

THE MATRIARCHS

1

RESCUED

The Story of Sarah

HEART

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANGELA HUNT

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— 1 —

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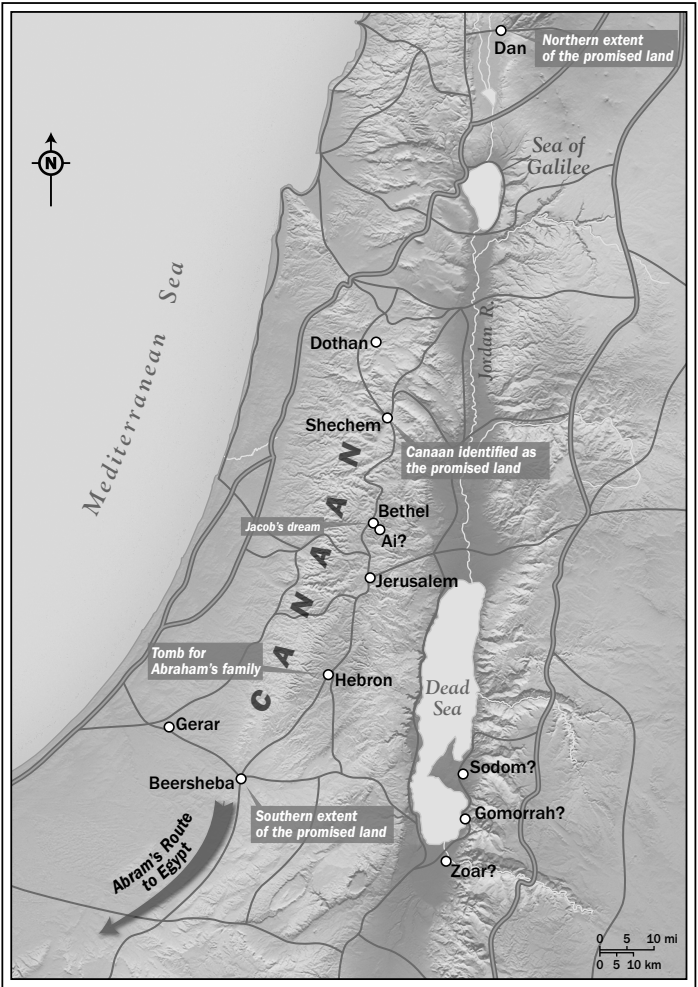
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Introduction

Once you've read a few pages of *Rescued Heart*, you may find yourself thinking, *Wait, that's not in the Bible!*

You'd be right. The Bible gives us pencil sketches of particular events, but a novelist's job is to flesh out those sketches by adding color, texture, and context, both through research and imagination. I'm not at all attempting to rewrite the Bible; I'm attempting to show you the full story as it *might have happened*.

You may be surprised to learn that many of the scenes in this novel come either from the Bible, my primary source, or the ancient Book of Jasher, which is mentioned twice in the Scriptures. The Book of Jasher never claims to be inspired or inerrant, but it certainly provides some interesting context. If you have questions while you're reading, the author's note at the end may provide you with some answers.

So settle into your favorite chair, brace for the unexpected, and enjoy this fictional look at the first matriarch of our faith.

I have also called you by name,
I have given you a title of honor,
though you have not known Me.
I am ADONAI—there is no other.

—*from Isaiah 45*

Book One

UR OF THE CHALDEANS

And Noah fathered Shem, who fathered sons.

One of his descendants fathered Terah.

Terah took a wife and fathered Haran and Nahor.

When Terah's wife died, he took another wife, Amthelo,
who gave birth to Abram.

Haran fathered Lot and two daughters, Milcah and Iscah.

Nahor married Milcah, who gave birth to sons and daughters.

Abram married Iscah and gave her a new name: Sarai.

But Sarai had no children.

Chapter

1

I STOOD in my grandfather's chamber and waited, my faith minuscule and my confidence nonexistent. My empty stomach twisted as Milcah's hands tightened on mine. "May you be a mother to millions," she whispered, her eyes bright. "Soon we will *both* be married women."

