

## UNDER *the* SAME STARS

Suzanne Fisher Staples worked for many years as a United Press International Correspondent in Hong Kong, Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. She has also worked on the news desk of *The Washington Post*. During her years in Pakistan she became involved with the nomads of the Cholistan Desert, who are the main characters in both *Daughter of the Wind* and *Under the Same Stars*. “It was the unfailing generosity and courage of the people of Cholistan that inspired me to write this book,” she says. “They are an extraordinary people – noble and generous, though they have no material wealth, full of great dignity and honour.”

Suzanne Fisher Staples is also the author of *Under the Persimmon Tree*. She lives in Pennsylvania, USA.

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UNDER  
*the*  
SAME  
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SUZANNE FISHER STAPLES



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First published in the USA 1993 by Alfred A Knopf  
First published in Great Britain 1994 by Julia MacRae Books

This edition published 2016 by Walker Books Ltd  
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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Map © 1993 Anita Carl and James Kemp  
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This book has been typeset in Cochin and Caslon Antique

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

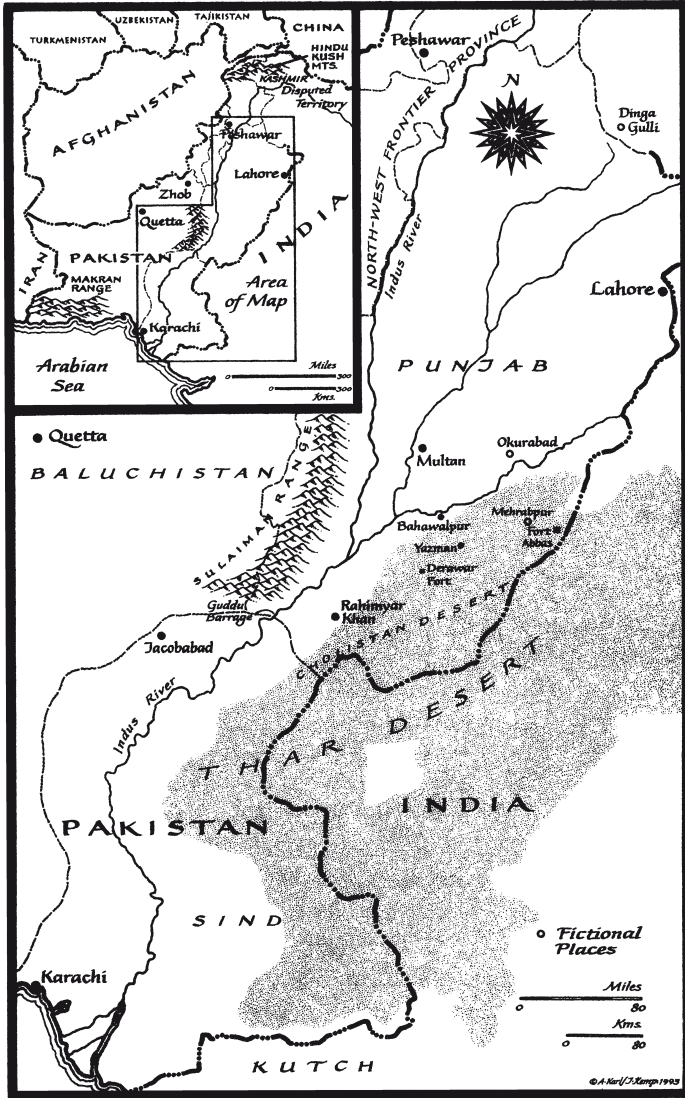
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:  
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-5357-0

[www.walker.co.uk](http://www.walker.co.uk)

*To Jeanne Drewsen, my agent, whose  
faith has been constant; Frances Foster,  
my editor, whose wisdom is an inspiration;  
and the many people in Pakistan who gave  
of their time, energy and hospitality to  
make it possible for me to travel and learn  
about their wonderful country*



