



*In the early days, when I was still an innocent girl, my father believed in perfection.*

Once, musing over his empire, contemplating the splendor he had created, he composed a poem. On the vaulted ceiling above his Peacock Throne he had an artist inscribe in gold, “If there is a paradise on the face of the Earth, it is this, it is this, it is this.” Simple words from a simple man. But how true they were.

Sunrise over the Yamuna River has often prompted me to think of Paradise. From the broad shoulders of the waterway I have cherished the sights before me as I might cherish the face of my lover. This morning’s views are as inspiring as ever, especially after having been away in hiding for so long. To my right sprawls the magnificent Red Fort. Opposite, awash in the sun’s blood, stands the Taj Mahal, neither soaring as a falcon might, nor cresting like the sea. Rather, the mausoleum arches upward, strong and noble, a gateway to the heavens. Knowing that the Taj Mahal was built for my mother is among my greatest joys, and my most profound sorrows.

Today, I am not alone. My guardian, Nizam, patiently rows our boat across the Yamuna. Behind our craft’s bow sit my two granddaughters, Gulbadan and Rurayya. No longer girls, each is a wondrous incarnation of my daughter. Looking at them, I think that time has moved too swiftly, that just yesterday I was stroking the soles of their diminutive, untested feet. My love for my granddaughters is even stronger now than it was then. When I see them I feel as if I’m moving forward into places harboring no regrets, no memories to remind me of my scars, those thick welts upon my mind and body.

Gulbadan and Rurayya giggle, whispering as young women do—of the men who strut before them, of the dreams they encounter. When I was their age my emotions were more closely guarded. On the surface I acted much the same, but within the thick shields of my defenses dwelt more troubled thoughts, thoughts often dominated by a yearning for acceptance, a need to feel worthy.

One of the few people ever to glimpse my insecurities was Nizam, who now propels us to the far bank, away from the prying ears about the Taj Mahal. A banyan tree perches at the river’s edge, its tendrils kissing

the water. To me, banyan trees resemble giant spiders, their branches falling straight to the ground like legs. Nizam ties our boat to a limb that plunges below the ripples, then nods to me. This confirms what I'm thinking—that we're isolated and quite safe here, safe enough for Gulbadan and Rurayya to hear the story of how they came into being.

The tale has never been told.

"My darlings," I begin, loosening the sash that bites into my stomach. "Your parents brought you to Agra, and asked me to travel here, because they believe you're old enough to be entrusted with a story." I pause, my eyes seeking theirs. My will at this moment is stronger than my emotions, and I force my voice to harden. "Are they mistaken?"

Gulbadan, the eldest, toys with a silver ring, which is as gouged as the planks of this decrepit boat. "What do you mean, Jaha?"

"I mean, can you keep a secret? Or are you like magpies on a water buffalo's back, chatting away when hawks are about?"

"But why must we be so careful?"

"Because, child, like any woman who has defied men, I have enemies. And such foes would pay dearly for this knowledge. With it, they would see to your undoing, as would the Emperor."

"The Emperor?" Gulbadan asks, her ring forgotten. "Surely we can't concern him."

"Emperor Alamgir," I say, "may Allah forgive his crimes, would wrong you if he heard these words."

"But he doesn't even know us. He—"

"He knows much, much more than you realize, Gulbadan. And just because he hasn't met you hardly means he's incapable of hurting you."

"Hurting us? But why?"

My sigh lingers and is beset with regret. "You must understand that we...that we kept secrets from you. Secrets I'll share today but that would have been perilous in your possession if you had been too young to safeguard them."

Neither granddaughter stirs, hardly seeming to breathe as a temperate breeze tugs at their brown robes. Simple garments also house my aged flesh, though I'm disguised as a Persian woman, shrouded in black shapeless cloth and wearing a veil that covers my face. When we met this morning, Gulbadan and Rurayya asked why I was in disguise. My lie about avoiding a greedy moneylender came easily, and as with all the

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other lies, my granddaughters believed me instinctively. But I'll no longer deceive them. Not after today.

"What do you know of the Emperor?" I ask.

Gulbadan glances at the Red Fort. "People seem to...well, either they worship or detest him. Though most detest him."

I start to speak, but Rurayya interrupts me. "Why is he so cruel, Jaha?"

How many times have I pondered this question? A hundred? A thousand? "The Emperor," I reply, still somewhat unsure of the answer, "always felt unloved. He was mistaken, but that didn't matter, for when you deem yourself unloved your world is quite cold. At first there's jealousy, then bitterness, then hate. And hatred soured Alamgir's heart."

"But how do you know anything about his heart?" Gulbadan wonders.

I hesitate, for Gulbadan and Rurayya have been misled all their lives. How would I react, I ask myself, if our places were switched? Can a young woman cope with the idea that she isn't a commoner, as she's been raised, but in fact, an emperor's descendent? Will my precious granddaughters understand the need for our deceit? "Alamgir was once called Aurangzeb," I respond finally, meeting their stares. "And I was once his sister."

