



# Sarai

A Novel

JILL EILEEN SMITH

✧ WIVES of the PATRIARCHS ✧

❁ WIVES *of the* PATRIARCHS • BOOK 1 ❁

# Sarai

A Novel



JILL EILEEN SMITH

  
Revell

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2012 by Jill Eileen Smith

Published by Revell  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Jill Eileen, 1958–

Sarai : a novel / Jill Eileen Smith.

p. cm. — (Wives of the patriarchs ; bk. 1)

ISBN 978-0-8007-3429-9 (pbk.)

1. Sarah (Biblical matriarch)—Fiction. 2. Bible. O.T.—History of Biblical events—Fiction. 3. Women in the Bible—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3619.M58838S27 2012

813'.6—dc22

2011038065

Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearance of certain historical figures is therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Published in association with the Books & Such Literary Agency, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370, www.booksandsuch.biz.

12 13 14 15 16 17 18      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Prologue

UR, 2051 BC

Sarai glanced across the courtyard, catching Abram's gaze. His half smile and the twinkle in his eye warmed her more than the wine she had tasted at the start of the ceremony. Music drifted around them as the bridal couple—their nephew Lot and his new wife, Melah—took their seats on the bench beneath the canopy and accepted rich foods from the hands of the servants.

“This whole wedding is a disgrace, you know.” Sarai's sister-in-law Milcah stood at her elbow and leaned close to her ear. “Why her father agreed to the marriage after Lot had already humbled the girl . . . Though I suppose he didn't have much choice. Who else would want her after she'd already given in to Lot's charms?” Milcah batted at a fly, sending it away. “I can't imagine why Lot couldn't wait with such a one. It's not as though she's a beauty or a temptress. It seems like he could have done better.” The last words came out in a whisper as Milcah moved in close again.

Sarai turned from watching the bridal couple to meet Milcah's pinched gaze. “If it is true that a babe is already on the way, it is

better they marry.” She had wearied of the heated debate and shame Lot had brought down on her household, particularly on Abram.

“Abi Terah seems pleased with the arrangement.” Milcah touched Sarai’s shoulder and pointed toward their father. “Though his conditions did seem a little harsh toward Lot, while Melah came away already with child and married to a man who can never put her aside or take another. I might have given in to Nahor before our betrothal for such a promise.” She laughed at that, then shifted her ample bulk, bursting with child herself, to face Sarai once more.

Sarai stifled her hurt at the critical words, remembering her own wedding promises, hers and Abram’s. She smoothed imaginary wrinkles from her skirts and avoided Milcah’s perusing gaze.

“I see I have upset you.” Milcah patted Sarai’s arm. “Your time will come, Sarai. At least you can rest in knowing Abram loves you. If he didn’t, he might have broken his vow to you long ago.” She placed a protective hand over her middle and shook her head, her gaze pitying, though Sarai sensed, as she always did, a hint of arrogance in Milcah’s tone. The beautiful Sarai was barren. She’d become a fool. A laughingstock.

She clenched her jaw and held herself erect, lifting a jeweled hand to her throat. “Thank you, Milcah.” She forced a smile. “If you will excuse me, I must check on the food.” She glided away from the bench along the courtyard wall, skirted the crowds, and hurried into the house, the vows at her own wedding feast suddenly sharp in her ear.

“I promise never to take another wife,” Abram had said, his gaze full of love for only her.

“I promise to give you a child.” Sarai had gazed into his handsome face, her heart doing a little dance at having finally convinced her father to let them marry.

“I hold you, my son Abram and my daughter Sarai, to your

promises this day. If you, Sarai, do not fulfill your vow to my son, his vow to you is null.” Her father’s unwavering gaze had held her fast.

How easy such a promise had seemed then.

But after thirty-two years of marriage, she had yet to conceive. And here Melah was already with child even before her wedding day. She blinked back stinging tears. Conversations and laughter filtered through the open windows while a harpist played quiet music in the background. After the meal, there would be singing and dancing, and guests would remain until well past nightfall, only to return again on the morrow for several more days of feasting.