## Names of Characters

*(Italicized syllable is accented)*

**Aab-pa** (*Aabb*-puh): a healer and herbal doctor

**Abdul Muhammad Khan** (Uhb-*ḍool* Muh-*hab*-muhd  
Khahn): Pathan murdered by his brother

**Adil** (Uh-*ḍibl*): Shabanu's male cousin

**Ahmed** (*Ab*-mehd): Rahim's only son, betrothed to  
Zabo

**Ali** (Uh-*lee*): an old servant in Selma's household

**Allah** (*Ah-lub*): Arabic word meaning "God"

**Amina** (*Ah-mee*-nuh): Rahim's first wife, mother of  
Leyla and Ahmed

**Auntie** (*Ann*-tee): Dadi's sister-in-law

**Bibi Lal** (*Bee-bee Lahl*): Phulan's mother-in-law

**Bundr** (*Buhn-duhr*): Mumtaz's stuffed monkey  
(Urdu for "small")

**Choti** (*Chob-tee*): Mumtaz's pet deer (Urdu for  
"monkey")

**Dadi** (*Dab-dee*): Shabanu's father

**Dalil Abassi** (*Dah-libl Uh-bab-see*): Dadi's proper  
name

**Daoud** (*Dab-ood*): Selma's late husband

**Fatima** (*Fah-tee-muh*): Shabanu's cousin, Sharma's  
daughter

**Guluband** (*Goo-loo-buhnd*): Shabanu's dancing  
camel, her childhood favourite

**Hamir** (*Hab-meer*): Shabanu's cousin, murdered  
by Nazir

**Ibne** (*Ibb-nee*): Rahim's faithful manservant

**Khansama** (*Khahn-sab-muh*): Rahim's cook

**Kharim** (*Khuh-reem*): Murad's cousin



**Lal Khan** (*Lahl Khabn*): Phulan's brother-in-law,  
murdered by Nazir

**Leyla** (*Leb-luh*): Rahim's eldest daughter,  
betrothed to Omar

**Mahmood** (*Muh-mood*): cloth merchant

**Mahsood** (*Mah-sood*): Rahim's younger brother

**Mama** (*Mab-muh*): Shabanu's mother

**Muhammad** (*Muh-hab-muhd*): Holy Prophet of  
Islam

**Mumtaz** (*Muhm-tabz*): Shabanu's daughter

**Murad** (*Moo-rabd*): Shabanu's brother-in-law,  
Phulan's husband

**Nazir Muhammad** (*Nuh-zeer Muh-hab-muhd*):  
Rahim's youngest brother

**Omar** (*Ob-muhr*): Rahim's nephew, betrothed to  
Leyla

**Phulan** (*Poo-lahn*): Shabanu's sister

**Rahim** (*Ruh-beem*): Shabanu's husband, a major  
landowner

- Raoul** (Ruh-ool): Nazir's farm manager
- Rashid** (Ruh-sheed): son of Zabo's servant
- Saleema** (Suh-leem-uh): Rahim's second wife
- Samiya** (Sah-mee-yuh): Shabanu and Mumtaz's teacher
- Selma** (Sehl-muh): sister of Rahim, Mahsood and Nazir
- Shabanu** (Shah-bab-noo): daughter of nomadic camel herders, fourth wife of the wealthy landowner Rahim
- Shaheen** (Shuh-been): Selma's lifelong servant
- Shahzada** (Shah-zab-duh): keeper of Derawar Fort
- Sharma** (Shabr-muh): Shabanu's aunt, cousin of both of her parents
- Tahira** (Tuh-beer-uh): Rahim's third wife
- Uma** (Oo-muh): Mumtaz's name for her mother
- Xhush Dil** (Hoosh Dihl): camel owned by Shabanu's family

**Yazmin** (*Yahz-meen*): servant girl in Selma's household

**Zabo** (*Zeb-boh*): Rahim's niece, daughter of Nazir, betrothed to Ahmed

**Zenat** (*Zee-naht*): Mumtaz's ayah



# 1

Shabanu awoke at dawn on a cool spring morning, with the scent of early Punjabi roses rich and splendid on the air, warm as the sun rising through the mist. The charpoy squeaked lightly, string against wood, as she rolled over to gaze at her sleeping child.

