



HENNA HOUSE

NOMI EVE

Author of
The Family Orchard

Chapter 1

“What is wrong with the girl’s eyes?”

“Nothing, she sees fine.” My father cleared his throat and looked down at his work—a single broad piece of leather lay over his bench—the flap to an ordinary market bag.

“But they are too big for her face.”

“If you say so, sir.”

The Confiscator moved closer, coming in front of my father’s bench. I’d ducked behind my father, peeking out from behind his supply shelves. The stranger was tall, thick-shouldered, and had a face so long it seemed to drip down to his belly. He absentmindedly touched the hilt of the *jambia* sheathed on a belt around his waist. The curved ritual scimitar was exquisite—the blade a gleaming threat of forged iron, the hilt a mellow yellow Eritrean ivory, overlain with two jeweled serpents wrapped around the handle, a band of rubies at the thumb point, and an embossed hawk’s head on the lip of the hilt, representing both mightiness and honor. He wore an expensive maroon silk djellaba with a black turban, and his beard was carefully tended.

“Eyes like that see either too much of the world or too little of it. And the color—greenish gold? Pretty and ugly at the same time. What is her name?”

My father opened his mouth and then shut it again without speaking.

“What was that? Her name, sir. Surely the imp has a name.”

“Adela . . .” Almost a whisper.

“I have no daughters, only sons.”

“Sons are a blessing.”

“Indeed, they are.”

My father coughed, a wet and phlegmy cough. He took out his handkerchief, blew his nose, and studiously avoided the man’s gaze.

“Your health, sir?”

“My health is fine.” My father coughed again.

“Eh . . . fine?”

And again, big grating hacks racked my father’s body. The Confiscator’s eyes narrowed; he stepped back until he was halfway out of the stall and screwed up his face in distaste—no, he wouldn’t catch this plague, not if he could help it. And yet my father’s obvious weakness clearly gave the Confiscator pleasure. A smile played on the corner of his mouth. He tipped his head forward to get a better earful of the miserable sound. And still he stared at me—looking at me, seeing me live a different life. For that was his job, to pluck children out by the roots from the soil of their birth and replant them in a different garden.

I stared back at the wealthy stranger. I wasn’t afraid of him *yet*. I was really afraid only of my mother. No one’s wrath or whims—not even the Confiscator’s—could scare me by comparison. Even then, at only five years old, I saw him perfectly for what he was: a thief, an evildoer, and a descendant of Amalake. I wanted to spit at him, but I knew I would be punished for it in this life and in the World to Come.

“But I am not here to discuss your daughter A—del—a’s un—for—tu—nate eyes.” He drawled on my name and the word *unfortunate*, stretching them out. “No. I am here to order a pair of *bashmag* sandals for my wife. She sent me to your stall because her friends say you make shoes that do not hurt before they are worn in. She must have three pairs. She insists that you, and only you, make the shoes she will wear to her sister’s wedding. And clearly I have been put here on earth for the sole purpose of seeing to her pleasure.” He waved a beringed hand. His nails were long, manicured. “Here are her foot measurements. I will be back in two weeks to collect them. And”—the Confiscator nodded in the direction of my hiding place behind the shelves—“make sure the girl is here when I come to pick them up. Yes? You understand me? Good, good. It is good that we men understand each other.”

My father didn’t ask why the Confiscator wanted me to be there, and he didn’t ask what would happen to either or both of us if I were elsewhere on the appointed morning. Instead, he asked the Confiscator a few questions about color, texture, and adornment and then recorded the order in his big ledger.

When the stranger left, I came out from behind the supply shelves. My father placed a hand on my head and patted me softly. He didn’t say,

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“That man is of no importance” because it would have been a lie, and my father was not a liar. Instead he murmured a snippet of scripture, referring to the miracle of sight and the clarity of spiritual vision. Then he picked me up and put me on his workbench and kissed my nose, before giving me scraps to play with as he began to ply the leather—making it supple with the caress of his tools.

I knew that the Confiscator was a bad man. I knew that my father hated and feared him. But it was only later that I understood that he was a bringer of nightmares, a kidnapper. History, religion, and politics had conspired to make him such. What did a little girl know of such subjects? But my father was wise—nothing like his ignorant and innocent daughter—and that is why a tear came to his eye as he tucked an errant lock of hair into my *gargush* when we left the shop that afternoon. He knew what I was to learn in the coming years—that his lungs were weak and his health fragile, and that as a consequence I was in danger of being stolen away from my faith and family.

