something on your mind you want to share with ol' Binta?"

Binta was nowhere near old. She was in the middle years of her life and still very beautiful, with eyes that twinkled with laughter and a perpetual smile upon her lips. She spent more time caring for Mehwish than her own son Hacim.

Mehwish was an only child, and her father Issaiyah fairly doted upon her. She was stubbornly resistant to change. Mehwish liked things the way they used to be when her world consisted of her, her father, and those who lived to serve them. She had no desire to share her father's affections with a half-brother or sister, and she didn't want to share his love with his beautiful new wife, Salme, whom Binta knew for a fact Mehwish was insanely jealous of.

Binta had cleaned Mehwish's little nasty bottom as a babe. She knew her well enough to know when she had something on her mind. She suspected it wasn't anything Mehwish cared to share with her. Binta decided not to push the issue. Some things are best kept to oneself.

Issaiyah bin Said al-Murgebi was wealthy. The foundation of his wealth was derived from the slave trade. He'd cleverly parlayed his blood money into seven spice *shambas* in the tropical paradise known as Zanzibar, or the Spice Islands. His holdings were not only vast, but he was the master of over 10,000 slaves.

Said al-Murgebi was blacker than most of the slaves he owned. It was common knowledge that Mehwish's paternal grandmother had been a pure-blooded black African from the village of Mbwa Maji, a small village south of

Dar es Salaam. The slaves whispered among themselves about it, but no one dared speak of the master's ancestry within his hearing—not if they valued their lives.

He was a cruel man, as was his father before him. The Africans whose villages the master pillaged referred to him as the demonic black beast who sold his own people for profit. Mehwish didn't seem to care. She once told Binta, "My father is black and he might even be a beast, but at least he is a rich one." Binta feared Mehwish had inherited some of her father's tendencies.

Mehwish paused in front of a large mirror to admire her face. For the first time that day, Mehwish deigned to acknowledge Binta's presence.

"Binta, am I pretty?"

Binta couldn't rightly say Mehwish was pretty. There was something in her eyes that kept her from prettiness, but Binta didn't have a mean bone in her body. She could never, ever hurt the innocent child by telling her the truth.

"Well, little missy, with all that lustrous, dark hair and that creamy olive complexion of yours, you have the promise of one day becoming a truly stunning woman," she said diplomatically.

Mehwish scrutinised Binta for a moment while she decided whether she'd been complimented or insulted. She quickly concluded that Binta would never be foolish enough to insult her.

For the first time that day, Mehwish smiled, thinking *Binta is right. I do have beautiful skin*. Mehwish made it a point to never venture out in the sun without both a bonnet and a parasol to preserve her skin colour. She turned her head from the left to the right, capturing every angle of her profile. *One day, when I have breasts and hips like my stepmother, every man who looks at me will fall at my feet.*

"You know what, Binta?" she said, continuing to critique her reflection in the mirror. "I praise Allah every day that I inherited the white skin and aquiline features of my mother and grandfather while benefiting from the wealth of my father."

Binta made no comment. After all, what in the world could she say to that?

CHAPTER 2

OUT OF ALL her father's shambas, Mehwish loved Serengeti the most. It was heaven on earth with an even coastline and a private beach, dotted with coconut trees right outside her bedchamber. Unlike his other holdings, which were located in rural areas, this shamba was located not far from Stone Town, the oldest part of Zanzibar, where the narrow roads were lined with churches, mosques, Hindu halls, and beautiful buildings made of coral stone, lime, and clay.

Mehwish never tired of going into the city. There was so much to see and do in Stone Town, so she was never bored. Serengeti was her father's kingdom, and she was his little queen.

Heaven on earth or not, at the moment Mehwish was so bored she could scream. Expelling a calculated loud sigh to express her boredom and to get Binta's attention, the petulant little girl eventually flounced on the chaise lounge across from Binta with her arms across her chest and her bottom lip poked out. She frowned when Binta continued sewing.

Her lips twisted imperceptively as a thought came to mind. It had been weeks since she'd been to Stone Town.

"Madhe Binta. I would have you take me into town. I have a desire to see the sights and to partake of the delicacies the roadside vendors have for sale."

We can visit the slave market in the Anglican Cathedral. If I am lucky, there may even be a public whipping or execution while we are there!

Binta glanced at her. "I guess the young mistress has forgotten the lunch

date with her esteemed father and Mistress Salme. If you do not hurry, you will be late.”

Mehwish had, in fact, totally forgotten that she was to lunch with her father and her stepmother. *Agh!* She could not stomach her stepmother’s insipid personality under the best of circumstances. She could only assume the dullard would be nigh on intolerable now that she was pregnant.

She let out another lengthy, put-upon sigh. She would have to postpone her trip into Stone Town. In the meantime, she would content herself by playing with a recent gift from her father. A fluffy white kitten with one blue eye and one green eye was sleeping peacefully in a corner of her bedchamber.

She’d named the kitten Confusion because Allah couldn’t decide whether its eyes would be blue or green. The kitten slept in a tiny lace-trimmed bed designed by Binta, an exact replica of the elaborate bed Mehwish slept in.

