

Where We Belong

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To my family:
Ken, Joshua, Vanessa, Benjamin,
Maya, Snir, and Lyla Rose
With love and gratitude

PART I
Rebecca

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CHAPTER 1

THE SINAI DESERT 1890

Rebecca Hawes lay awake in her tent, convinced that the howling wind was about to lift her entire camp into the air and hurl it to the far side of the desert. The desolate wasteland of the Sinai Peninsula lay beyond her tent door, thousands of miles and a world away from her home in Chicago. Sand pummeled the canvas; the thick material heaved and flapped as if trying to take flight. Rebecca gazed around in the darkness, her eyes open wide. She saw nothing. The sandstorm obliterated every ray of starlight and moonlight, making the darkness seem biblical, like one of the plagues God used to punish Egypt—a darkness that could be felt. She had thought, at age forty-five, that she would live at least another twenty years or so, but this storm just might be the end of her. Pity. There was so much more she hoped to accomplish.

She remembered the luxurious hotel room she had left behind in Cairo two days ago and understood why the Israelites had longed to return to Egypt after camping in this wilderness, even if it meant slavery. Moses had been leading them to Mount Sinai

to worship God, and she was on her way to the Monastery of Saint Catherine, built on the same site. The centuries of history invested in that mystic place fascinated her. Imagine—Emperor Justinian built the basilica at Saint Catherine’s in AD 557! She hoped she lived through the night to see it.

An odd pounding noise caught Rebecca’s attention, a staccato beat that joined the shrieking wind and drumming canvas. She struggled to sit up on the sagging camp cot to listen. The sound, when she identified it, was a reassuring one—the Bedouin caravan drivers were securing the tent stakes shaken loose by the gale. Perhaps she wouldn’t blow away after all. How the men could see anything at all in such profound darkness was a mystery to her. She heard them speaking to their camels, the animals hissing and growling in response. Nasty beasts!

Then a new thought occurred to her: What if the sand piled up into a mound around her tent, burying her, the equipment, the drivers, and even the camels?

She swatted away the thought with a wave of her hand. There were much worse ways to die.

“Becky? Are you awake?” her younger sister, Flora, whispered. She lay on a camp cot not two feet away, yet invisible in the gloom.

“Yes, I’m here.” Rebecca groped toward the sound of Flora’s voice and found her arm, giving it a reassuring pat.

“Well, this is certainly turning out to be an adventure, isn’t it?” Flora asked.

Rebecca heard the suppressed laughter in Flora’s voice and grinned. “Yes, I believe this is the very definition of an adventure!” She started to laugh out loud, then buried her face in her blanket to muffle the sound. She could hear Flora doing the same. They might have been schoolgirls again, whispering after lights-out, instead of two middle-aged sisters.

“If our society friends could see us now . . .” Flora sputtered.

“They would have us committed to an asylum!”

“I think Thomas Cook should add tours of the Sinai with a Bedouin camel caravan to his posh itineraries,” Flora said. “Don’t you?”

Rebecca laughed out loud at the idea, then quickly covered her mouth again.

“Shh . . . we’ll wake up Kate,” Flora whispered.

“I’m already awake, Miss Flora.” Kate sounded peeved.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, dear. It’s just that when I think of where we are and the absurdity of this storm—”

“Yes, shouldn’t we be making social calls or raising funds for one of your charities?” Rebecca asked in her grandest voice. She and Flora laughed all over again. “We’d better control ourselves,” Rebecca finally said, “or Petersen will be sticking his somber head through the tent flap, wondering if we’ve become unbalanced.”

“The boy has been our butler for two years, Becky. He knows full well how unbalanced we are. Remember the first time he saw us doing calisthenics in our backyard in our bloomers?”

Her words brought more laughter, and Rebecca wiped tears from her eyes. She felt a fine layer of grit and tasted it on her lips. The wind pounded sand through every crack and seam and opening. She hoped it wouldn’t damage her photographic equipment. “Forgive us, Katie dear. We’ll settle down now, I promise. Go back to sleep.”

“How can I sleep when I’m about to be blown away?” Kate grumbled. Rebecca couldn’t see their so-called lady’s maid in the darkness, but she could imagine the churlish frown on her face, her stiff posture and crossed arms. It had been Flora’s idea to try to transform the thieving, eighteen-year-old street urchin into their lady’s maid. Rebecca was beginning to believe it might be easier to spin straw into gold.

“You don’t suppose we could be buried alive by morning, do

you?” Flora asked. “Remember how Nimrud’s Palace was so completely engulfed by sand that the local Arabs didn’t even realize it was there until Henry Layard dug it out?”

Rebecca smiled. “I had the very same thought. Perhaps some future archaeologist will find us a thousand years from now and wonder what on earth those crazy sisters were up to.”

“Um . . . remind me again why we’re doing this,” Flora said.

Rebecca heard the smile in her sister’s voice and was glad they were together. They had enjoyed exotic travel since they were schoolgirls—exploring Paris’ maze-like streets, traveling up the Nile in a *dahabeeah* to see the pyramids, perusing the *souks* and dark alleyways of places like Cairo and Jerusalem.

“I believe we came here because we longed for an adventure, remember?” Rebecca replied. But that wasn’t the only reason. Midway through her life, Rebecca had fallen in love. Professor Timothy Dyk was brilliant, scholarly, warm, companionable—and in love with her, too. They were so well-suited that Rebecca might have been formed from the rib plucked from his side. But she couldn’t accept Timothy’s marriage proposal—not yet, anyway. Perhaps never. This quest at Saint Catherine’s was her last resort, and if it failed, she had no other recourse but to remain a spinster. Rebecca would endure sandstorms and desert perils and much, much more if she thought it would finally topple the wall between them.