Nizam nods at these words, the shadow cast by his turban bobbing upon Rurayya's lap. "His sister?" Gulbadan repeats in disbelief.

I lean toward my girls. "We had to protect you. If we hadn't—"

"But how can you be his sister?"

"Because my blood, your blood, Gulbadan, is as royal as his."

"Royal? Your father was a fisherman like mine. He died in a storm!"

"My father was the Emperor. Emperor Shah Jahan."

"Impossible!"

"But true."

Gulbadan's mouth opens, but no words spring forth. Her brow tightens. Her hands drop. "Then why do you live so far from Agra? And why...why have you lied to us? Why have we never known?"

"When you hear my story you'll understand."

"But why are you telling us now?"

"Because of your little brother."

"Because of Mirza? You make no sense!"

I have rarely seen Gulbadan so upset. Rurayya acts as if she's awakened to find a sky with two suns. "Please, please listen, Gulbadan. If you listen, I'll explain."

My granddaughter stifles an angry reply. I close my eyes for a moment. Silence descends and I question the prudence of our decision. They are certainly old and wise enough to keep my terrible secrets. But will events ever unfold that might warrant such knowledge?

"I must tell you of our family's history, and of the beliefs of those long since dead," I say. "I can't predict the future, but in these troubled times the throne may someday be empty. If it becomes so, and if Mirza is willing, he might try to claim it. He's far too young to hear of these tidings today, but you are not. Mirza will need your guidance if he wishes to follow the path his great-grandfather so carefully laid—a path that led to peace and compassion, not the war and mistrust surrounding us today."

"But Mirza's just a boy," Rurayya replies.

"Yes, but someday he will be a man, just like your father. And his blood is royal. Such blood could reunite the Empire again. It could save thousands of lives. That is why I ask that you listen well. You'll tell this story to your brother when he's ready. You will all need to know it if Mirza ever seeks the throne."

Gulbadan glances in the direction of her distant home. "And until he's ready we will deceive him, just as Mother deceived us?"

"She only deceived you, child, because she loves you."

"But Mother never lies," Rurayya says.

"You'd lie, Rurayya, to protect your children. And so would you, Gulbadan. You'd tell a thousand lies, tell them each and every day for however long you needed to. And then, one morning, a morning much like this, you would tell the truth."

"What is the truth?" Gulbadan demands.

I point across the river to the Taj Mahal. "Do you know why it was built?"

Heads turn toward the marble teardrop. "Emperor Shah Jahan," my youngest granddaughter replies, "created it in memory of his wife."

"In memory of our great-grandmother?" Gulbadan asks.

"Your great-grandparents lived extraordinary lives," I answer. "Nizam knows their tale. Your parents know it. But we're old, and the story must not wither with us."

Rurayya looks at Nizam, who confirms my words with another nod. My friend is as honest as a mirror, and Rurayya's lips part in wonder. "How did it begin?"

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Though I am no teller of tales, my words rise swiftly, as I hope my story will temper their misgivings. I explain that before my father ever knelt on the Peacock Throne he was called Khurram, and that as the Emperor's favorite son he was expected one day to rule the Empire.

"When Khurram was fifteen," I continue, "he visited a silk and beads shop. Inside, sitting atop a cushion was my mother, Arjumand. Her beauty, the poets claimed, could make rainbows weep with envy. And so Khurram was drawn to her. He asked the price of a bead and she curtly replied that it wasn't a bead, but a diamond. When she told him it cost ten thousand rupees, a sum she believed he could never afford, my father quickly produced the money.

"The next day, Khurram went to his father, begging for Arjumand's hand in marriage. The Emperor himself had encountered the madness of love and could hardly deny it to his son. Yet he decreed that five years must pass before Khurram could wed Arjumand. Meanwhile, in a marriage of political convenience, my father was wed to *Quandari Begum*, a Persian princess."

"Why do we never hear of her?" Gulbadan asks, her anger ebbing.

"Because my father's other wives were as important to him as camels," I answer, subduing a smile, pleased that Father placed Mother far above her predecessors. "He supported them in the harem but rarely saw them."

"And after five years," Rurayya wonders, "what happened?"

"Khurram and Arjumand were married under a full moon, within a ring of golden torches. Afterward, the air was so thick with Chinese rockets that night became day."

Gulbadan's gaze swings from the sky to me. "But, Jaha, where's the danger in this?"

"The seeds of danger were sown soon afterward, when I and my brothers and sisters were born. We caused the Empire to plunge into war, a war pitting brother against sister, father against son."

"You?"

"I was a part of it," I reply slowly. "I tried to do what was best, but one can win only so many fights."

"What fights? What did you do?"

"Hear me out, Gulbadan, and soon you will know everything."