I exhaled a quivering breath. "I was beginning to think I would live with my father and brother forever."

"No longer! Now that Abram has come, you will discover the joys of married life."

"I hope it is as joyful as you say."

"Of course it is. What could stand in the way of your happiness?"

A thousand things, I wanted to answer, but my sister would not understand the reason for my anxiety. She had grown up with Nahor, her husband. My future husband was also a kinsman to us, but long ago he had been sent away for reasons I never fully understood . . . and no one wanted to explain.

I was better acquainted with the neighborhood butcher than with my betrothed.

I sighed as Milcah released my hands and reached for my embroidered veil. "Amthelo has been embroidering this linen for so

long,” Milcah said, a teasing note in her voice. “If she added any more butterflies, flowers, or birds, you would not be able to see through it.”

My sister draped the fabric over my braided hair, then stepped back and clasped her hands. “Unbelievable,” she whispered. “Despite all that adornment, your beauty shines through. Abram will be speechless when he sees you.”

“Stop being silly,” I chided, “because I need you to be serious. I may be coming to you for advice in the days ahead.”

“What advice could you possibly need? In your thirty-nine years, surely you have heard women talk about marriage.”

“I have, but—” I bit my lip.

“What?”

“I do not know the man, so I do not know what he expects of me.”

Milcah chuckled. “You will find out within a few hours.”

I released an exasperated sigh. “Do not mock me. I know what is expected on the wedding night, but I do not know Abram. I saw him for the first time yesterday, long enough to realize he is different. What if he does not like me? What if he decides that waiting for me was a waste of his time?”

My sister raised a finger. “I cannot deny that he seems odd compared to the men of Ur. But the men in our family have always made good husbands. You will not be sorry you married him.”

“I hope you are right.” I stepped back and braced for the future. “So? Have you any advice for an older bride?”

She crossed her arms, ran a critical eye over me, and nodded. “You will not disappoint him. But here is one suggestion—if I were you, I would have a baby as soon as possible. Even with the blessing of the gods, older women find it more difficult to conceive.”

And you are an older woman. The unspoken words dangled in the space between us.

I sighed as she went to the door and peeked out, allowing a flood of voices to swirl into the room. As the king’s vizier, my

grandfather knew nearly every man in the city. Dozens of guests had come to witness the marriage of the mysterious Abram who had come from the north to marry Terah's granddaughter.

"No sign of Father," Milcah said, closing the door. "We will have to wait."

Frustrated by yet more waiting, I dropped to a stool, careless of my new silk tunic. "Perhaps Abram has changed his mind. Perhaps he has gone back to his home. He might have a woman in the mountains, someone he did not want to leave."

"Grandfather signed a betrothal contract, did he not? Abram would be breaking the king's law if he does not fulfill his responsibility."

"A betrothal arranged before I was weaned. He might not have known he had a wife waiting for him in Ur."

"He knew—Grandfather would have made certain of it. He would have sent one of the king's messengers with the news."

Her mention of the king only heightened my anxiety. Nimrod, ruler of the Chaldeans, was well acquainted with our grandfather, but my father had always insisted on hiding me from the king's gaze, reasoning that the king's harem did not need a woman from our family. I understood why, of course. Our king—any king, for that matter—had the right to take any unmarried woman he desired, and both my father and grandfather were afraid I might appeal to the king. I found it hard to believe a king would covet an older woman, but even my sister advised me to wear a veil whenever I left the house.

If only my life had been as normal as Milcah's. At forty-two, she had borne eight sons and three daughters who kept her busy and gave her a sense of purpose. Until now, my only purpose had been to keep myself hidden while I waited for my absent groom.

Waiting had never been easy for me. Yet I had done my best to wait patiently for my life to begin.

I shivered as an unbidden thought sent a ghost spider scurrying

up my spine. “You do not think the king would come to the wedding, do you?”

Milcah laughed. “The king, in his vizier’s house?”

“He respects Grandfather. And he sent a gift to your wedding.”

“He will probably send a gift to yours as well, but a king does not concern himself with the private lives of his servants.”