And then there was their young maid, Kate Rafferty. Who knew what effect this journey would have on her stony heart? Or on their cheerless, nineteen-year-old butler, Petersen, whom Flora had rescued from the orphan’s home? Someone had to try to reach these young people before they were lost forever. Why not Rebecca and Flora?

One of the camels began braying loudly outside their tent. “Oh, those poor animals,” Flora said. “They have no shelter from the storm.”

“You’re not going to invite them into our tent, are you?” Kate asked. “I know how softhearted you are, Miss Flora.”

“Not unless they have a bath, first,” she replied, laughing. “They smell atrocious!”

“Besides, they’re used to desert conditions,” Rebecca said. “God created them to endure sandstorms.” She didn’t believe for a moment that they had *evolved* through the process of natural selection as that heathen Charles Darwin proposed. His outrageous theories were in all the newspapers these days and many of the scientists she knew seemed to be embracing them. Rebecca could not, would not.

“We should try to sleep now,” she said. “It’s certain to be a long day tomorrow.” They had traveled seven hours across the rocky desert yesterday, then risen before sunrise and traveled eight hours today before the sandstorm had forced them to hunker down. The storm had seemed both beautiful and terrifying as it rolled toward them, darkening the sky and filling the horizon like an eerie yellow thundercloud. Tomorrow’s journey would be at least as long as today’s, providing the storm blew itself out as the Bedouin sheikh assured her it would. The pace was exhausting, but Rebecca had hired the camel caravan for only forty days, including traveling time to Mount Sinai and back. She wanted to spend as many of those days as she could doing research at the monastery.

“How much longer until we get there?” Kate asked.

“It should take us another week to reach Saint Catherine’s.”

“And are we going to have sandstorms like this every night? If so, I think we should turn around right now and go home. Besides, I don’t trust those camel drivers. Their leader keeps staring at me.”

“It takes more than a sandstorm to make Flora and me turn back,” Rebecca said. “And I don’t think the sheikh will do you any harm. He’s probably staring because he thinks you’re pretty. Your red hair is very unusual.”

Kate's exasperated sigh was loud. The servant's cot creaked and rustled as she thrashed in the dark, rolling over.

"I was thinking about the Israelites when we were riding today," Flora said. "It must have been so hard to trust God and keep walking through such desolate land. We know how their story ends and that they finally reached the Promised Land, but they had no idea what would happen next. They simply had to trust God and keep going."

Rebecca didn't know how her journey through the Sinai would end either—whether her errand would lead to success and a breakthrough with Timothy or spell the end of their romance. She bid the other women good-night again and settled down on her cot, trying to get comfortable. She thought about how far they already had come—the cross-country train ride from Chicago to New York; the steamship voyage to France; another steamer through the Mediterranean and down to Cairo where they were delayed several days while arranging to meet with the Archbishop of Sinai to get permission to visit the monastery. Her ability to converse with him in Greek had impressed him greatly, and he not only granted permission but even took time to pray for their protection from the hot, desert winds that blew in from the Sahara. He had been kind—but his prayers obviously hadn't changed God's mind about sending the wind.

While in Cairo, they had also hired the services of an agent, Mr. Farouk, to accompany them on their journey. He had purchased all their equipment, hired a cook, arranged for a camel caravan, and stockpiled enough food and drinking water for their entire forty-day expedition. Rebecca and Flora and their entourage then crossed the Gulf of Suez and met the Bedouin drivers and their animals. The shaggy, sun-browned men might have stepped right out of the pages of *The Arabian Nights*, covered from head to toe in white robes, with turbans wound around their heads and swords at their sides. After strapping

dozens of crates of live chickens and turkeys to the camels, they were on their way.

Rebecca knew it was outrageous for two unmarried women and their lady's maid to travel alone through such rugged terrain with only their young butler—the somber yet faithful Petersen—as an escort. Who knew what sort of man this Mr. Farouk would turn out to be? Not to mention the twelve Bedouin camel drivers and their sheikh, who had insisted on joining them, carrying an ancient, rusting rifle that he waved in the air dangerously from time to time. Rebecca, however, had learned not to care what people thought. As for her safety, God already knew when the end of her days would be. She had no reason to fear.

She did feel sorry for Petersen, though. He'd grown up on the streets of Chicago and had never ridden a horse, let alone a camel. He'd had a particularly difficult time staying comfortably seated these past two days, and she'd seen him rubbing his bottom whenever he dismounted. Neither sister had wished to subject Petersen to such discomfort, but he had insisted on coming along, sounding very biblical with his declaration that "wherever you go, I will go." Knowing how much Petersen distrusted Kate, Rebecca suspected he'd come along to protect them from her, rather than from pagan foreigners.

The wind howled on; the canvas thrummed. Rebecca pulled the blanket tightly around herself, seeking comfort more than warmth. What would it be like to have the man she loved sleeping beside her, curled together like spoons in a drawer, listening to the familiar rhythm of his breathing, feeling his heartbeat? She may never know. But whether Timothy was part of her future or not, Rebecca hoped that the discoveries she unearthed at Mount Sinai would make this long, perilous journey worthwhile in the end.

She fidgeted on the narrow cot, unable to get comfortable. Trying to sleep was hopeless, the shrieking wind and pelting

sand too unnerving. In spite of all her carefully made plans, Rebecca was, in this moment, helpless. Yet hadn't she been in danger before on some of her other travels? Perhaps nothing as deadly as this sandstorm, but frightening, nonetheless. She decided to travel back through her memories to the very beginning, when it was just Father, Flora, and her—and the elderly servants who'd cared for them, of course. If Rebecca truly was about to die, at least her final thoughts would be of the people she loved.

For as long as Rebecca could recall, Flora had been by her side—sister, best friend, confidante, and partner in adventures, great and small. . . .