

# *Seven Daughters and Seven Sons*

By Barbara Cohen & Bahija Lovejoy

## Chapter I

I am Buran, daughter of Malik, and the fourth of the seven female children born to him, and to his wife of holy memory, my mother, Zubaydah. My father was called Abu al-Banat, the father of daughters, and the title was not considered an honorable one. Allah had not seen fit to bless him with sons, and all that happened afterwards stemmed from that fact. O my children, the ways of Allah are beyond human understanding. What we imagine to be a blessing can actually be a curse, and what we suppose to be a curse may blossom into a blessing.

The marvelous chain of events about which I will tell you began one evening as I sat in the courtyard with my father, playing chess.

It was spring. The scent of jasmine hung thick in the air. As we moved first one piece and then another, the pale light died away. The moon had not yet risen. The wooden shutters on the windows of our little house of baked bricks had been removed, and the light from the oil lamps inside made bright squares on the ground. But our board was too far from the windows to catch the light, and in time it grew too dark to see the chessmen.

With his hand, my father swept the pieces aside. "That's enough of that," he said. "O my daughter, I declare you the winner."

"But Father," I assured him, I wasn't even close to putting your king in check."

My father laughed. "Six moves more, seven moves more, what difference does it make? Sooner or later you would have checked my king, and mated my king, just as you always do. It was a dark day for me when I taught you this foolish game. Your mother scolded me. She said your time would be better spent with your needle or your loom than in learning men's amusements." He sighed, a vast mock sigh. "Ah me. I should have listened to your mother."

"O my father," I murmured, "I'm glad you didn't." I knew he was glad too. He loved to play chess; it was a precious distraction from his daily struggle to support our crowded household. Since he had no sons, he had been forced to teach the game to one of his daughters, if he was to play it at all, for he had neither the time nor the money to gamble with other men in the shops of the suqs. I, Buran, was the one he had chosen. Perhaps he chose me because I was so clumsy at all the tasks my mother set me around the house that he felt it was I she could best spare. Or perhaps he chose me because I was the one who wanted with all my heart to learn.

I knelt on the ground to pick up the scattered pieces. In the street beyond our wall I could hear voices and the sound of footsteps echoing in the night. The footsteps halted at our gate, and through the wooden slats I caught a glimpse of lantern light and the whirl of two or three striped jubbas fashioned of fine linen. Even before my father spoke, I knew who had stopped at our house.

"Go indoors," my father ordered. "Tell your mother to prepare a drink of yogurt. Your uncle and some of his sons have come to call on me," he added with a sigh. It was a real sigh this time.

Our house was small. It was necessary for my father to detain my uncle and cousins in our courtyard while my mother prepared the drink and laid out a few sweetmeats. "A paltry display," she complained, "but it's the best I can do. It's all we have." I knew that was true. "Your uncle is unbelievably thoughtless to call on his brother here at home," my mother continued crossly. "He knows we can't afford to entertain him properly. Why didn't he go to see your father in the shop, the way he usually does?"

When the food was laid out, she, my sisters, and I withdrew to the other room. My sisters were soon busy with their sewing and their embroidering, their spinning and their gossiping, though what they found to talk about so endlessly when they went nowhere and saw no one was beyond my comprehension. Still, I envied them, for they never seemed to be afflicted with the fits of melancholy that overcame me when I wondered what would become of them, what would become of me, what would become of all of us. "Allah will provide," they always said. "Allah will provide." And then they would go on with their ceaseless stitching, their endless chatter. They were content to be just what they were. There were times when I longed to jump right out of my skin and into someone else's, like: my cousin Hassan's, or my cousin Ali's. It was they who had conic to call on my father, along with my: uncle.

I stood by the curtained doorway and listened to the conversation between my father, his brother, and my two oldest cousins. It was wrong to listen, my two oldest cousins. It was wrong to listen, but I'd always done it; and so accustomed were my mother and my sisters to this habit of mine, that they'd long ago stopped scolding me for it. I think they were rather glad I listened because then I could tell them all that bad been said. That is, I told my sisters. My father told my mother.

"Your visit does honor to my poor home," I heard my father intone politely as he escorted his brother and his nephews out of the courtyard, through the arched hall or iwan, and into the main room of the house.

"Well, there's a reason for it, O father of girls,"

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