Ignoring Binta’s suggestion that she prepare herself for the luncheon, Mehwish reached for the sleeping kitten. Startled, the kitten nipped Mehwish on her hand. She examined her hand carefully. Thankfully, there was no blood. The skin had not been broken.

Mehwish’s facial expression didn’t change as she grabbed the frightened kitten by the scruff of its neck, marched over to the other side of her bed chamber, and cruelly tossed it out of her open bedroom window. It fell three floors to its death, bursting apart on the flagstones below. Mehwish leaned out of the window to dispassionately watch the whole thing from beginning to end.

Binta didn’t have an opportunity to react to Mehwish’s cruelty before there was a knock at the bedroom door. She hurried to answer the door, still distraught by what she’d seen. It was the master himself, come to check on his daughter’s tardiness for the luncheon.

Mehwish’s dark eyes welled up with tears the minute she lay eyes upon her father. He looked toward Binta as if she’d done something wrong as Mehwish ran over to wrap her arms around his waist and bury her face in his abdomen.

“There, there, my love. I hope you are not still upset about the new addition to our family. Everything will be fine. You’ll see.”

He had hoped a good night’s sleep would smooth things over between

him and his daughter. He so wanted her and Salme to get on well together. Mehwish nodded, indicating that the discussion of the previous night was not the cause of her current distress.

“Well then, tell Papa what is wrong, little one.”

He had a look of puzzlement on his face when Mehwish grabbed hold of his big black hand to lead him to the open window. With quivering lips, she pointed in the direction of the courtyard beneath her bedroom window.

“What the fuck!”

Her father’s bellow of outrage when he saw what had become of the kitten named Confusion could be heard throughout the great house.

“Tebeda ena mut!” (*Get fucked and die*) he screamed to no one in particular and everyone at the same time. His sharp retort spilled outside to the courtyard and beyond. The slaves paused in their chores and trembled in fear. The cruel lion who had seemed content with his new state of marriage for the past few months had returned. Anything was liable to happen.

“Tell me who is responsible for this outrage, my darling. I will see that they are punished to fit the crime.”

Mehwish’s nose was beet red. Tears ran down her face as she dramatically pointed to a young man who, unaware he was the subject of the master’s narrow-eyed scrutiny, was busy pruning a bush in the courtyard below. Mehwish blamed the hapless slave for the evil deed, giving Said al-Murgebi a body to vent his anger on.

Binta stood back while Said al-Murgebi sought to console his daughter, shaking her head in disappointment. She’d seen Mehwish do evil things in the past. She’d also seen her throw that kitten out of the window, but she dared not contradict the spoiled child’s claim. She pitied the person who would be wrongfully accused of the deed. Said al-Murgebi’s punishment was sure to be brutal and swift.

Mehwish and the master brushed past Binta to go out to the courtyard. Binta waited until Mehwish and her father left the room to look out at the pair below the window. Mistress Salme was standing near the front door with her hand shielding her eyes from the sun and a frown on her face.

It wasn’t until the master looked up to fix Binta with his cold cruel stare

that she realised the unfortunate youth Mehwish had pointed to was her own seventeen-year-old son, Hacim.

“NOOOOOOOOO!” Binta screamed, before the floor dropped out beneath her. She grabbed the hem of her skirts and ran to the courtyard as quickly as she could. This had to be a mistake. Missy Mehwish wouldn’t break her heart by hurting her only child. She just knew she wouldn’t.

But Mehwish intended to do just that. It didn’t matter that Hacim was a good boy and that he had never been inside the mansion. And it didn’t matter that he had never seen the inside of Mehwish’s bedchambers, from where the kitten had been tossed. Those salient facts were of no consequence to Said al-Murgebi when he saw how upset his precious daughter was from the loss of the kitten.

Binta knew Said al-Murgebi to be merciless in his dealings with the slaves. They were of no value to him. Their lives meant nothing, and his daughter had been raised to feel the same. Binta foolishly assumed that since she’d taken care of Mehwish since the day she pushed her way out of her mother’s womb that she, and her son by association, would be placed in a different category from the other slaves on Serengeti. Her worst nightmare now played out before her eyes, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

“Oh God, no! Please, young mistress,” Binta begged. “Tell the master you made a mistake. Don’t let them hurt my son. Please!”

Binta looked crazed with her turban eschew and snot running out of her nose. Both her and Hacim’s screams were heard throughout the shamba as her son was summarily dragged to the frequently used whipping post and flogged until the flesh fell off his back like the skin of an overripe banana. The beating went on well after Hacim’s spirit had fled the courtyard.

Nothing could stop Binta’s lamentation; not even a vicious blow to the mouth could silence her cries.

Young Mehwish looked on barefooted and clad in her night-rail, dispassionately eating an apple while the innocent youth’s dead body was pulled down from the post.

Suddenly Mehwish realised she was famished. Other than the apple, she’d yet to break her fast. Mehwish and her father didn’t spare Binta a backward glance when they went inside to have lunch.