She rested her head against the cool limestone wall aligning the comfortable sitting room, unobserved by the servants as they rushed down the halls from the cooking rooms with platters piled high with food. She had no reason to be jealous. She was mistress of a wealthy estate, wife to one of Ur’s finest nobles, whose father had long held the king’s ear. A princess of Ur, if ever there was one.

But she could not stop the pain Milcah’s presence always evoked. Milcah already had one son who had weaned only three months before. She did not deserve another so soon.

“I thought I might find you here.” At Abram’s voice and his touch on her shoulder, she turned into his comforting embrace. “What’s wrong, dear one?”

Sarai released a troubled sigh and leaned back to better see his face. “Milcah.”

He nodded, but at his quizzical look, she knew he did not understand.

“She is flaunting her swollen belly, and I have no patience for her criticisms.”

“Ah,” he said, pulling her close again. “Milcah is jealous of your beauty, dear wife. She has nothing else to flaunt.” He patted her back, but the action did not soothe.

“I would rather have a child than beauty.” The words were a

mere breath against his chest, but when his hands stilled, she knew he'd heard.

"And I would rather have you just as you are." He held her at arm's length, his gaze searching. "Do not trouble yourself or deny joy to others, dear one. You have nothing to fear."

She looked into his handsome face and cupped his bearded cheek with her hand. He still carried the vigor of one much younger, and she rested in his strength as he held her. "But I do fear, dear husband. I fear I have failed to give you what you most deserve. Perhaps if I had been as Melah, you would already have a son."

"I deserve nothing, Sarai. What I possess is only a gift. Adonai will give what He will." He lifted her chin to look into her face. "Lot will have to live with his errors the rest of his days. Trust me in this, Sarai. A man who takes a woman before the proper time lives with long regrets, whether he realizes it or not."

"Do you think Lot regrets marrying Melah?" she whispered. Abram often had Lot's ear, and Abram had given the younger man a scathing lecture after the truth had come out.

"Lot is too brash and too charming, though he did repent of his act and agree to the marriage. But then, Father gave him no choice. He would have lost any inheritance if he had refused. Father has his honor."

"Lot should have had his own." Sarai looked into her husband's loving gaze, grateful all over again for such a man. A man whose character surpassed most men in the city, even those in her own family. A man who had earned her devotion and her respect.

Abram bent to give her a gentle kiss. "Come, sit with me at the feast. You need not endure Milcah's pity on such a day."

Tears rose again at his kindness, at how astute he could be to her emotions. He brushed the tears from her cheeks and slipped her hand in his. "Do not fear, Sarai. In His time, Adonai will give us a son. And if He does not, we will discuss what to do about it then."

She nodded, following his lead as he guided her back through the house to the courtyard. But as the music played around her and the well-wishers shouted blessings of fertility to the bride and groom as they entered the sparkling bridal tent, Sarai could not stop the worry or the fear.

How flippantly she had promised her husband a child in order to convince her father to give her to Abram.

She did not know how much that vow would cost her then.

And how impossible it all was now.

## Part

# 1



Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.

Genesis 11:27–30

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. . . ."

So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him.

Genesis 12:1, 4

# 1

## FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

Sarai looked up at the great ziggurat of Nannar and took a step backward, overwhelmed as she always was at the enormity of the temple to Ur's patron god. The steps rising upward, forever upward, drew her gaze to the triangular peak, its god's-eye view gazing down at her, watching. She shivered, certain the feeling came from more than the soft breeze blowing down from the north.

Abram would not approve of her being here. Even protected by her male slaves and accompanied by her maid, Lila, her niece Melah, and her servants, Abram would still consider Ur unsafe for his beautiful wife. And if he knew her reason . . .

Why had she come?

"Did you bring the likeness?" Melah stopped on the cobbled street and turned to look at her. Her niece's face, still rosy with the freshness of youth yet well tanned by the sun, held a glint of excitement.