But Mumtaz had slipped out, perhaps before first light. Shabanu closed her eyes again and waited for the sun to creep through the open doorway of their room behind the stable.

She lay on her back and stretched her arms over her head. Mumtaz was nearly five, and there was little time for her to be free in this life. She would be safe enough within the ochre mud walls of the family compound near the village of Okurabad on the road to Multan.

Shabanu did not force her daughter to stand

to have her hair untangled every morning. She allowed her to wear her favourite old shalwar kameez with the legs halfway to her knees, the tunic faded to a greyish wash. Soon enough Mumtaz would have to stay indoors and wear the chador. For now Shabanu wanted her to have whatever freedom was possible.

Shabanu remembered how she'd rebelled when her mother had forced her to wear the veil that reached to the ground and tangled around her feet when she ran. It had been the end of her climbing thorn trees and running among the sand dunes.

Outside, the sun dappled through the neem tree, and Shabanu imagined her daughter hiding behind the old giant, her matted head against its leathery bark, the dirt powdery between her toes.

The spirit stove popped as old Zenat started a fire for tea in the kitchen beside the room. Already flies darted in and out of the doorway. Shabanu rose from the charpoy and stretched.

Dust rose around her bare feet as she moved about, folding bedding, then gathering things for the child's bath – tallowy soap and a rough, sun-dried towel.

Shabanu went to the doorway. A flash of sunlight caught in the diamond pin in her nose, sending a glint straight to where Mumtaz hid behind the tree. The glass bangles on Shabanu's arm clinked as she whipped her long black hair into a thick knot at the base of her neck. She turned back inside to reach

for her shawl and saw from the corner of her eye a small movement as Mumtaz flitted away, silent as a moth.

Wrapping her shawl around her, Shabanu followed her daughter towards the old wooden gate that led to the canal, where Mumtaz loved to play in the water. The small dark head bobbed beyond the bushes that framed the inner courtyard of the big house where Shabanu's husband lived. Shabanu was the youngest, by eight years, of Rahim's four wives, and Mumtaz was his youngest child. The other wives lived separately, in apartments in the big house.

Shabanu and Mumtaz had lived with Rahim until early in winter, when Shabanu had persuaded him that life would be easier for her and the child if she could take up residence in the room near the stable while he was in Lahore, the capital of the Punjab one hundred and fifty miles away, for the winter session of the provincial assembly.

There had been incidents, a few of which she'd told him about – the scorpion in her bed, the rabid bat in her cupboard. Rahim had raged and demanded to know who had done these things. A small, thin boy was offered as the culprit.

Then Rahim had said there was no need for her to move out of the house. Why would she rather be off, away from the rest of the family? Why would she give up the convenience of running water, electricity, servants? But Shabanu knew that danger lay

precisely in her staying, and she had remained firm in her insistence. At the last moment before leaving for Lahore, Rahim had acquiesced.

The others said the stable was where Shabanu and Mumtaz belonged, and laughed wickedly behind their veils. She didn't mind. It gave her privacy from the insolent servant women who walked into her room without knocking, and reported everything back to the other wives.

Shabanu followed the child to the stand of trees past the pump, where Mumtaz stopped. On the broad veranda, beyond the wide silver pipe with water dripping in sparkles from its mouth, stood bamboo cages in which desert birds blinked their fiery eyes.

The birds came from the dunes of Cholistan, where Pakistan meets India, a land of magic and camels where Shabanu had spent her childhood. Mumtaz never tired of her mother's stories of the desert's wizards and warriors. She was fascinated by her father's birds. She loved to come in the first morning light to help the old mali remove the linen covers from the tall domed cages. Shabanu stopped to watch her daughter approach, her hands stretched out towards the feathers that shone brightly from between the thin bars. The mali returned with pans of maize, clucking and mewling to the birds, and asked Mumtaz to lift the cage doors.

