

❖ WIVES *of the* PATRIARCHS • BOOK 2 ❖

# Rebekah

A Novel



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To Jill Stengl, whose encouragement in this project kept me sane, whose faith gave me hope when I was certain there was no story to tell, and who believed in me despite my doubts that I could complete the work.

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Part

# 1



Some time later Abraham was told, “Milcah is also a mother; she has borne sons to your brother Nahor: Uz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel (the father of Aram), Kesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph and Bethuel.” Bethuel became the father of Rebekah.

Genesis 22:20–23

Now Rebekah had a brother named Laban.

Genesis 24:29



# ❁ 1 ❁

HARRAN, 1969 B.C.

Light flickered from clay oil lamps in every corner of Bethuel's bedchamber, the effort valiant but feeble, useless to dispel the gloom. Attendants hurried in and out, the hum of their whispers mixing with the sounds of their movements as they refilled a water jar here, wrung out a cool cloth there, and adjusted blankets, fussing, fearing . . .

Rebekah stood to the side, unable to take her eyes from the form of her father lying prone on the raised wooden bed, his head engulfed in soft cushions and layered with cloths meant to bring his fever down. But his clear moments had been few, his words strained as though he were speaking through stretched and cracking parchment.

Tears filled her eyes, and she pulled the cloak tighter about her, desperate to subdue the shaking. *Not now, Abba. Please, do not leave me.*

She heard voices in the hall outside the room and swiped at the unwanted tears. Though the time for mourning was almost upon them, she did not want her grief put on public display. Not yet. Not while there was still a chance her father might recover.

Shadows danced over the tiled floor, and servants moved quickly to leave the chamber as her brother Laban and her mother, Nuriah, moved in. Laban carried a scroll and seal and walked with assurance to kneel at his father's side.

"You called for me, Father?" Laban spoke softly, but his words carried to Rebekah. She leaned closer to better hear him, catching Laban's glance and look of silent censure.

"Bethuel? Is that you?" Her father's eyes fluttered as he spoke. "Let me behold my namesake, my firstborn, that I might bless him."

Laban touched his father's arm even as a determined glint filled his dark eyes. "I am here, Father."

Rebekah's heart skipped a beat, and a certain dread filled her. What was he doing? She opened her mouth to speak, then changed her mind and turned to rush out and find Bethuel, but before she could move or utter a sound, her mother hurried to her side and clutched her arm with clawlike strength.

"Keep silent," her mother hissed into her ear, and though she leaned away from Rebekah, her grip did not slacken, her intent strikingly clear.

"I have brought the scrolls, Father. You need only to dip your seal in the wax and all will be well." Laban unrolled the parchment, took the small clay bowl, and poured the already heated wax onto the bottom of the scroll.

A rustling of robes filled her ear, and Rebekah turned, seeing two of her father's servants enter—two who had always favored Laban.

"Bring me Bethuel. I must bless my son." Her father's voice stumbled over the words, each one coming out painfully slow.

Nuriah stepped forward and touched her husband's chest. "You must do as Laban requests, my husband. He is the one whom you must bless."

Her father's breath grew labored, and Rebekah's own breath hitched as she watched him wince, as though her



mother's words caused pain. Everyone knew her brother Bethuel was not quick-witted as Laban was, that his words and actions were slow, lumbering, and that he did not have the skill to run the estate the way her mother or Laban would want. But her father had always preferred him, and Rebekah knew that if nothing else, her brother would look out for her, would be fair and kind, unlike Laban.

"Mother, please." Rebekah's whispered words were met with a look like hardened stone. She clamped her mouth shut.

Laban took the seal and curled his father's fingers around it, pressing it into the wax.

Rebekah's stomach tightened as she recognized the scroll as the one her father kept secure in an urn buried in the dirt beneath the floor, the deed to all that he owned. The deed that should have been passed to his firstborn, to Bethuel. She glanced toward the door. Where was he? Why did he not stop this? Had Laban done something to her brother? But no, Bethuel was big and far stronger than Laban. He could break Laban's neck in his two hands, though he would not do so. Not for any reason.

She turned at the sound of rustling sheets. Her nurse, Deborah, was helping her father to sit straighter. Laban blew on the wax, waiting for the seal to dry, while her mother took her husband's hand in hers.

"Please, my husband, say the words you know you must say."