"It's here." Sarai patted the pouch at her side, tucked into the pocket of her robe. "But I still don't see what good this will do."

The image was carved of olive wood, a pregnant likeness of Sarai with crescent moons—symbols of the god—painted into the

clothing designs. But could the gods really give Sarai the child she craved or the son Melah longed for—one who would live? While Abram’s brother’s sons lined his table like olive plants sprung up beneath an ancient flowering tree, Abram’s own table stood quiet, empty.

Sarai would sacrifice her beauty to fill that void, to give Abram a son.

Melah frowned, crossed her arms over her chest. “It won’t do any good at all if you don’t believe, Sarai.” Her gaze dropped to Sarai’s flat stomach. “Obviously you need help.”

“Obviously.” She couldn’t keep the sharpness or the sarcasm from her tone, especially in front of this upstart niece, or the pang of guilt and sadness from piercing her heart.

“Nevertheless, you should have done this years ago.” Melah’s patronizing tone made Sarai bristle. “You can’t ask others to do the sacrificing and petitioning for you. The goddess wants your devotion. If you want a child, you must worship the mother goddess. For even Inana came by her fertile power through her mother Ningal. You’ve known this since childhood.” Melah turned, then looked back again. “Of course, if you’d prefer Inana’s fertility rites . . .” She smirked as though the thought amused her, whether because she disdained Abram’s faith or because she could not imagine Sarai submitting to Inana’s sexual practices. Probably both, considering Melah’s blatant interest in the love goddess and her impassioned ways.

Sarai lifted her chin and tilted her gaze away from Melah. She nodded to her slaves and continued around the ziggurat to the streets behind until she came upon the courtyard fencing in Ningal’s temple. Columns stood on either side of the gate with steps leading to two great, sculpted doors, where bulls carved into the wood gave silent otherworldly protection to all who dwelled therein. Incense, the breath of the gods, burned spicy-sweet in tall sconces

on either side of the doors, where real guards in bronze helmets and brass greaves held tall spears at attention. From their vantage point, they saw every movement in the courtyard.

Sarai stared at the scene, taking in the gleaming gilded columns. The dappled light made the bulls appear to move, their horns bent forward as though to strike. The temple seemed to pulse with its own breath, making Sarai's catch in her throat. Her sandals felt suddenly weighted, stuck to the stones like dried mud to baked bricks.

She shouldn't be here.

"Are you ready?"

Sarai slipped a hand over the image in her pocket and slowly turned to look at her niece, the wooden image burning the flesh of her palm as though heated by the sun's sharp rays. Had Ningal's son Utu come to block their path? The gods were always bickering over one thing or another. Perhaps the sun god did not want them to pay homage to his mother. And what if Melah was right? Inana was the goddess of love. Was she the one who could answer Sarai's prayers for a child? But the rituals involved . . .

She shook her head, releasing her grip on the image and letting the pouch hang from the belt at her side. Never! She would not resort to such practices, even if she paid someone else to do them for her. Still, Ningal did not exact such a cost.

She looked at Melah. "I . . ." She what? Words would not form. What did she want but a child? But was this the best way?

"I didn't come all this way to have you change your mind on me, Sarai. Do you want to keep your vow to Abram or not?" Melah flicked a gaze in Lila's direction. "Or perhaps you should just give him your maid and be done with it." Her scowl drew her narrow eyes into slits, making her forty-plus years look far older than Sarai did at twenty years her senior.

"Abram wouldn't hear of such a thing." She lifted her chin, but the action was more to put Melah in her place than to assert her

confidence. If Abram knew where she stood right now, what she was about to do . . . might he take another wife? She glanced at Lila, who had become more like a daughter than a maid to her. Abram would never agree to such a thing.

The sundial in the courtyard moved a notch, and Sarai glanced at the sky. Clouds skimmed the surface of blue, pushed along by the increasing breeze. She braced herself, her hand closing over the pouch with the image once more. She must act, one way or the other.