When the birds were fed, Mumtaz turned again towards the grey weathered gate leading to the



canal. Shabanu was about to call to her when a tall, dark figure sped from the veranda. In two strides the figure was behind Mumtaz, and a long, pale hand with crimson nails flashed out from under a dark green chador. The hand grabbed the child by the hair and yanked her from her feet.

“You filthy urchin!” It was Leyla, Mumtaz’s eldest half-sister. “How dare you spy on my father’s house!”

“He’s my father too,” said the child, her voice piping. Leyla flicked the wrist of her hand that grasped the child’s hair. Mumtaz bit her lips and squeezed her eyes shut against the pain in her scalp. Leyla turned back towards the house, pushing the child before her like a prisoner of war. Mumtaz was small but strong, like her mother, and when she struck out at Leyla with her wiry arms, Leyla tightened her grip on the child’s hair to keep her moving along.

“Thank you,” said Shabanu, appearing at Leyla’s side as if from thin air. She took Mumtaz by the hand and stepped between them. Leyla’s mouth, the same deep, shiny red as her nails, went slack with surprise for a moment. She shook her fingers loose from Mumtaz’s tangled hair and withdrew her hand gracefully under the folds of her chador.

“How can you let her run loose like a street rat?” Leyla asked. “She’s wild. She scares the chickens.”

“That’s enough, Leyla.” Shabanu’s voice was calm.

Mumtaz's eyes remained tightly shut against tears as Shabanu knelt before her and held her by the shoulders.

"I'm here, pigeon," she said, turning towards Mumtaz again. "That will be all, Leyla," she said without looking up. Mumtaz slumped into her arms and buried her face against her mother's neck. Shabanu held her for a moment, then removed her to arm's length and brushed the hair from her eyes. Her gaze held the child's.

"Come, we'll feed the ducks, and then you can bathe in the canal," Shabanu said, as if Leyla had ceased to exist.

It was Shabanu's refusal to defend herself, as if she had nothing to defend herself against, that drove the other women of Rahim's household – Leyla; her mother, Amina; the other wives; Leyla's sisters and half-sisters – to hate her. If only she would say that Mumtaz had as much right as the others to run about the courtyard, and ask what harm the child caused. But Shabanu refused even to acknowledge their resentment.

Shabanu was the favourite of Rahim – "the Merciful" – their powerful father and husband, the landowner and patriarch of the clan. The other wives hated her pretensions to dignity.

Each wife had her own private grudge. Leyla's mother, Amina, the first and most important of Rahim's wives, was the eldest, the best educated among them all, and the only one who was his

social equal. Amina also was the mother of Rahim's only surviving son, a poor quivering thing called Ahmed.

Amina had borne two other sons, also sickly and defective in one way or another. Like all of Rahim's sons, with the exception of Ahmed, both had died in infancy.

Amina had long since stopped sharing Rahim's bed. While her position gave her an unquestioned advantage over the other wives, she guarded her jealousy with a keen eye.

Ten years after Rahim had married Amina his attentions began to wander, and that was when he took a second wife. She was Saleema, who had captured his fancy one hot July when he visited his family at their summer retreat in Dinga Galli in the Himalayan foothills.

Saleema had come to see Amina, a second cousin, with her elder sister. She was a shy, slender girl with large dark eyes and a serious mouth. Saleema was far from beautiful. She inspired no jealousy in Amina, who had grown weary of her husband's physical demands. They culminated in pregnancy after pregnancy, each of which ended, to everyone's great disappointment, with a defective son or a daughter – three girls in all.

Then there was Ahmed. And by then Amina had had enough. It was such a relief not to have Rahim come to her bed at night when she was tired and wanted only to sleep! She had borne a healthy son.