We stilled at the sound of voices outside the door, and I rose as my father entered and caught my gaze. “Are you ready? Your bridegroom has arrived.”

Milcah squeezed my hand. “Iscah is finished with waiting,” she told him. “Your daughter is more than ready to become a wife.”

Father stepped forward and drew me close. “I know you were often frustrated because we forbade you from marrying at a younger age. I know other women mocked your status as a virgin.”

Other men mocked you, I wanted to say, for holding me in reserve as if I were some priceless treasure.

But I held my tongue out of respect.

“Soon you will understand why we kept you for Abram.” Father’s smile flashed in his beard. “My half brother will prove himself worth the wait.”

“I hope so,” I whispered.

He released me, Milcah patted my shoulder, and I walked toward my future on legs as unsteady as a baby’s.

THE HEAVY SCENT OF INCENSE—a mingling of cinnamon, ginger, and jasmine—filled my head as my father led me into the great hall. I blinked back anxious tears and struggled to smile as the guests murmured with approval. Their soft whispers must have assured my bridegroom, who wore an intense expression of curiosity as he watched me walk toward him.

The point of Father’s elbow rubbed my rib. “So? Do you think my little brother worth the wait?”

From beneath the safety of my veil, I studied my betrothed. The man who waited for me was no “little brother.” He stood taller than my father, his broad shoulders draped in rough linen that clung to his chest like armor. His skin was more tanned than my grandfather’s, with hands that testified to years of toil in the unforgiving sun. Strands of gray shone in his dark hair and beard. His eyes, focused on me, appeared deep, untamed, and more than a little intimidating.

I looked away and shook my head, then realized that Abram might interpret my movement as disapproval. “I do not know him,” I whispered. “But he looks like a man who could benefit from living with a civilized woman.”

Father chuckled. “That he does. And after this, my daughter, no one will ever again refer to you as overripe fruit. You will be a wife and mother, and everyone will forget that you married at an advanced age.”

I bit my lower lip, resisting the urge to shush him.

When we reached Abram and Terah, my grandfather, Father took my hands and placed them in Abram’s. My groom’s hands were rough and his nails untrimmed. From what uncultured city had he come? Even the slaves of Ur were better groomed.

The intensity of Abram’s gaze burned through my veil as Grandfather recited a prayer to Sin, lord of the moon. Though the groom was not required to pray, Abram did something I had never witnessed at the many weddings I had attended. He interrupted.

Abram’s low voice cut through Grandfather’s chant as he addressed an unfamiliar God, asking for His blessing upon our marriage. The people around us murmured, their surprise palpable.

Then Abram lifted my veil. His breath caught as he took a half step back, looking like a man who had been knocked over by a runaway cart.

I did not know whether to be flattered or offended. Was he so stunned by my appearance—

“Bless ADONAI, the Lord God,” he whispered, his gaze intent on my face. “I, his humble servant, do not deserve such a gift.”

A wave of mirth rippled through the assembled guests, then my grandfather cleared his throat. “Abram,” he said, his eyes sober, “will you take Iscah, daughter of Haran, as your wife?”

“I will.”

Grandfather turned to me. “Iscah, do you agree to take Abram as your husband and lord?”

“I agree.” I blushed when my voice came out in a nervous squeak.

Grandfather nodded. “What gift, Abram, do you bring to honor the covenant of marriage?”

Abram spread his large hands. “I have neither gold nor silver,” he said, his eyes focused on my face. “And what would be the use of such a gift, since anything I bring to the marriage would remain mine? So I will give you something to be yours alone: a new name. From this moment forward, you will no longer be known as Iscah, but *Sarai*. For a *princess* is what you shall be to me.”

I blinked, simultaneously startled and touched by his offering. I had not expected an expensive present, but I thought he would at least bring something tangible. But he had given me the unexpected . . . a majestic name that settled over me like an ill-fitting cloak.

“A wonderful gift,” Grandfather said, his eyes warming. “Sarai, attend to your husband. Abram, claim your bride.”

Abram stepped forward and gave me a kiss on the cheek, a gesture that elicited whoops of delight from our guests. Then he took my arm and led me toward the door.