“Well?” Melah tapped an impatient foot, hands on her ample hips. “Do you have the coins? Are you going to do this, or did I waste my whole afternoon, not to mention the months it has taken to convince you I’m right?” She gave Sarai a pointed stare, then turned to walk toward the temple doors. Melah would offer a sacrifice whether Sarai did so or not, so the day really wasn’t as wasted as she’d like Sarai to believe.

Sarai stifled a smile. Despite Melah’s hasty marriage to Lot and the subsequent loss of their firstborn, Sarai had come to accept Melah, even carried some measure of affection for her, though she could be as ornery as a she-goat sometimes. Both Melah and Milcah believed in Ningal and Inana and worshiped frequently at one or both temples. Both women had borne children, though in Melah’s case only one infant daughter still lived.

The breeze brought the scent of incense toward her, and the chant of worshipers clustered to her right broke into her thoughts, sealing her decision. She lifted the image from the pouch and stared at its pregnant likeness. Once she paid the hefty sacrifice—coins she had taken from the dowry her father had given her years before—the priestess would take the image, set it before the goddess, and offer prayers on her behalf until the new moon waned. Time enough and, hopefully, prayers enough to invoke the goddess’s favor and grant her a son.

She drew in a slow breath, willing courage into her bones. She

could do this. Her promise to Abram was at stake, and time was not in her favor. She had to do something, anything to procure a child. If that meant a sacrifice to the mother goddess, despite Abram's certain disapproval, she had to take the risk.



Abram scanned the distant copse of trees and brambles for some sign of Sarai's favorite ram, the one bent on straying despite Abram's attempts to teach it otherwise. Sarai would say the ram followed the same instinct born in men, and her piercing gaze would remind him of his youth and his own selfish ways. He scowled. Later he would chuckle over such thoughts, but now he was faced with the task of finding the animal.

Using his staff to guide his steps, he moved from beneath the shade of a spreading oak, speaking softly so as not to alarm the ewes still grazing nearby. On the hill opposite the meadow where his flock grazed, his nephew Lot played a melancholy tune on a reed flute, the sound carrying to Abram. He almost envied the younger man's ability, yet felt a measure of pride that his sheep knew his voice above all others, even the flat sounds of his tuneless singing. One young ewe in particular stayed close, like a daughter. He plucked at his beard and gave in to a rueful smile. Perhaps she was as tone-deaf as he.

The young ewe followed him now, and he waited a moment before picking his way forward again. When she reached his side, he picked her up and placed her over his shoulders. Clouds blocked the sun as he approached the ridge, and a sudden breeze cooled the skin on his face. An unexpected shiver worked through him as he neared the brambles, and he slowed, a feeling of uncertainty prickling the hairs on his arms. He squinted, raising a hand to his eyes, his grip tightening on his staff.

He stopped and listened, shifting the lamb's weight, then took

several more cautious steps forward, at last spying the ram caught by its thick wool among the thorns, its pitiful cry touching Abram's heart. The sky darkened further, and a chill wind brushed his face. He glanced heavenward, a sense of foreboding filling him. There had been no sign of a storm that morning, but if one was upon them now, he had best make quick work of releasing the ram and hurry back to the rest of the flock, which would not know where to go to find shelter without his leading.

Spurred by this sudden urgency, he set the ewe on the ground near a patch of grass and pushed aside the brambles with his staff to get closer to the ram. "And how did you expect to get yourself out once you got into these thorns?" he asked the animal, gentling his voice above its bleating. Thorns gripped his robe, but he ignored the ripping sound of the fabric as he worked to disentangle the animal's wool. "There, there," he soothed. But the ram kicked and fought Abram's efforts, wedging himself in worse than before.

Sweat poured down Abram's back as he worked the hook of his staff under the animal's belly. The wind picked up, the air suddenly heavy and damp. His arms ached from the strain as he finally wrapped the hook of the staff around the animal's body well enough to wrench it free, briars and all.

