

OUT FROM EGYPT · 1

COUNTED
With the
STARS

CONNILYN COSSETTE



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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

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To Chad, whose sacrificial love makes this possible

To Collin and Corrianna, my most precious gifts

And to my *Abba*, Yahweh, who opens my eyes



PROLOGUE

20TH DAY OF AKHET
SEASON OF INUNDATION
1448 BC

*M*y sandals have not crossed this threshold since I was ten.

Inhaling, I focused on the Eye of Horus woven into the papyrus mat beneath my feet. After summoning an infusion of courage from its steady gaze, I lifted my chin and entered my father's chambers.

My father's braided wig lay on his desk, as if flung aside without a thought for his usual meticulous appearance. He stood with his back to me, studying a document with such intensity that my quiet entrance had gone unnoticed. Did I imagine that his hand trembled?

Intuition fluttered in my chest. Never had I seen my father so unraveled.

Appointed with vibrant tapestries and a gilded sleeping couch fit for Pharaoh, this room resurrected a long-forgotten memory

of sitting beside my father as he studied trade reports and his warm hand enveloping mine.

Hoping to swallow the quiver in my voice, I cleared my throat. “Father, you sent for me?”

He startled but did not turn as he spoke. “Yes, Kiya. Come in.” Scratching at the silver stubble on his head with one hand, he continued examining the document in silence.

Fidgeting with the beaded shawl I had just purchased in the market, I stroked the embroidered ibises and the silver beads that twinkled like stars along the hem. I had also been considering a lyre at a musician’s stall. Roses scrolled down the body of the instrument, the petals so lifelike I could almost inhale their delicate fragrance. But before I could make any offer, Yuny, my father’s servant, had skidded to a stop in front of me. His chest heaved from exertion as he repeated a curious demand from my father that I return home in haste. The stricken look on the man’s wrinkled face had caused me to abandon the lyre and rush back to the villa.

My sandals, although crafted from the finest kid-leather, had not been designed for running, so now blisters plagued the sides of my feet and between my toes. Surveying the room for somewhere to sit and ease the pain, I was surprised to see my father’s friend, Shefu, on a chair in the corner.

Shefu’s children and I had played together when we were young, and we were frequent guests at his wife’s extravagant banquets, but I had never spoken with him. A wealthy businessman, he was very tall and quite handsome, even with the touch of gray at his temples. He seemed quiet and kind—standing in sharp contrast to his wife, whom my mother avoided whenever possible.

I attempted to catch his eye and offer a smile, but his gaze was locked on the floor, and he gripped the ebony armrests with his long fingers, knuckles white.

Were he and my father discussing exports? Arguing? My father had seemed distracted for the past few days and had been even more distant than usual when he'd returned from a trip north to Avaris. But why would I be called in during a business negotiation?

"Kiya . . ." My father paused, placing the document face-down on the desk. He sat on a nearby chair, giving me the faint impression that he was sinking into the tiled floor. He gazed at his palms, as if searching there for words.

"What is it, Father? Is it Akhum? Have you heard something?" My pulse began to thrum with concern for my betrothed, who was away on a military expedition.

"No, it's not Akhum." He dragged in a quivering breath. His eyes flicked to mine but then away, as if he was afraid to meet my curious gaze.

"Shefu—" He raked his fingers across his scalp. "Shefu is here . . . to take you with him."

Panic rose in my throat as I tried to decipher his statement. "Take me where?" I looked back and forth between the two men, but neither of them would meet my eye.

My stomach hollowed, and alarm screeched in my brain. "Father? Tell me. Where is Shefu taking me?"

After a few agonizing moments of silence, my father's words broke free, flooding out in a rush. "I am ruined. My boats, all of them, sank in the Northern Sea. I did all that I could to avoid this. But everything—" He rubbed the back of his neck and swallowed hard. "Everything we own will be auctioned off to pay my obligations. I owe Shefu for the five boats I purchased last year, among other things . . ."

My father looked me straight in the eye for the first time in years. "This is the only way. To protect your mother, and Jumo, from being sold as well. I have no choice."

A blur of colors and a torrent of swirling sounds met my

senses. I staggered backward, shaking my head, blinking away the cloud of confusion that threatened my sight.

My hip knocked into a marble-topped shrine table near the doorway, causing a large cow-headed carving of Hathor to tip. She fell, clanking into another idol, which toppled into another, which in turn knocked a golden image of Ra onto the stone floor, his sun-crowned head splitting from his body and his hooked scepter scattering into pieces. The other statues followed suit, until not one god stood intact. Shards and splinters littered the tiles.

I turned from the tragedy, meaning to run, but the truth crashed over me like a wave, and my knees gave way. Arms over my head, I called for my mother, over and over, through choking sobs.

But it was Salima, my handmaid, who lifted me from the floor, her dark eyes pooling with tears, and led me back to my own room by the hand.

She removed my wig, soaked through with sweat from our excursion to the market that morning. Then she washed my face and head with cool water she had retrieved from the Nile long before I had awakened.

After she dressed me in a shift woven from fine linen but simple in design, and reapplied my kohl, Salima placed her warm brown hands on either side of my face.

Since my seventh year, Salima had bathed me, groomed me, applied kohl to my eyes, and dressed me in gowns and wigs. Although only a few years older than me, she'd endured my childish impatience and fits of temper without a shadow of bitterness ever crossing her face. And now, for the first time since my father had gifted her to me, she stared directly into my eyes with her luminous dark ones.