Rebekah's stomach twisted into knots at the pained expression on her father's dear face. *No, Abba. Do not listen to her.* But it would be useless to fight her mother and brother when they had obviously conspired together in this. Somehow they would have convinced Bethuel to stay away, to let them work things out as they had planned. And he was too kind and gentle to demand anything against them.

"Please, my husband." Nuriah's insistent tone made heat

rise to Rebekah's cheeks. Her arm still felt the nails her mother had dug into the skin moments before. There was no reasoning with the woman when she was siding with her favorite son, no matter what the cost to anyone else. Sometimes Rebekah wondered if her mother loved Laban more than she did her own husband. Surely she favored him above her other children or grandchildren. The thought brought a bitter taste to her mouth.

“May Adonai bless you, my son.”

Rebekah leaned forward, listening, her father's words no more than a breath.

“May your mother's sons serve you, and may you prosper all the days of your life.” He fell back among the cushions, his body spent.

Deborah lifted the thin sheet closer to his neck, and he closed his eyes. Rebekah watched closely, begging the God of Shem to let her see his chest rise and fall.

“Thank you, Father.” Laban leaned close and kissed their father's sunken cheek, then gathered the scroll and seal and moved quickly from the room.

Her mother gripped Rebekah's arm once more. “See to it you say nothing of this to anyone. Your brother has done what he must. It is all for the best.” She lifted a veined hand toward her husband's frail form. “He has always favored you and our weak-willed firstborn. But he was wrong.” She wrapped her robe more tightly about her thin frame and hurried after Laban.

Rebekah stared after her, her heart thudding hard against her chest, a sense of betrayal and fury filling her. “He is not weak-willed.” She spoke the words out of earshot of her mother. She knew better than anyone that her brother Bethuel was a gentle man—anyone watching could see the way he tended the lambs in his care, treating them with greater kind-

ness than her mother had treated anyone in her life. Better than Laban did his own wife and children.

But it was Laban who had the sense for business and the wherewithal to command a household. Laban could charm the feistiest merchant and work his way into the most uncompromising heart. She was weary of his deceit and the way he controlled those around him. In the past, she could run to her father for aid. But now . . . what would she do without her abba? She looked again at his frail form, watching Deborah replace the cool cloths across his forehead and about his chest.

“Is he suffering?”

Deborah lifted a shoulder in a shrug, but a hint of worry filled her eyes. “I do not know, mistress. I do not think so. Not very much.”

A sigh escaped her, and Rebekah stepped closer, kneeling at his side. She took his hand, clasped it between both of her own, and lowered her head to kiss it.

He rallied and cradled her cheek in his palm. “My dear Rebekah.”

She strained to hear the words, leaning close so as not to tax his strength any further. “Abba, you must rest so that you can get well. We need you.” Tears made her voice waver, and she could not stop them from freely flowing over her cheeks. “I need you.”

A faint smile formed at the edges of his beard. “My Rebekah. My strong one.” He paused, and she counted his breaths, silently begging him to continue, yet not wanting to press him.

*O God of Shem, please do not take him now!*

He opened his eyes once more, his look infinitely loving and sad. “Your mother knows best, dear one. She will find you a husband and all will be well. Do not fear.”

“But I don’t want to lose you.”

She waited, but he did not respond.

Deborah came near and placed a hand on her arm. “He is sleeping, mistress. He will not likely speak again. He has spent his last words.”

Rebekah gently squeezed her father’s limp hand and laid it beneath the covers, watching the slow beat of his heart barely lift the sheet that was meant to warm him. She faced her nurse and fell weeping into her outstretched arms.

“My mother does not know best.” The words came out broken and soft, though she knew Deborah could hear her.

“There, there, now. Obviously, your father does not agree. Perhaps he has already passed on his wishes to your mother. Soon you will live in the home of your husband and all will be well.” She lifted Rebekah’s chin in her sturdy hand. “Trust Adonai and wait and see.”

Rebekah wiped the tears from beneath her eyes and willed her emotions under control. She glanced once more at her father, her regret and anger and hurt mingling with every labored beat of his heart. “All will not be well,” she whispered, hoping he could not hear. She turned and held Deborah’s sympathetic gaze. “I will have no say in the matter, and my father will not be there to defend me.”

She was no match for her mother, but she would not cow to Laban’s rule without a fight. She was not her father’s daughter for nothing.