When they were a few paces away, Abram knelt beside the ram and picked the last of the briars from his wool, then took the horn strapped to his side and poured oil over the scratches, rubbing it into the animal's skin. The ram stood still, apparently sufficiently chastised. Abram looked from the ram to the ewe. To mate the two would bring sturdy, unblemished offspring. No others in his flock could compare to these specimens of perfection, though he knew from experience that producing young would not change the ram's behavior.

Then again, would producing an heir change him?

His jaw tightened at the thought. It wasn't his fault Sarai had

been barren all these years. They'd been the perfect couple from the start, though now, after years of her barrenness, his brother and nephew did not glance at Abram with the same hint of jealousy because of his beautiful wife. At least their wives had borne them sons, though Lot's had not lived long enough to tell of it.

He glanced at the two animals beside him, noting their suddenly rigid stance, the wary looks in their eyes. He looked at the sky, wondering at the change, at the unexpected stillness. Light now seeped from beneath the gray clouds, sending shafts of blazing white in all directions. The wind picked up again, the breeze stiff yet warm. Strange.

Definitely time to head back.

He dug his staff into the earth and pushed to his feet, ready to call the animals to follow, when a loud rumble like thunder made him pause. The clouds drew together as he watched, dark and heavy again. Fear tingled his spine.

He darted a look in all directions. Nothing moved. Even the wind had stilled, and Lot's flute no longer filled the silence. He glanced at the two animals, but they too had stilled, their heads bent to the grass but their mouths closed, unmoving.

"Abram!"

A chill worked through him. He glanced around again, but there was no one in sight. Was he hearing things?

"Abram!"

The voice, louder, more insistent, and powerful, reached into the pit of his soul, stirring deep fear inside of him. He sank to his knees and put his face to the dirt.

"Here I am," he choked out, his own voice weak in comparison.

"Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Abram shuddered at the words, unable to respond. *Who are you?* But he couldn't utter the question. Deep down, he knew exactly who spoke to him. Only Adonai Elohim, the Lord, the Mighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, could make a man tremble in fear at His voice. Only a mighty Creator could cause the breeze to still and make the sky ominous and foreboding. Only a great Creator could speak such words and make a man know they were truth.

*I will do as You ask*, he said in his heart, certain his voice would not hold the words steady. At his response, the breeze returned. Abram slowly lifted his head. The animals resumed nibbling the grasses as though nothing had happened. Abram pushed himself to his knees, shaking, but one glance around him told him nothing had changed. The threat of the storm had passed, and in its place an inviting landscape and sunny, cloudless skies greeted him.

Had he heard correctly? It had all happened so fast. But in his spirit, he knew. He must take Sarai and leave Ur and follow the Lord to wherever He might lead. Where would He lead them?

But Abram didn't need to know that yet. He needed only to obey.

He looked back at the two animals, perfect in body but opposite in spirit. One obedient and loyal, the other rebellious and wayward. He would not be like the rebellious ram. He would obey his Creator.

Which meant he would sacrifice all he had to do so—his family inheritance, his home, his relatives, his friends . . . his best.

He stood, still unsteady, his gaze resting on the animals now looking at him with wide, trusting eyes. He must build an altar and make a burnt offering to the Lord. His heart constricted with his decision. One of them must die in the sacrifice.



Sarai shivered at the sudden shift in the breeze. Red dust coated the tanned leather of her sandals as she crossed further into the courtyard toward the imposing doors of the goddess's temple.

Melah moved ahead of her to approach the guards who stood blocking the way. Sarai waited, motionless, as Melah dropped her coins into a wooden tithing box inlaid with shells and lapis lazuli set in crescent designs.

Behind Melah, her five serving girls bowed low, facing the temple but not moving to enter. Melah would not have paid their way, and few slaves could afford such a luxury as to enter the chambers of the gods. To Sarai's left, the sonorous chant of the Ningal singers' tuneless melody and the heady incense coming from the tall cones on either side of the ornate door nearly turned her stomach.