History, politics, religion. I dip my stylus in the dark mists of time. The Confiscator worked for Imam Yahye. Imam Yahye wrested power from the Turks, and had become ruler of the Kingdom of North Yemen in 1918, the year of my birth. My family and all the Yemenite Jews dreaded the Imam’s many decrees. The day the Confiscator first came to my father’s stall, I couldn’t have told you a lick about politics, but I could have reported how often my father and brothers came home stinking like shit, death, and piss because they had been conscripted to carry dung, cart off sewage, and haul animal carcasses. The Imam’s Dung Carriers Decree relegated Jews to the jobs of refuse and carrion collectors. The Donkey Decree forbade the Jews of the North from riding horses. Instead, my father, brothers, and our friends could ride only donkeys, and they couldn’t even ride our donkey, Pishtish, like hearty men; instead they were forced to ride sidesaddle, which limited their ability to travel. There was also the House Decree, which forbade us from building our houses as tall as the houses of our Muslim neighbors. And the Walkers Decree, which forbade us from walking on the same side of the street as a Muslim.

But the worst by far of all the Imam’s decrees was the one that brought a tear to my father’s eye the day the Confiscator paid us a

visit: the Orphans Decree. It called for any orphaned Jewish child to be confiscated, converted, and quickly adopted by a Muslim family if a father died. This meant that Jewish children were ripped out of the arms of newly widowed mothers. That's why the Confiscator had lingered in my father's stall—because of my father's cough. The Confiscator had a quota to fill. Perhaps he had heard that the shoemaker was sickly. Perhaps he had had his eye on me for a long time already.

That night my parents fought. My father banged his fist on the breadboard and growled, "You must engage Adela—the bastard came to my stall sniffing around for children to put in his pocket. It is your duty as her mother to find her a husband."

I was the youngest of nine, the only girl, and my mother's last and least-favored child. I was a bitter afterthought—a thorn in the side of my mother's old age. She would have neglected to betroth me at all, leaving my fate to the whims of chance, but my father, who loved me well, intervened. That night, he reminded her that it was her duty to find me a husband in order to protect me from confiscation. The Jews of the Kingdom engaged their children as toddlers and married them off the moment they reached maturity. Once a child was married, he or she couldn't be confiscated. This is how it came to pass that my parents were arguing about my marital status when I hadn't even lost all of my milk teeth.

"If you don't, I will," my father threatened, "and for a man to make inquiries of this sort is unseemly. But I will do what I must if you refuse to do your duty."

"My duty?" My mother arched her back, stuck out her slackened breasts, and made a crude gesture toward her own sex. "If I had refused to do my duty, we wouldn't have a daughter or eight sons for that matter. Mmph. Don't speak to me of duty. Now take your dirty hand off my breadboard. Leave me in peace."

"But Suli, she is already five years old."

I was a spinster by our standards. A girl three doors up was engaged when she was two. The goat-cheese maker's daughter was engaged while still in the womb. I was like Methuselah, older than time and still unattached.

My mother wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "Leave me in

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peace if you expect dinner.” As Father stalked out, she muttered after him, “What a bother, what a ridiculous bother.”

The next time the Confiscator came to my father’s stall, he didn’t mention my eyes, and for most of the exchange he ignored me completely. But even though he didn’t glance in my direction, I felt his gaze upon me. Not his “this-lifetime” eyes, as Auntie Aminah called them, but his “next-lifetime” eyes—the hooded eyes of the soul that can see into the heart of a small girl. And that is when I learned to fear him. When he saw right through me, making me feel simultaneously naked and invisible.

I crouched in the back of the shop. I was suddenly so afraid that he would take out his jambia and kill my father with a nick to the jugular or a swift downward blade to the heart, that I was almost sick when he finally said my name, “A-del-a, A-del-a, don’t hide, little one. Come out and show your face.” I emerged clammy and pale as a ghost. He knelt down so that the folds of his djellaba pooled around his feet. Then he pointed to a beautiful pair of shoes on the shelf, maroon with little embossed florets around the ankles. I had helped my father with the florets. He was teaching me how to press and stamp and glue leather. He didn’t mind that I helped him, even though it was unusual for a girl to assist her father in his stall. My mother never cared where I was, as long as I wasn’t bothering her. “My Adela works better than any boy,” my father would brag, but my brothers would hear and torment me for the compliment—with pinches and slaps, and knuckle punches in places where the bruises wouldn’t show.