It was much later that Ahmed's weaknesses became apparent.

Saleema bore three daughters and two sons, both of whom died within a matter of months. Rahim's disappointment seemed to diminish Saleema with each birth. Amina watched with satisfaction as Saleema grew thinner and paler, until there seemed to be nothing left of her but her large black eyes and a straight line for a mouth.

Eight years later, under similar circumstances, came Tahira, who at the age of fifteen became Rahim's third wife. Tahira still was beautiful. After five years she too had borne three daughters and two feeble sons, both of whom died within a year. In that time she had been the chief co-occupant of Rahim's bed.

While Saleema had lapsed into bitter resignation that she had been replaced in her husband's affections, Tahira still harboured hope that Rahim would tire of Shabanu, return to her bed, and give her a healthy son who would inherit his father's land. For it was not at all certain that Ahmed would survive. And although Tahira was eight years Shabanu's senior, still her skin was smooth and her waist was slender, and the need for a viable heir should have been of paramount importance to the ageing leader.

But from the time six years ago when Rahim first met Shabanu, a girl of twelve with budding breasts, wisdom beyond her years and a dazzling smile, he

had had eyes for no other woman. In truth it had been too long since he'd had any appetite for his third wife, whose dainty approach to love made her seem insipid to him.

When Shabanu produced only one female child, those close to Rahim advised him to divorce her and take another wife who would produce a healthy heir. But Rahim demurred. His total indifference to all women but his fourth wife could only be explained as witchcraft.

Amina could not conceive of anyone else's happiness being achieved without expense to her own, and she viewed anyone who made her husband smile and whistle as he walked about the farm – as did Shabanu – with the deepest suspicion and contempt.

The women of Okurabad couldn't understand what attracted Rahim so powerfully to Shabanu – the way she went about barefoot, wearing the heavy silver ankle bracelet of the nomads, and no make-up. She, a low-born gypsy, dared to regard them with contempt! They were all daughters of landowners like Rahim, holy men, tribal leaders whose ancestors had descended directly from the Holy Prophet Muhammad Himself, peace be upon Him!

Shabanu's father was a camel herder. She was a daughter of the wind.

They all knew how to dress and behave in the best houses of Lahore. Shabanu walked about the courtyard singing gypsy songs in her wood-smoke

voice in Seraiki, the language of the desert. She'd never even been to Lahore!

They said among themselves that she practised evil magic.

They were frightened of Shabanu, of the levelness in her eyes which they mistook for conceit, a certain knowledge that Rahim would side with her against his elder wives.

For many weeks now the entire household had been preoccupied with preparations for Leyla's approaching marriage. Although the ceremony was not to be for several months, Leyla was busier than she ever had been before, and for some time had not followed Mumtaz about the garden as once was her custom. Shabanu cursed herself silently for letting down her guard.

Leyla growled low as a cat and turned swiftly away, her chador swirling out around her like a green flame. When she was gone, Shabanu shook the child gently by the shoulders.

"You mustn't go to Papa's house until I'm awake and can go with you," she said.

Mumtaz said nothing, and Shabanu pressed her fiercely against her breast for a moment. Then they walked holding hands to the canal, which ran like an opal ribbon through the morning haze.

## 2

Rahim returned from Lahore during the day, and that evening Shabanu sat at her dressing table and watched in an ivory-framed mirror as Zenat took a heated rod from the fire. The old ayah arranged curls around Shabanu's face to soften the strong line of her chin.

Shabanu removed the silver cuff from her ankle and replaced it with a fine gold chain.

Mumtaz sat quietly watching the ritual of her mother adorning herself for her father. Shabanu lifted strands of pearls and rubies from red velvet cushions and twisted them together, then held them up for Zenat to fasten at the back of her neck.

"How do I look?" she asked, glancing from the mirror to Mumtaz's face. Mumtaz stuck a finger into her mouth and ran to her mother.