*The gods of our people are idols, Sarai. There is only one Maker.*

She whirled about, Abram's voice loud in her ear. But no. His words were a memory. She had heard them often enough to know better than to be here. She caught sight of her slaves still standing guard at her back, their faces somber, dark as flint. Abram's One God, El Echad, would not dwell in such temples built with human hands. Hadn't she watched the construction of the many projects the king had undertaken since her early childhood? Hundreds of men had slaved to build Nannar-Sin's giant ziggurat, and more besides to add palaces and temples to shadow its sprawling court. Would the One God need such a temple?

The breeze swirled about her in a sudden gust, lifting the filmy gauze and jewels from her headdress. She must not do this.

The carved image pressed heavily against her hip, and the precious coins from her dowry seemed suddenly too important to waste on such uncertainty. She closed her eyes, seeing Abram's disapproval, wanting desperately to please him. Would he take another wife as Melah had suggested?

Oh, but why could she not bear a child?

The familiar ache settled in her middle, and she wavered, staring up at the imposing temple to Ningal, wondering if the goddess truly had the power Melah had worked so hard to convince her of.

If Sarai did not do this, if she did not ask, would she be throwing away her last chance? She'd been barren for so long. Did this goddess have the power to undo her past and make her whole before it was too late?

The chants grew louder as Melah disappeared behind the yawning doors into the mouth of the goddess. Dark clouds blotted the sun. Was Ningal's son Utu hiding his warmth, displeased with her uncertainty? Or had El Echad sent the clouds and the wind to drive her away?

"Oh, Abram, what should I do?" The words vanished in the thump of the chanters' drum, but the act of speaking them spurred her to move.

She must flee.

Her feet suddenly loosed from their immobility, Sarai spun about, picked up her skirts, and rushed through the streets of Ur, fear making her legs spring with the gait of youth long forgotten. She would run home to Abram and his God and forget this day had ever happened. She would renounce all devotion to Nannar-Sin and Ningal and their offspring of gods.

But as she slowed at the outskirts of Ur's redbrick walls, waiting for Lila to catch up to her, a new thought struck hard. What if her visit today had already offended Abram's God? Was El Echad greater than the mother goddess that He could grant a child? If she had offended him, what would Abram say? What could she do?

She walked with weighted steps the rest of the way home.

## 2

Abram laid his staff on the ground and walked nearer the edge of the cliff, picked up a heavy rock, and carted it back to the grassy knoll. His heart ached with each footfall, as each rock placed on top of the other brought him one step closer to killing the animal and lighting the sacrifice. Which animal should he offer? His favorite or Sarai's? The good ewe or the rebellious ram?

The thoughts tormented him as he put the last rock in place and found kindling to lay on top of the stones. Sacrifices were not new to him. His father, Terah, had sacrificed animals, among other things, to the gods of Ur. And his brother Haran had lost a bet and been forced by the king to sacrifice a son as a substitute for the king's life—a yearly sacrifice required by the gods to ensure the land's fertility. Surely Haran's death soon after came from his grief over such an act.

Abram shuddered at the thought. The idea that a man could be killed and brought back to life was pure myth, a story the people believed the gods required and could do. But not once had a sacrificed man returned to walk the earth again.

The sun or moon held no such power. And Adonai Elohim had

not required such sacrifice of men. An animal's blood, not a son's, must be shed.

The thought strengthened his resolve, and Abram knew he could not put off what he planned to do, what he needed to do. He walked away from the altar, back to the two animals. He could go to his flock still visible in the distance and choose another, one less perfect. He could almost hear Lot's voice making the suggestion. His practical nephew would find a way out of such a difficult choice. And it would surely make Abram feel less torn—and make telling Sarai less painful.

But the memory of that other voice still resonated in his soul. Adonai had not asked him to do this, but how could he start a journey without showing his willingness to obey his God, or take one step forward without repentance for his own rebellious ways?