The crowd surged forward, shouting congratulations, as we moved to the feast waiting in the courtyard. Some of the guests had traveled many days to celebrate this union, so they needed to be honored with fine wine and hearty food.

As the musicians began to play and guests surrounded Terah, Haran, and Abram, the men of the hour, Milcah tugged on my

sleeve. “My dear sister,” she shouted, her voice brimming with humor, “how are you enjoying life as a married woman?”

I leaned closer to be heard above the clamor. “It is not much different from life as an *unmarried* woman. The men still get all the attention.”

She winked at me. “My advice? During the meal, ask Abram what he thinks of the food. If he is complimentary, he will be an agreeable husband. If he complains, he will have a tendency to be critical.”

I regarded her through narrowed eyes. This was probably a trick, a ploy to help me relax.

“Go,” she said, giving me a gentle push toward the head table. “You must not keep your husband waiting. Go take your place beside him.” She smiled. “And do not forget to ask about the food.”

ABRAM AND I BARELY SPOKE during the feast. He ate, accepting congratulations in between bites, while I nibbled at the roasted lamb and vegetables. A few of the women walked over to wish me well, and several cast curious glances at my groom. The butcher’s wife, with whom I had regular conversations, leaned forward. “Unlike the vizier,” she whispered, her brows knitting, “he has the look of a wild man.”

I forced a smile, though her remark had done nothing to reassure me. “He does not resemble my father or Nahor, true. But Abram had a different mother.”

“So I have heard. Are you certain he did not come from another family?”

I nodded, but her question lingered in my thoughts. I knew so little about the man I had married, and the little I knew came from family members who did not seem eager to talk about him. What if the butcher’s wife was right? What if I had married a man with whom I had absolutely *nothing* in common?

When the shouts of congratulations faded and the platters stood empty, my pulse quickened. If I did not speak soon, Abram would begin to wonder if I could converse in anything but a terrified whimper.

“My lord,” I said, turning to him, “what do you think of the feast?”

Abram tore his gaze from two drunken brawlers and looked at me. “I think we should go.”

“Leave our wedding banquet?”

“Look there.” He gestured to a table of giggling women who could barely hold themselves upright. “As long as we remain, they will continue to drink. Better that we leave so they can collect their wits.”

Though his suggestion surprised me, I did not think anyone noticed when Abram took my hand and led me out of the courtyard and onto the street. I lowered my veil and followed him through the narrow alleyways until we reached the small house where we would live. The unremarkable structure resembled a score of other mud-brick homes in the area, but I shivered when Abram unlatched the door and stepped back, allowing me to enter.

A rough coat of plaster covered the walls, and narrow clerestory windows allowed light and air into the space. The house held only four pieces of furniture—a chair, a bench, a small table, and a bed—but someone, almost certainly Milcah, had draped garlands across the headboard and around the bedposts. The sweet scent of roses perfumed the air, and a single oil lamp glowed on the table, gilding the room with soft light.

Milcah had brought beauty to a humble house. I smiled at her thoughtfulness and leaned forward to luxuriate in the scent of the flowers, but Abram had other things on his mind.

He bade me sit on the bed, then tugged on the corner of my veil. When it fell to the floor, he stared at me so intently I wondered if he was having second thoughts. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” he whispered, falling to his knees. “I am simply amazed that ADONAI would choose to bless me with such a treasure.”

A flush warmed my cheeks. “A treasure? I am far past the age—”

“You waited for me,” he said, his voice husky. “I am sorry you had to wait so many years, but I could not leave until ADONAI told me to go home.”

I studied his face, wanting to know more about him and this mysterious ADONAI, but perhaps this was not the time for questions. We were married, and we had both waited far longer than was customary or even desirable . . .

Abram took my hand, pressed a kiss into my palm, and slowly slid his lips up my arm. My skin pebbled beneath his touch, and my heart fluttered despite the jittery state of my stomach.