"Like Papa's birds," she whispered, and clasped

her arms about her mother's waist. She buried her face in the silken folds of Shabanu's deep red sari, which hung from her knees heavily, weighted by embroidery of golden thread at the hem.

"Come away, Mumtaz. You'll mess your mother," said Zenat, circling the child's wrist with her claw-like fingers.

"Oh, let her be," said Shabanu. "God knows there's little enough time for her to sit in my lap like a baby." She hugged Mumtaz, who breathed in deeply, as if she wanted to keep her mother's rich, dark perfume all to herself.

Shabanu put the child to bed, telling her a story of the desert wind. The wind, she said, was a poet whom God had sent to live in the desert. His love dwelt among the stars. He could never reach her, and was doomed to spend eternity singing among the dunes.

When Rahim's servant rapped on the wooden door, Shabanu blew out the candle, kissed the smooth curve of her daughter's cheek, and left her in the careful guardianship of Zenat.

Rahim's servant held a lantern aloft, and its light glittered in the mirrors of his black velvet waistcoat and gleamed from the starched fan at the front of his turban. Zenat lifted the wedding chador on which Shabanu's mother had embroidered desert flowers so perfect the individual stitches were invisible, and Shabanu bent her head like a bride as the ayah arranged it over her hair.



Rahim was standing before the heavy wooden mantel of the fireplace in the grand front room of the old house when Shabanu entered. The electricity was off in the house, diverted to the pumps that carried water from the tube wells in the furthest fields, where the cotton was newly planted. Candles glowed from silver holders on the mantel, and crystal oil lamps beside the draped windows threw golden glints from the mirrored ceilings. The ancient mud walls were painted with fat melons and trellises bent with the weight of heavy-headed flowers.

Rahim's square shoulders belied his sixty years. Shabanu lifted her head and removed the chador, letting it slip down over her shoulders, and Rahim watched her silently. The turbaned servant reappeared at the door with a silver tray and offered Shabanu a glass of apple juice.

"Are you well?" Rahim asked, his voice rich and warm. Shabanu nodded. The incident with Leyla was not important enough to bother him with, especially not on his first night home. She saved the most serious of Amina's and Leyla's acts of malice for her argument that she must find a place away from Okurabad where she might live with Mumtaz one day, when Rahim was no longer there to care for them. He was forty-two years older than Shabanu, and she was truly afraid to be at the farm without him.

"See!" she'd said to him two weeks before, when

she'd presented him with the body of Mumtaz's favourite puppy. She had found it with its neck wrung at the edge of the stable yard. "What will become of Mumtaz and me when you are no longer able to protect us?"

As always when these things happened, an acceptable explanation was found for the puppy's death. It was said that Mumtaz had played with the pup in the stable, which was forbidden. Rahim and his brother Mahsood kept their stallions there. The least disturbance could cause a hormonal storm that might rage within the high-strung beasts for days.

"You must keep the child under control," Rahim had said to her. He dismissed her fears, and she'd had to let the matter drop.

Rahim put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her forehead gently.

"My old soul is always better when I've laid eyes upon you, my love," he said.

The deep lines in his face softened as he smiled in the flickering light. His hair was grey as his silk shalwar kameez. A woollen Kashmiri vest fitted flat over his middle, and his trousers billowed out from under the tunic before narrowing again above his soft polished shoes. He was straight and slim, but Shabanu thought he looked weary, and wondered what weighed so heavily on him.

"Would you like to visit Zabo?" he asked, and Shabanu's heart lifted.

“When?”

“I’m going to Mehrabpur tomorrow. I thought you and Mumtaz would like to come along.”

“Yes, of course,” she said quickly, and lowered her eyes. Shabanu was afraid to show pleasure at the thought of seeing her one friend, for fear something would happen to prevent her going. It had been so long since Shabanu had been with anyone her own age with whom she could talk freely.

Rahim lifted her chin and looked into her eyes.