Hours passed, and the sun sank low on the horizon outside her father’s bedroom window when the telltale sound of rattling in her father’s throat jolted Rebekah. Deborah sprang to his side, but Rebekah stared, unable to move, watching as he strained to take first one breath, then another, until at last no more breaths would come. The sheet stopped moving, and his pinched expression softened in the unmistakable mask of death.

“Your father rests in Sheol now,” Deborah said, her words barely registering at the fringes of Rebekah’s heart. “He does not suffer any longer, dear one.”

Rebekah nodded numbly as servants rushed into the room, and loud keening sounds burst from the waiting mourners’ lips.

She staggered from the room into the hall where her brother Bethuel stood looking lost and forlorn. Their father had called for him, but the message had not been conveyed soon enough to bring him in from the fields, not soon enough to thwart Laban’s plans. Anger flared once more at her mother and Laban and their callous indifference to this brother who had never hurt a soul in all of his life.

She touched his arm and looked up into his sober eyes. “He loved you. He wanted to bless you and would have. You must believe that.”

He nodded but did not speak.

“I don’t care what Ima and Laban have done. I need you, Bethuel.”

He placed his large hand on her shoulder and patted it awkwardly. “I will take care of you, Bekah.”

She reached both arms around his waist, relieved to feel his arms come around her. But as her mother’s voice sounded in the distance, giving orders to the servants to prepare her father for burial, she felt little comfort from his reassuring hold.

Laban’s and her mother’s actions had changed her future. Nothing would be the same again.

## ❁ 2 ❁

The city gates loomed in the distance early the next morning. Laban cinched his cloak closer against the dawn's first chill, his nerves on edge with every step. There would be no problem convincing the elders the documents were real. His father's seal on the parchments would act as proof enough, and as long as Bethuel kept his tongue . . . He cinched his cloak again, glancing behind him at his father's steward—his steward now. The man would support him. All of the servants favored his leadership over that of his brother. There could be no doubt that his father's namesake was slow. Not exactly witless, but a clumsy oaf whose only skills lay in caring for the sheep.

Still, Laban tucked the pouch of parchments tighter beneath his arm as though holding them close would protect his assets. They would believe what he told them. Of course they would.

He shivered as a line of young maidens glided past him carrying jars on their shoulders, headed to the well outside of the city. He spotted Rebekah among them with her maid Selima, relieved when she did not stop or attempt to engage him in another confrontation. She alone had insisted that the

firstborn Bethuel should carry the birthright of their father's blessing and had tried to convince both Bethuel and him that she was right. Thankfully, she'd stopped short of threatening to expose him to the elders. Her fate rested in his hands, and she knew it.

Lifting his shoulders in a shrug, he tried to brush the conversation aside, but the tension would not abate. The weight of guilt pressed in on him. It was ridiculous, of course. He had done nothing wrong. In fact, he had done the most prudent thing to protect his family.

He watched Rebekah's graceful form move beneath the gates toward the well as he approached the gate himself. Her beauty surpassed that of every maiden in Harran, and already he had received requests from several men willing to pay for the privilege of marrying her. He smiled, glad their father had not given in to the potter's request for his son Naveed. Rebekah's beauty belonged in kings' palaces.

But plans for his sister must wait for another day. He sighed, glanced at his steward, and entered the gate to meet the elders.

"Greetings, Laban, son of Bethuel. Have you come prepared to take your father's seat among us?" The chief governor of the palace motioned to the seat his father used to occupy as head of the merchants' guild.

"I am ready, Kenan." He handed the documents to the leader of the elders and took the seat offered him. "You will find everything in order there." He leaned back, confident that the documents his brother had signed along with his father's seal looked authentic even to the discerning eye.

The governor studied the parchments, running his fingers over the seal at the bottom. Laban waited, forcing himself to remain calm, to breathe normally, lest he show his anxiety. If he was caught deceiving these people, he could end up losing his place of honor and, even worse, be imprisoned

for fraud. But they need not know the full truth. Any one of them would have done the same.

“Everything seems to be in order,” the man said at last. He rolled the parchments up again and placed them back into the pouch.

Laban handed the pouch to his steward, relieved. He settled back, listening as the day’s order of business commenced.

As the morning waned and the sun rose higher in the sky, the meeting at last came to an end, and the men left, most to attend business elsewhere. Laban moved toward the stairs leading to the streets below the city gate. At a touch on his arm, he turned.