He placed a hand over his chest and looked from the two perfect animals to the heavens. He would sacrifice the one most like himself. The one who represented his own penchant for straying. Decision made, he pulled a dagger from his side and slit the animal's throat, then cut it up, burned its flesh on the altar, and worshiped.



Sarai stood at the threshold between the food preparation area and the courtyard of her home, hands fidgeting with her sash, gaze darting between the servants and the distant path. Abram should have been home by now. Scents of onion and garlic mingled with the aroma of roasting fowl, filling the house. Clanking bowls and the chatter of servants, so familiar this time of day, helped dispel the memories of her afternoon. An afternoon she would not soon forget, whose regret still lingered with each beat of her heart.

She patted her thigh where the carved image had lain in its pouch at her side, reminding herself that she was free of it now. She had tossed the accursed thing into the fire the moment she'd returned

home, vowing never to go near a foreign temple again. Why then did she still feel so restless and carry such a weight of guilt?

Annoyed with herself, she turned to observe the servants at work preparing the evening repast. A distant *clop-hobble*, the distinct sound of her father using his walking stick, grew closer. He appeared at the threshold of the cooking rooms.

“Late again, is he?” Terah moved a step back toward the hall and motioned for her to follow him into the courtyard. He slowly lowered his body to the stone bench and patted the seat beside him. “Sit, daughter. You must not worry so. He’ll come.”

“Of course he will.” Sarai walked to the edge of the court and peered down the path Abram always took from the sheep pens, then joined her father. “One of the animals must have gotten lost again, or he and Lot got to talking.” Her nephew could outtalk a woman and often engaged Abram in conversation about El Echad, the One God. But the more likely scenario was that a lamb had gotten caught in brambles or stolen from the flock by a lion or a fox. In his quest to find it, Abram might not show up until nightfall.

She toyed with a smile, seeing in her mind’s eye her strong husband leading his sheep, rescuing the lost, disciplining the wayward. Her favorite lambs had always been the ones bent on straying. Perhaps they reminded her of Abram’s younger days before his visit with their ancestor Eber when he learned of El Echad. And before she had tamed his restless spirit after he took her to wife.

“What are you smiling at, Sarai? Do you see him coming?”

She had almost forgotten her father’s presence. She looked again at the path, and indeed, he was coming toward her, a lamb draped across his shoulders. No doubt his favorite ewe. He treated the animal like a pet, even letting it eat at their table. Another reminder of how much he needed sons.

The thought darkened her spirit, the image of the temple to the goddess mocking her. But she wouldn’t think of it now.

She turned to face her father. “He is coming.” She patted his knee, then stood, lifted her skirts, and hurried through the gate to meet Abram on the path.

She stopped a few paces from him, shaken by the intense look on his face. “What is it?” Her jeweled hand moved to her throat, brushing the soft fabric of her robe. “Something has happened. Tell me, please.”

Abram stood looking down at her, his eyes bright. He set the lamb on the ground beside him, patted its head, then took Sarai’s hands in his. “Adonai Elohim spoke to me today.” A look of awe and humility filled his bearded face, and she longed to cup his cheek with her hand to somehow transfer the joy in his eyes to hers.

“How do you know? Did he speak aloud?” A tremor passed through her. She knew this God of Abram’s was real, and He terrified her.

Abram nodded, tightening his grip on her hands, his dark eyes ablaze with excitement. “He called my name. He told me to leave my country, my family, and my father’s household and go to a land He would show me, that He will make my name great and make me into a great nation, and that in me all of the families of the earth will be blessed. He promised to bless those who bless me and curse those who curse me.” His look bored into hers, then softened. He released one hand and cupped her cheek. “To make me a great nation means He will have to give me a son, Sarai. We will have a child yet. Adonai promised.”

Sarai’s stomach dipped as he drew her into his arms. She blinked away the sting of tears, grateful beyond words that she had not heeded Melah’s advice, had run from the gods of her people. Abram’s God would provide him an heir. She would bear a child after all!