The Confiscator smiled. “My, aren’t they little masterpieces? Maybe when you are older your father will make you a pair like this. Perhaps even for your own wedding? No?”

My father produced one of the pairs of shoes he had made for the Confiscator’s wife. The Confiscator reached out, grasped both shoes, and dangled them by the heels. In front of my eyes, the shoes grew tails, ears, and whiskers, turning into rats that the Confiscator could feed to the snakes on his knife.

“Ahh, the shoes are lovely. You are indeed a master of your trade.”

“Thank you, sir, thank you for your compliments.”

“But I suspect this will only whet my wife’s appetite for such luxuries,

and I will be forced to visit you again and again, rather than listen to her berate me for denying her her due.”

On the way out the Confiscator turned, pointing a beringed finger at my father at the exact moment that my father let out a big phlegmy cough.

“I will be back, Mr. Damari,” he croaked, “you can be sure of it. My wife, precious little frog, how can I help but spoil her? You understand how it is with pretty girls. Who are we weak men to resist their wiles?” I buried my face in my father’s legs—though at the last minute I pried myself loose and glared at the Confiscator, a fatal mistake which turned me into a pillar of salt, like Lot’s wife. “*Sha, sha,*” said my father as he ran his hands through my hair. I was cold but sweaty, my gargush askew. “*Sha, sha, little rabbit, all will be well, sha, sha,*” he murmured.

Despite my father’s pleas, my mother had no interest in “doing her duty” and finding me a groom to protect me from the Imam. She knew my father was just blustering when he said that he would take up the task of betrothing me. It wasn’t a man’s job. He wouldn’t have known how to begin. No, my father would just have continued to occasionally bother my mother about it, but she would have continued to ignore him, and me for that matter, as she had done since I was born. But then my father’s cough worsened and worsened, and he took to his bed. The Angel of Death hovered over our house. He lay ill for three Sabbaths. At the start of the fourth week of my father’s illness, my mother sent me to the market for green onions and turnips for stew. I was making my way home when I saw the Confiscator gesturing to me. He was standing by one of the spice seller’s stalls. I almost turned and ran, but his jambia pulled me forward, the jeweled serpents on his scimitar twisting around each other, tugging me closer, closer. I was in their thrall. They were alive, their emerald eyes looking deep into my heart, as the hawk on the hilt opened its beak to murmur into my ears, a wild bird-whisper that came to me in a language I knew but didn’t know. The air was heavy with the midday exhalations of the market—cardamom, pepper, saffron, curry, and a curdled whiff of clarified butter from the cheesemaker’s stall, an undernote of fly-buzzed slops and fermenting rinds from behind the fruit sellers’ stalls. Somewhere a dog was crying, horrible howls as if he were being beaten. The Confiscator bent down

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to speak with me and smiled genially—clearly this was a man used to speaking with children.

“Your father is ill? Eh? That cough sounded like bad business. You’ll tell him I asked after his health. Won’t you? Won’t you . . . A—del—a?”

I took a step back, and then another. But before I could get away, he reached out and touched my face, to the right of my right eye, and then winked at me. In my heart, I heard him speak without words: *We are one and the same, you and I. We are not strangers, are we? No, of course not . . .* Where his fingers grazed my forehead, I felt a burning pain. He turned on his heels, his djellaba swishing after him.

How did I get home? I don’t remember. I burst through the door, my heart crazy with extra beats.

“What is it, Daughter? What happened?”

My gargush had slipped back over my braid. I panted, holding on to the doorpost. My legs would barely hold me up.

Coughing, my father struggled up from his pallet.

“Daughter, what is it? What happened?”