“Laban, son of Bethuel.” One of the elders approached.

“Yes, my lord.”

“I would have a word with you.”

Laban’s heart kicked over in a silent surge of uncertainty, but at the look on the man’s face, he relaxed and walked with the elder through the city gate toward the main thoroughfare of Harran’s market streets.

“I am sorry for the loss of your father, may he rest in peace.” The man lowered his head in a proper gesture of sorrow.

“Thank you, my lord. His presence is greatly missed.” Laban touched a hand to his forehead, dutifully agreeing with the man’s sentiment.

They walked in silence several moments, passing a baker carrying a tray of pastries on a wooden platter, headed toward his market stall, while street urchins raced in and around the patrons, nearly toppling the man’s tray. Laban glanced at the sky, fighting the urgency to hurry the man along.

“Your father and I had discussed the possibility of a match between your sister and my son Dedan.” The man cleared his throat, and though Laban looked him in the eye, he would not meet Laban’s gaze.

“What did my father say about the matter?” By the man’s



shifty expression, Laban knew the answer. His father probably thought the man a liar and a cheat and would never give Rebekah to such a man's son.

"Only that he was weighing several offers." At last the man stopped and faced Laban. "I am prepared to offer whatever you request. I think it will benefit both your house and mine to make such an alliance." His earlier disquiet seemed to disappear, replaced by sudden confidence. "My son is anxious to meet your sister."

Laban stroked a hand over his beard. He would find opposition from Rebekah and probably Bethuel if he acted too quickly in this. He lifted a brow, feigning uncertainty. "I am afraid this is a subject I am not as familiar with as I should be. If you will forgive me, my lord, my father's affairs are not yet fully set in order. I must consult with my older brother on this matter before I can give you an answer."

"I thought the papers indicated these decisions rest with you." Skepticism filled his expression, setting Laban's heart to a quicker beat.

"It does—they do. But like you said, my father had many offers, and I have not yet had the chance to look into them." Sweat pricked a line along his turbaned brow.

The man nodded, seemingly satisfied. "Of course. I understand." He turned to head in the opposite direction, and Laban breathed a sigh. "But do not keep me waiting long." He gave Laban a pointed look. "I am not a patient man."



"We will be moving at the end of the week." Laban leaned against the threshold between the cooking rooms and the area where they entertained guests during meals. The place where Rebekah's father had presided over family meetings and conducted urgent council business. But only days after her father's body rested in the family burial cave, Laban was

already turning her world inside out. “Take whatever you will need to move to the house in Nahor in Paddan-Aram.”

Their grandfather’s home in Paddan-Aram, the city of Nahor, was larger by far than their house in Harran, where more people wanted to live in less space, where the king’s palace and the seat of their government resided.

Rebekah turned from the table where she kneaded the dough for the next morning’s baking to look from Laban to her mother, who was seated at the table chopping figs.

“Why should we move? Harran is our home.” Rebekah shoved the heel of her hand into the soft, doughy mound, but it did nothing to release the sudden tension in her heart.

“If your brother thinks we should move, he has good reason.”

Her mother’s rebuke stung. Rebekah had argued with Laban all of her life. She would not follow his lead without question. She shoved the dough harder, turning it as she went, forcing back the ache that came every time she thought of her father.

“We won’t all go. Not all at once,” Laban said to Nuriyah as though Rebekah were not in the room. “But I want you to take Rebekah and her maids and leave the city. Farah will stay with me for a time. People will understand during this period of mourning.” Laban took a few steps into the cooking room, then seemed to think better of it and returned to prop one arm against the threshold.

Rebekah whirled to face him, flour-coated hands on her hips. “You cannot push me out of your life and send me away. Not until you have secured a proper betrothal for me.” If she left, he might forget his responsibility to her.

“You’re not coming with us?” Nuriyah’s thick brows furrowed, her mouth a tight line.

“I will visit often, and soon. Once things are settled here, Farah and I will join you.”

Rebekah turned the dough over into a clay bowl and covered it with a cloth, refusing to look at him. “You still have not

answered my question.” She closed the distance to the table where her mother sat and braced herself, facing him. “Why should I leave?” She would find Bethuel and enlist his help to keep her here if she must. She had lived in Harran most of her life. Her friends were here.

“It is a safer place for you. Until I can sort out the many suitors who have come calling, it is better if you are not in the city.”