She felt Abram’s hand rubbing circles along her back. “Will you come with me, Sarai?” He whispered the question as though he were suddenly uncertain.

She pulled back from his embrace and touched his face. “Of course, dear husband. I am bound to you in all ways. Where would I be without you?” She smiled at him, pleased to see the joy return to his gaze.

He bent his head and kissed her, a passionate, lingering kiss that awakened her senses. Perhaps this God would indeed grant her a son if Abram’s sudden ardent affection were any indication.

She giggled at her own humorous thoughts as Abram lifted his mouth from hers. “Supper awaits you, my lord, unless you were planning to help Adonai’s promise come to pass before you fill your belly.”

His stomach rumbled in response, and they both laughed. He patted his middle even as he wrapped one arm around her waist. “You do tempt me, dear wife,” he whispered, nuzzling her ear.

She laughed lightly again, then noticed their father slowly coming toward them. “I don’t think our father will wait for us.” She kissed his cheek. “He’s put off eating, waiting for you, and the food is past ready. But of course, he didn’t know you were so unexpectedly detained.”

She took two steps forward, expecting Abram to join her. When his feet didn’t move, she halted, not wishing to depart his embrace. Her mind was still reeling with all that had happened. Was it true? Would she indeed bear a son of the promise?

“The voice did not detain me long. The sacrifice did.” Abram’s words carried tenderness. And perhaps a hint of regret?

She faced him again, her back to their father. “What sacrifice? Did your God require a sacrifice greater than the one He has already requested? Isn’t it enough to leave our family, our father, our inheritance, our friends? What more could El Echad want?”

Abram cupped her cheek again, studying her, then his gaze skipped to some place behind her. “Blood sacrifice was handed down from the days of Noah, to make atonement for our sins.

Our ancestors Eber and Nahor both taught this to me, though our father has not done so. Adonai Elohim did not ask it of me, but I knew in my spirit it was the right thing to do. I sacrificed one of the rams to Him.”

Sarai looked away, her gaze catching a glimpse of Abram’s pet, the spotless lamb he favored. There were only a few perfect sheep in the flock, and even fewer rams. The only spotless one she knew of . . . She looked into his face again, surprised when his gaze met hers so intensely.

“Which ram?” She needed to know. Yet she already did.

He took her hand in his and turned her away, walking them both toward Terah.

She forced him to stop. “Which one, my lord? You must tell me if I’m to follow you.”

His gaze darkened ever so slightly. “Did you not just tell me you were bound to me in all ways? Following me should have nothing to do with which ram bore the sacrifice.”

She recoiled at his tone, suddenly irritated that he should use her own vows against her. He didn’t have to remind her. Didn’t she always obey his commands? Didn’t she even today obey when she didn’t sacrifice to the goddess? She didn’t need his reminder. She needed him to tell her he had chosen a ram she didn’t care for in the least. Not one she fancied.

“I chose the one most like me,” he said at last. “There were only two choices, and he represented my sins better than the other one.”

“So you would spare your favorite and sacrifice mine.” The words came out more bitter than she’d expected. Selfish male! What man had ever looked out for a woman above himself? She turned away from him, about to stalk off.

He caught her arm. “Sarai.” His voice, both gentle and commanding, beckoned her to pause. She let him slowly turn her to face him. He grasped both her hands in his again. “I saved this

one”—he glanced at his pet, then looked back at her—“for you. If we are to seek the Lord’s favor, we must both offer Him our best. They will both shed their blood to cover our sins. I will take you to the altar first thing in the morning.”

His words pierced her conscience, humbling her. She lowered her gaze, undone. “I’m sorry, my lord. I’ve misjudged you.”

He tipped her chin toward him. “It is an honest misjudging. We must each part with everything we love. Except each other.” He kissed her again, then took her hand and called to the ewe who would give her life for Sarai in the morning.