“The Con—fis—ca—tor,” I stretched out his name like he had stretched out mine, breaking it. “What?” My mother came in from the back room. “What did you say?” I repeated myself. Her face blanched. She grabbed me by the elbow and made me sit down on her lap. I don’t remember ever sitting down on her lap, either before or after that morning. She patted my head, and whispered, “Sha, sha, little girl” into my ear as I sobbed with the aftermath of my terror. But she quickly grew tired of comforting me, tipped me off her lap, snorted, and said, “Stop mewling and see to your chores.”

That night I didn’t sleep. A hot wind had descended on the mountains. It was an uncommonly warm spring, when the rains were few, and the sun seemed to be coming closer day by day, as if intent on collecting some debt from the dust and sand. That whole season men climbed up to their roofs and slept in the lightest of garments. Women too shrugged off their modesty and joined their men on the roofs, desperate for a cooling breeze. That night, on the roof with my parents, I lay hour after hour staring at the stars—the stars that seemed to rearrange themselves into constellations that frightened and rebuked me. Serpents and hawks and other angry animals were all perched on twinkling knife blades, hanging in the firmament above me precariously, threatening to fall. All night long I heard my father’s rasping breath, punctuated by coughs that racked his

body. I thought about the Confiscator. I wondered not *if* he would take me but *when*. My fear was a red-hot fire behind my face, stoked all night long by the waves of coughing that made my father groan and wheeze. My fear was justified. My father seemed deathly ill, worse than ever before, and the Confiscator had looked straight into my heart. He even knew my name. *A-del-a* he had said, breaking my name into jagged little pieces.

The night lasted forever. My father coughed. My mother tended him—reserving her pity for the small hours in between midnight and dawn, when she dabbed his burning brow with a wet cloth and murmured comforting words that she would never utter by daylight.

In the morning the heat broke, and the knife that hung above me in the sky sheathed its blade. My father had willed the worst of his sickness away. I don't know how he did this, but by morning prayers his fever had passed. The color returned to his cheeks and the strength to his legs. There was still sallowness to his skin, and he still coughed that horrible cough, but the immediate danger had clearly dissipated. Left behind was a stink—a foul odor of inevitability that made us all anxious and jumpy. In the coming weeks, whenever I went to the market I looked over my shoulder and cocked my ear for the maroon billowing *swish swish* of the Confiscator's djellaba. When I came home, my head was always filled with the ghost of my father's cough, a groaning cautionary lament that scraped the walls of our house even when his lungs were clear. My mother finally began looking for a suitable groom for me. "If only you could marry Binyamin Bashari," she said over and over again—to me, to Auntie Aminah, to my sisters-in-law, to anyone who would listen. She let it be known that if she'd had her choice, she would already have engaged me to Binyamin Bashari, son of our neighbor two doors up. Binyamin's father made blades for jambias. Jews were not permitted to wear jambia, but we were the masters at making them. Working with one's hands was considered beneath the Muslim men in the Kingdom of Yemen, so the work was left to us Jews. Accordingly, the men of our community became jambia makers, metalsmiths, wicker workers, jewelers, potters, tailors, carpenters, tanners, and rope braiders. Mr. Bashari had learned the craft of jambia from his father when he was just a boy. His father had learned it from his father, who had learned it from his father, who had learned it from his father, who had learned it from his father, and so on, back to the generations who came to Yemen in the retinue of Bilquis, whom others called Sheba the Queen.

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Binyamin Bashari was my playmate, a sturdy, good-tempered boy with deep-set brown eyes and a wolf-muzzle jaw that made him look fierce, even when he was laughing. His mother was one of my mother's only friends, but Binyamin had been betrothed to a distant cousin from Sana'a since the day of his Brit Milah, when he was circumcised and engaged almost simultaneously, at the tender age of eight days. Disappointed, my mother had to look beyond the Bashari house, and cast her net widely over the eligible boys of Qaraah.

Alas, her early attempts were all for naught. A recitation of the boys she tried to engage me to reads like a liturgy of misfortune. It was my sister-in-law Sultana who gave me the most comprehensive accounting of my ill-fated fiancés. Sultana, no stranger to misfortune herself, didn't spare me any details. Both of Sultana's parents had died the year after she married my second-eldest brother, Elihoo. After eleven years of marriage, poor, sad, orphaned Sultana had only one living baby, a scrawny little thing named Moshe. Before Moshe, she had lost six babies all in their first year of life. And then one more died in her womb—a little girl so tiny and perfect that her beautiful little body fit into the palm of the midwife's hand. After their last baby died, my brother Elihoo almost took another wife, but at the last minute he canceled the engagement. Elihoo was a brute, but he loved Sultana and pledged himself to her and to her alone, whether they had living children or not.