A knock sounded on the outer door, silencing her protest. Laban moved into the sitting room while a servant went to see who had come to call. Rebekah glanced at her mother but ignored the shake of her head that told Rebekah to stay where she was. She walked quietly to stand along the wall and peeked around the corner to watch and listen.

“Baruch, welcome, my friend. Come in. Have some refreshment.” Laban embraced the potter and kissed each cheek, motioning him to sit among the cushions.

“No, no. I would not think to impose on your hospitality so late in the evening.” The potter rubbed a shaky hand over his beard, his gaze fixed solely on his feet. “I only wondered . . . that is . . . my Naveed is anxious for your answer.” The man looked up, and Rebekah caught the hopeful glint in his eyes. Naveed’s father had asked for her hand before her father died, and it was up to Laban now to give the man an answer. She waited, her breath held tight within her.

Laban nodded and placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “I am sorry to have kept you wondering, my friend. Your son is surely a worthy man that would make any woman proud.”

*But not your sister.* She knew with the release of a sigh that Laban had no intention of giving her to the potter’s son, the third born, who would inherit little and likely make only a modest, perhaps even a poor living the rest of his life.

“I am afraid, however, that the amount you offered for Rebekah’s hand has already been exceeded by several other

hopeful fathers just this past week. Unless you can offer much more than you already have . . .”

Disappointment filled the potter’s expression as he slowly shook his head. “I have offered you all that I could spare. I am afraid I will have to withdraw the request.” He bowed then and turned toward the door, looking back for a brief moment. “Thank you for your *hospitality*.” He swept out of the house before Laban could respond.

Rebekah did not miss the man’s sarcasm, nor the hint of anger directed at her brother. How many men of Harran would he offend by setting too high a bride-price for her? Was this why he wanted her to leave the city, so he could conduct his business without her knowing, so that she would not have to face the good people he had offended once she finally wed?

“It is just as well.” Her mother’s voice came from beside her. When had she moved close enough to hear? “Naveed was a poor potter’s son. He would have never been able to provide for you as you deserve.”

Rebekah stilled, her cheeks flushed with anger, a familiar feeling she had known too often of late. “Naveed was a good man. Better a poor man who is good than a rich, evil one.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Laban said, joining them in the cooking room again. “Pack your things. You leave in three days.”



Rebekah’s arms ached from lifting and carting heavy baskets laden with clothing, cooking utensils, and the washed wool for her weaving to the donkeys’ carts, only to do the task in reverse once the small caravan reached her mother’s new home. The city of Nahor in Paddan-Aram was situated in a lush valley surrounded by higher hills. Her grandparents’ former home occupied one of the wealthier, more spacious sections of the town yet smelled musty from long disuse.

Some of the furnishings used by her grandfather Nahor, his wife and concubine, and their children still took up many of the rooms.

Rebekah explored the large estate as servants bustled about her, sweeping and arranging things the way her mother told them to. The air was cleaner here than in Harran, the noise decidedly lessened with the house situated far from the markets and some of the more pungent trades. She breathed deeply. Her weaving room was larger and more airy, and the view from her bedchamber's window was beautiful. She should thank Laban for sending them here, but she could not forgive him long enough to even consider such a thing.

She moved into the courtyard, where Deborah and Selima had begun preparations for the evening meal. The donkeys' carts sat outside the courtyard, empty now, the animals rubbed down and munching hay in the large stables near the house. She joined Selima near the millstone and poured the ground grain into a clay bowl.

"I think I could get used to living here," Rebekah said, adding oil to the flour and mixing them together. "There is so much room. Smells better too." She moved her hand in an arc. "But don't tell Laban I said so." She wrinkled her nose and Selima laughed.

"Your secret is safe with us, mistress." Selima's hands gripped the millstone, her body swaying with the motion of the turns. "It helps to have the animals in a stable away from the house, rather than below us."

"I do miss the sound of the camels when they belch." Deborah laughed and Selima joined her.

"I think the animals smell better than some of the people," Rebekah said. Her own brother among them, though in truth, Laban wore plenty of perfumes to mask his body's odor. It was the smell of his deceit she had grown to despise.

"I thought you liked the scents of myrrh and sweat."

Deborah bent over the clay oven, poking the fire beneath it with a long stick.

“I like the scents of the river and how a body smells when it is clean.” Rebekah smiled, enjoying the company of these women. Even Naveed could have improved his habits of cleanliness, though he was better than some.

