

OUT FROM EGYPT · 3

WINGS
of the
WIND

CONNILYN COSSETTE



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For Juli

A true sister-of-the-heart
with a gift for asking the right questions
and a passion for setting captives free.
Your encouragement, support,
and vision are invaluable to me.



*I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon
those who sit in darkness.*

—Isaiah 42:6–7

When the Canaanite king of Arad, who lived in the Negev, heard that Israel was coming along the road to Atharim, he attacked the Israelites and captured some of them. Then Israel made this vow to the Lord: “If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities.”

Numbers 21:1–2

1

ALANAH

14 NISSAN

1407 BC

NEGEV DESERT

Forging through the teeming mass of Canaanite soldiers in this vast army camp, I'd never felt more alone. A tendril of hair tickled the side of my neck and I jammed the errant strand under my bronze helmet, hoping no one had glimpsed the flash of red against my shoulder. The scaled armor I wore, heavy as it was, disguised my form to good effect. If I was vigilant to keep my guard raised, no one would ever know a woman walked among them until they found my body on the battlefield tomorrow.

Careful to widen my stance and tread with a heavier step, I ran my brother's name through my mind again and again, then repeated it under my breath for good measure. If I was questioned, the name *Davash* must spring easily to my lips,

instead of my own. Any hesitation and there would be suspicion. I could not afford suspicion.

My build, my hands, or the pitch of my voice could reveal my gender in the span of a breath. When it happened—for surely it would happen at some point—it must be after my bow took its revenge. My makeshift beard, a thin layer of dirt smudged across my cheeks and chin, had begun to peel and itch, but evening shadows would aid my deception.

Drunken laughter swirled around the sea of black tents, mixing with the bray of horses and clanging of weapons meeting in practice, a wild cacophony that only grew louder as twilight advanced. Perhaps hiding in plain sight would be easier than I'd expected.

Beneath my brother's gray wool tunic, a copper amulet hung from a leather strip around my neck. The gift from my father depicted a raised-relief image of the warrior goddess Anat, battle axe and spear in hand, and had inspired the courage I needed to leave my village when the king of Arad again called for defenders of his lands. Although I had little respect for any deity, the weight of the cool metal against my skin and the reminder of my family bolstered my resolve. The quiver slung over my shoulder was full, each arrow tipped with vengeance. I had no delusions that I would live through the battle tomorrow, but when the arrows I had made with my own hands found Hebrew flesh, I would finally have satisfaction for the deaths of my father and my three brothers.

Amorites and Jebusites, and even some Moabites and Edomites, numbered among this fierce but fragile coalition. Tribal grudges had been set aside to come together against the swarm of Hebrews invading our lands.

Crude language tossed across campfires had little effect on me, for I had grown up with three older brothers. But the lisp of female voices floating through flimsy tent walls soured my

stomach. Lonely soldiers with extra war rations made for good business, so women who traded in their own flesh were never far from the battlefield. The seductive laughter and brazen display of their wares made my skin crawl. I would rather die than number among them—in fact, I planned on it.

A group of men huddled around a fire at the edge of camp, slapping backs and comparing weapons. I slipped behind them and settled near a boulder, breathing easier as shadows deepened and night advanced.

Days of trudging through the desert to meet the army in this valley had wreaked havoc on my body. Wounded skin flamed and throbbed where my sandals had stripped my heels and ankles raw during the long walk across blazing sand and stone. I closed my eyes and breathed steady, imagining the pain lessened with every slow exhale.

Rich smoke emanated from the cookfires and the meat of prebattle offerings to the gods. To distance myself from my empty stomach's violent reaction to the smell, I focused on the conversations around me and attempted to lift useful details from the overlapping chatter. Perhaps if I feigned sleep well enough, no one would take notice and I would be rewarded with information on tomorrow's strategy—and our enemy.

A slurred voice rose above the rest. "How many of those Hebrews did we take last month?"

"Five hundred, at least. Frightened little hares, all of them," a gruff voice responded.

Someone else snorted. "The rest of them will scatter tomorrow. And any that don't will be made into girls by my dagger."

Raucous laughter erupted, startling my eyes open. I squeezed them shut before anyone noticed or questioned me. Drunk as they were, if I answered with my own voice, I would be on my back in one of those tents within moments. Would I have the

courage to grab the dagger at my hip and plunge it into my heart?

The slurred voice rose to the top again. “You seen their women? They worth keeping?”

Lewd comments followed, assaulting my ears and curling my insides. My brothers, much as I admired them, had been no different than these soldiers—coarse and savage with their enemies. No wonder they had found such pleasure in war. It was a surprise they’d survived long enough to be murdered by the Hebrews.

The name of the hated invaders tasted bitter, even in my mind. I swallowed hard and imagined loading my first arrow and letting it fly toward the faceless intruders who had stolen everything from me. I’d heard the stories of the slaves who’d thwarted Pharaoh nearly forty years ago, as well as the rumors that their sights were set on Canaan. Fools. They would be crushed. Decimated. And I would ensure that I killed my fair share of them before my blood soaked the sands tomorrow.

Sour, wine-laden breath suddenly filled my senses, and a voice was in my ear. “How ’bout you, little man? You going to keep a couple Hebrew fillies for yourself? Even a young one’s got needs? Eh?”

There was no time to hesitate. Grabbing for his throat, I dug my fingers deep into his windpipe and emptied the depth of my hate and fear into my voice. “I. Am. Trying. To. Sleep.”

He was twice my size, built like a bull, and thankfully almost gone with drink. His black eyes went wide. Even through his haze, he must have seen something in my expression that gave him pause. He stood, mumbled a curse, and staggered out of the circle of firelight.

I tensed my body. *Do not tremble. Confidence. Swagger. Be Davash.*

Rising, I ignored the myriad eyes on me and stomped away.

But in the blackness between campfires, my breath came fast and my body vibrated like a discharged bowstring. I should have stayed away until morning. Why had I risked discovery? Skirting clusters of tents and the glow of fires, I kept my head down and my hand on my dagger hilt.

The sharp-ridged hills around this valley were shod with lime shale, too noisy to climb even with my well-practiced light step. A river of stones would clatter down if I attempted it in the dark.

A tent, butted up against the hill, stood deep in shadow. I slid behind it, silently pressing my body into the gap between the tent and the limestone behind. There was only enough room to lay with my leather satchel beneath my helmeted head and my bow and quiver against my back. Sleeping in armor would be uncomfortable, but necessary.

My mind touched on the faces of each of my brothers as they'd left our village to head off the invaders. Zealous to protect our farm after reports that the Hebrews were moving north, my father and brothers had heeded the call from the king of Arad to band together and go on the offensive. They'd left, more than confident they would return and sure that a horde of slaves wandering aimlessly in the wilderness would have no chance against the united warrior tribes of Canaan.

And yet, here I lay, a woman alone in the middle of this immense army, preparing to finish what the men of my family had started. Or, at the least, to meet them in death. Curling in on myself, I rubbed my thumb over the four jagged wounds on my wrist as I braced against the numbing cold and the howling emptiness, and forced sleep.

Morning could not come fast enough—even if it was to be the last dawn I would see with earthly eyes.