According to Sultana, my first possible fiancé died of the pox just one week after my mother broached the subject with his mother. The second potential groom fell from the upper platform in the granary where his father worked, and broke his back, dying in agony after the passage of two Sabbaths. The third boy's mother and father agreed to an engagement, but two days before the ceremony, the boy choked on a cashew nut, turned blue, and died at Torah school. The fourth went to sleep one night and never woke up. The fifth boy did not die in an accident or succumb to an illness, but was murdered by a crazy rope braider who lived in the bowels of the market. His headless body was found behind a bush near the bigger well around the corner from the Square of the Just, and his head was found in the madman's lair, along with the heads of three other victims.

After the last and most gruesome incident, my mother threw up her hands.

"There is no one for Adela to marry," she complained to my father,

chopping nuts for baklava. “She’s a bad-luck charm. An opposite amulet. What mother would want her for her son?”

At this my father slapped her, knocking loose one of her teeth.

She raked her nails across his face, drawing blood where there was no beard.

“We should send her to Aden,” my father growled, “smuggle her with a caravan. Such things happen, you know. Children make it out of the Kingdom, I have heard talk of it . . .”

My mother widened her eyes and made a grotesque grimace, as if she had bitten into an apricot with a worm for a pit. “To Aden? Never. Better she be a Muslim than fall into the hands of your brother’s wife, that Indian witch.”

Even though I was just a little girl, I knew she was referring to my Aunt Rahel—a Jewess born in Alibag, India. Rahel had come to Yemen as a child, and married my Uncle Barhun in Aden. I had never met Aunt Rahel, but, for reasons I could not fathom, she was the witch in all of my mother’s cautionary tales, the villainous harpy who would snatch me at midnight should I dare to dream of a fate other than the one Elohim had written for me in the Book of Life.

My father lifted a hand to slap my mother again. She raised the little bone-handled knife, and waved it in his face. He retreated. He knew, after all, that what my mother had said was true. None of the mothers of the Jewish boys of Qaraah wanted me for their sons. Why would they? Who could blame them? Perhaps the Confiscator was correct and my eyes were too big for my face. Perhaps I was doomed to live a life of misfortune. Some of my first memories are of playing with other little girls who had all been engaged since before they could toddle. They always made fun of me. “Adela,” they cackled, “you will be orphaned and adopted, maybe they will call you Mustafina, you will pray to Mohammed, or you will be an old maid for sure.” I kicked sand in their faces, and ran away to hide in Auntie Aminah’s lap. Aminah was my mother’s only sister. She was older than my already old mother by eight years. She had wrinkly skin, gray wiry hair, and, most impressive, a crippling hump on her left shoulder that made it hard for her to walk quickly, or even to breathe. She had never married because of her infirmities, but I had always liked her much better than I did my own mother. She would sit under the old frankincense tree behind her house, embroidering or darning. We had a frankincense tree too. Hers

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was up a little path, behind an old stone wall and some mint bushes. “Sha, sha, Adelish,” she would say, “don’t cry.” But I couldn’t help it, and my tears would mingle with the sweet scent of the resin from the tree, giving my sorrow a mellow tincture, though it didn’t feel anything but bitter to my heart.

Sometimes I would hear my mother lamenting the conundrum of my groomlessness to her friend Mrs. Bashari, Binyamin’s mother. “Maybe if we raise the price,” she said, referring to my dowry. “Perhaps we should throw in the bone-and-pearl *sundug* case.” My mother and her friends all spoke about me like chattel, and in time I even came to see myself as a calf to be sold at market, or as one of the ugly flat-nosed monkeys in the cage of the Somali curiosity trader. The poor creatures would poke their slick pink tongues out of the bars, and make crude gestures to passersby. Sometimes a wealthy man would buy one of those monkeys and lead it away with a collar and leash around its neck. The monkey would hop by its new owner’s side, dodging the crush of the market throng, screeching and howling in coy terror at this new variety of imprisonment.