Naveed. Surprise filled her that she did not miss him or his offer of marriage. In truth, she could think of no one in Harran she pined after. She drew in a slow breath as she glanced through the courtyard’s gates in the direction of Harran. Even the cone-shaped homes of the town were not visible from this distance, only a road that trailed into a thin line outside the city wall the farther it went.

“I wonder who your brother will pick for you.”

Selima’s comments brought her thoughts up short. Selima was obsessed with weddings and thoughts of marriage.

“I am like a prized camel in his eyes. He will sell me to the man with the biggest purse.”

“And for such a purse you should be grateful. It is proof your brother cares for your welfare.”

Her mother’s caustic tongue set Rebekah’s head to aching. She hadn’t heard her approach.

“My brother cares only for the wealth I can bring him.” Though she couldn’t prove it, she suspected Laban kept back part of the gold she earned from her weaving, despite his assurances that he was giving her the full amount.

“Your brother thinks you are fit for a prince.” Her mother stepped closer, carrying a basket of wool on her way into the house. She looked Rebekah up and down. “Though with that disobedient spirit, you should be glad Laban sent you away from Harran. That tongue of yours will get you into trouble, Daughter. Don’t think I didn’t warn you.” She stalked out of the courtyard and into the cool interior of the house.

Rebekah stared after her, stunned. How was it possible

that her mother's words hurt more now than they ever did? She had endured the woman's scorn all of her life. But Abba had protected her then.

She swallowed hard at the touch of Deborah's hand on her arm. "She did not mean it as it sounds, mistress," Deborah whispered into her ear.

But Rebekah knew better. "I care nothing for spoiled princes. I want a man who treats me well. A man I can trust." She flung the words toward the house, certain her mother could hear.

"One day you will thank me," her mother called from inside, so self-assured, so matter-of-fact.

Rebekah turned her back to the house and looked at Deborah, refusing to continue her mother's argument. What could she say to such words? Deborah placed an arm around her shoulders and drew her toward the women's circle, where Selima glanced up from her grinding, her normally smiling face suddenly somber. Even her maids were weary of Nuriah's outbursts. With Laban away and her father gone, her mother had grown increasingly bitter.

Deborah, her nurse from the day of her birth, was more of a mother to her than Nuriah had ever been. And Selima, Deborah's daughter, was more of a sister than a maid, though social dictates did not allow her to be treated as one.

Rebekah scooped the ground grain from Selima's pile and sifted it through the sieve. She worked in silence for several heartbeats, and when she glanced into the distance, she saw a man walking the thin path toward their estate.

"Someone is coming." She set the bowl aside and walked to the edge of the courtyard to get a better view. The man drew closer, and she would have recognized his lumbering gait among any crowd of men. "It's Bethuel!" She snatched a linen cloth from the bench and wiped her hands on it as she ran toward him.

She reached him moments later, breathing hard, and threw

herself into his brotherly embrace. “How I have missed you, Bethuel! And now you are here!”

He twirled her in his big arms like he used to do when she was a child. “Laban needed me to watch over you.” He set her down and moved a piece of hair from her face. “A house needs a man nearby, you know.”

She clutched his arm. “And I could ask for no better man to protect me.”

With Bethuel nearby, her mother would mind her tongue. Both her father and this brother had quietly commanded a respect Rebekah could not seem to gain on her own. One look from him would silence her mother’s misguided words.

She smiled into his thoughtful eyes, pleased when he winked back at her.

“We will find you a good husband, Bekah. I will make sure of it.”

“If you help Laban decide, I know all will be well.” Bethuel could judge a man’s character in one glance. If only he had remained the one in control of her fate. “But come, there is time enough to worry about protecting me. You must be hungry, and the evening meal is almost ready.” She smiled at him again, relieved that he had chosen to come rather than go off to his beloved hills and be alone with the sheep.

He rubbed his middle with one hand. “I could eat a whole goat right now.”

She laughed. “Well, unfortunately, red lentil stew will have to do.”

“Spiced the way I like it?” He looked like a small boy the way he asked, and she suddenly was a young girl again learning to prepare her father’s favorite dishes, pleased and proud when she succeeded in making him smile.

She patted his arm, her thoughts wistful, and wished her father were with them too. “Spiced just the way you like it.”

They took their time walking back to the house.