“I wish I could do more to make you happy,” he said. She did smile then, and his eyes lost their dark worried look for a moment.

“It will make me very happy to see Zabo.”

Rahim tapped her chin with his knuckle.

“But I need your help,” he said. “I am going to ask Nazir for Zabo to marry Ahmed. Will you persuade her?”

Shabanu thought at first that Rahim was mistaken; he couldn’t mean Ahmed!

“But Ahmed is ... not right!” said Shabanu.

“He’s been to doctors in Lahore, and he can give her children,” Rahim said quietly, not looking at her.

“But what if they’re like him?” Poor Zabo! She was lovely and fair as a spring day in Cholistan. Shabanu’s stomach tightened and her mouth felt dry.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Rahim said softly. “But she’ll be safe here with Ahmed. You

and she can spend all your time together. You need someone to talk to and laugh with. You will persuade her?"

"If Zabo marries Ahmed, she'll never have anything to laugh about – ever again!" she said. "Must you?" She looked into Rahim's face, but his eyes would not meet hers and finally she looked away.

"I must find ways of forcing Nazir to cooperate after Leyla's marriage to Omar," he said, his voice taking on the formality he used as a shield against her. Nazir, Rahim's youngest brother, was greedy and difficult. He was known for his huge appetites for food, drink and women, and for cruel treatment of his wife and servants. And he was known for taking anything that caught his fancy.

Nazir was jealous of Rahim and Mahsood, their middle brother. The marriage of Leyla to Mahsood's son, Omar, would reunite the clan's land for the first time in two centuries. And this no doubt had increased Nazir's jealousy.

"Nazir has tried to find a suitable match for Zabo since she was ten," Shabanu said. "But no decent family wants a son, even a low-born son, to marry Nazir's daughter. And he'd never accept a son-in-law unless he had a large landholding."

Rahim remained silent. Among Pakistan's land-owning classes it was the custom for cousins to marry in order to keep land within the family. Marriages were never made without thought of expediency.

"You can't ask me to persuade my only friend to marry an idiot boy who would give her idiot children!" said Shabanu.

"Zabo will marry anyone her father wants her to marry," said Rahim.

"You'll have to deed thousands of acres to Ahmed to get Nazir's agreement," she said. "Do you trust your brother not to grab such a large piece of your land?"

"Ahmed will listen to me," Rahim replied. "He may be slow, but he knows enough not to trust Nazir. He's a good boy, Shabanu. Zabo would—"

"Zabo would be miserable!" Shabanu's eyes snapped.

"His mother and I have decided," Rahim said, and she knew there would be no more discussion.

Shabanu suddenly saw clearly Amina's hand in the arrangement. It was better to obscure such a cruel union as that of Ahmed and Zabo in the shadow of a major event like the wedding of Leyla and Omar.

One day Omar would inherit the family's largest landholding. His marriage to Leyla would be the marriage of the century. It would rejoin thousands of acres of ancestral land that had been divided and divided again by feuds that spanned every generation since the clan had settled in the Punjab. The future leadership: of half a million clansmen depended on the sons Omar and Leyla would produce.

No expense would be spared in the preparation. Nothing would be left undone. Talk of clothing, jewellery, the house where they would live, the ceremony, the food, the dowry – details heaped like grains of sand on a dune – occupied the entire household. Already there were wagers on the timing of the birth of the couple's first son.

Leyla also was Amina's child, but the mother's ambition for Ahmed, her only son, was fierce. Ahmed had little sense. He had a limited ability to learn some things, such as riding and caring for horses and hunting deer and birds in the desert – all things he loved to do. At other things, such as his formal lessons, he proved hopelessly inept. Ahmed was a good-natured boy, but there were times when his brain seemed to depart his body, and he would sit rocking by the day on a straight-backed chair, his eyes glazed, a thread of spittle attached to his chin, wetting his shirt.

"I shall come with you and console her," Shabanu announced, reaching for the bell to signal the servants to bring dinner.