But as he rose to continue his upward journey, he must have seen the small statue of Inanna, goddess of love and fertility, sitting among the flowers by the bed. Milcah had undoubtedly placed it there, hoping the queen of heaven would help us conceive on our first night together. The corner of my mouth quirked as I imagined my sister’s reasoning: *A woman of thirty-and-nine years has no time to waste . . .*

I was about to remark on Milcah’s thoughtfulness when Abram dropped my arm and grasped the statue. While I gaped, he strode to the door and hurled the figure into the street. I stared, blinking, as the clay shattered.

Abram closed the door, dusted his hands, and returned to me as if nothing had happened. He bent, pressing his lips to the side of my neck, but I could not ignore the astonishing act I had witnessed. “You do not care for Inanna?” I asked, pulling away. “You are not afraid she will repay your violence by cursing me with a barren womb?”

Abram straightened, a faint line appearing between his brows. “You should know, *Sarai*,” he said, stressing my new name as he took my hand, “that I worship ADONAI, the Lord God and Creator

of heaven and earth. I will never allow a graven image to come beneath my roof. As my wife, you should understand and honor my wish.”

Stunned, I pulled my hand from his. “You learned to worship this ADONAI while you were away?”

“I did.”

“But now you live in Ur, and in Ur we worship the king’s gods. We do not know this ADONAI.”

“Then I will introduce you.” He slipped his arm around my shoulder. “I do not expect you to know this, but the Lord becomes jealous when we take what is rightfully His and give it to someone else. Our worship and prayers belong to Him alone. We should not incite Him to jealousy by giving those things to another god.”

I lowered my gaze in confusion. “I did not know.”

His fingers caught my chin and lifted it. “I will teach you, but all in good time. For tonight, I must focus on getting to know *you*, my princess.”

Chapter

— 2 —

ABRAM OPENED HIS EYES to see the gray light of dawn brightening the house. “Thankful am I, Lord God, to awaken to a new day.” He smiled in an overflow of gratitude, then focused on the gentle sound of Sarai’s breathing.

What had he ever done to deserve such a treasure? He could think of nothing, yet ADONAI had blessed him with a wife so stunning that no man would be able to resist staring at her. But though her face and figure were beguiling, her soul was shadowed with ignorance—as was his father’s, his brothers’, even his mother’s. No one in Ur seemed to remember the God who had created them.

How quickly the sons of mankind had forgotten their Creator! Righteous Noah preached to the former world and the present one, but as people began to wander throughout the earth, they forgot Noah’s admonitions and sought their own paths. They longed for gods they could manipulate, even create.

“Noah, you were right,” he whispered into the semidarkness. “You warned me that the people of Ur had forgotten ADONAI. Yet you bade me return to the place of my birth to seek the Lord’s will. So here I am . . . with my people and a wife who does not know you.”

How could he introduce his family to ADONAI? For years he had dreamed of going into the world and teaching everyone he

met about ADONAI. He would have to begin with his wife, but he could not force her to believe. Like everyone else, she would have to come to ADONAI willingly. Freely. Completely.

Just as Abram had yearned for her to come to him.

Once Sarai believed, once she saw how completely he wanted to protect and honor her, surely the others' hearts would soften.

ADONAI would show him the way.

MY EYES FLEW OPEN when a pair of lips touched mine. For a moment I struggled to remember where I was, and then I breathed in Abram's masculine scent and felt his hand on my cheek . . . as his lips, ever gentle, roused me to wakefulness.

I tapped his nose with my index finger. "What are you doing?" I asked when he lifted his head.

A smile nudged itself into a corner of his mouth. "Upon waking I always give thanks to ADONAI. Should I not also show appreciation to my wife?"

I shrugged to hide my bewilderment. "If you like."

Thoughts tumbled in my head as he kissed me again. Never had any married woman mentioned this kissing in the morning. The tradition—if that is what it was—was an odd way to be awakened out of a dream.

Still—my arms slid around his neck as if they had a mind of their own—this was not a bad way to begin the morning. Much better than waking in the terror of a nightmare or by thoughts of waiting chores.

Abram rolled onto his back, taking me with him. I smiled. "Am I to expect this every morning?"

"If it pleases you," he answered, and in his voice I heard a hint of insecurity. He was new to this, too . . .

"It pleases me." I locked my fingers in his hair. "It pleases me well."