At times, I had glimpsed a depth of wisdom in those eyes that made me wonder what her life might have been before

she became my handmaid. But I had never asked. Why had I never asked?

Salima leaned her forehead against mine and whispered something in a language I did not recognize. But the music of it washed over me, leaving behind an impossible calm and a surprising clarity.

My father had sold me.

There was no choice but to go with Shefu and serve him. What that meant I could not begin to guess. He seemed benign, but was he as good to his servants as he was to his peers? I had seen slaves in other homes, cowed and skittish, some with obvious bruises on their faces and arms. Was that to be my lot?

It did not matter. I could not let my mother and my disabled brother be separated. Jumo would not be safe anywhere but with the woman who had fought for his life from his first breath.

I straightened my back. “Salima, where is my mother?”

She looked down. “I do not know. I think your father sent her and your brother away before we left for the market.”

“Do you have the gifts I purchased this morning? The ivory combs and the dyes and brushes for Jumo?”

She gestured to the reed basket at the foot of my bed.

“Please make sure they receive those.” If nothing else, I could at least leave a token of my love for them.

She dipped her chin at this, my last request.

I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply, as if I could breathe in the serenity that clung to Salima along with her customary sweet-almond fragrance.

An image from earlier this morning surged into my mind—sweat sparkling on Salima’s dark forehead and across her closely trimmed scalp as she shifted the heavy basket full of my purchases from one shoulder to the other.

The burn of shame welled in my eyes. “I cannot begin to tell you how . . .”

She placed her fingers on my lips and shook her head, her expression full of mercy. “No need, mistress.”

The address jarred me. I was no longer her mistress. Salima would be sold as well, to feed the same yawning chasm of debt, another offering at the altar of my father’s excess. I grasped her hand with the urgency of a lifeline. “Call me Kiya. Please.”

Salima dropped her eyes to speak my name. “Kiya.”

Abandoned on my vanity table next to us was the elegant wrap I had purchased earlier. I picked it up, allowing the silken fabric to flow across my skin like water. My practiced eye had ensured that not one flaw marred its surface as I dickered with the cloth vendor.

I folded the linen piece and pressed it into Salima’s hands, insisting that it was my gift to her. To my surprise she accepted it with grace, grasping it to her chest in wordless gratitude.

She handed me a small woven basket and attempted a sad smile. “Master Shefu will be waiting.”

With a nod, I turned and walked away from the room in which I had slept every night of my life, and every comfort contained therein. I followed a silent and stoic Shefu out of the white villa that had been my home since birth and into the violent sunlight, with the incomprehensible realization that my handmaid and I were now on the same footing.

1

1ST DAY OF AKHET
SEASON OF INUNDATION
1447 BC

The sound of my knock on the wooden chamber door echoed in the pit of my stomach. Shira opened the door, but the Hebrew girl refused to meet my eyes. Two streaks of fur, one black and one gray, fled the room—even the cats knew enough to escape.

“Is that Kiya?” My mistress’s sharp voice raised the hair on the back of my neck. “It had better be.”

Tightening my grip on the water jug I carried—my only shield—I drew a deep breath as I stepped past Shira and over the threshold.

Tekurah crossed her bedroom in four swift strides to tower over me. “Where have you been? You held up this entire household all morning.”

What an exaggeration. I abandoned the temptation to try and explain the throng of people, animals, and merchant booths clogging the city today. Pushing my way through the crowds during festival preparations had proved almost impossible,

especially carrying a jar full of water from the canal. Besides, Tekurah was never at a loss for reasons to reprimand me.

With practiced obedience I mumbled, “Forgive me, mistress.”

My show of humility did nothing to placate her. She thrust the ebony handle of a fan toward my face while accusing me of deliberate delay. I flinched. *She might actually strike me this time.*

She threw her hands in the air. “Why do I have to put up with such a worthless slave?” She growled like one of her cats and then continued her tirade. I didn’t bother to listen. I had heard all of this before and doubtless would again.

Jaw locked and mind numb, I waited for the end of her diatribe. Instead I focused on the intricacies of the painted mural on the wall. The lush scene depicted the glorious paradise of the afterlife, where gods and men traveled together in gilded boats on the sparkling blue waters of the eternal Nile. The vivid colors were striking, but they were nothing compared to my brother Jumo’s masterful artwork.

Shira’s posture snagged my attention. The Hebrew girl stood in front of the open window, wrapped in sunlight, head down and eyes closed—submissive as usual. Were her lips moving?

“And if you keep me waiting again”—Tekurah pointed the fan an inch from my nose—“I *will* hit you. Even the gods wouldn’t fault me.”

Bitter retorts bubbled up inside me, threatening to burst free. Silently, I prayed to Ra, Isis, and any other god who would listen, for the strength to keep my mouth shut. Sweat trickled in rivulets down my spine.

Tekurah drew a long breath through her nose, black eyes flashing. With another growl, she hurled the ebony fan toward the enormous bed in the center of the room, but it tangled in the sheer linen canopy and clattered to the floor. She stared at

it, blinking, and then exhaled through gritted teeth. Hands on hips, she turned and stalked to her bathing chamber.

As Shira retrieved the fan, I breathed quiet thanks to the gods for such a brief scolding today. My sliding grip on the heavy earthen jug would not have held much longer.

Tekurah's bathing room was tiled floor to ceiling in white-washed stone and decorated with lush palms and splendid scenes from the Nile—hippos, crocodiles, and ibises. My skin prickled at the chill in the room. I placed the jug on the floor next to the long stone bathing bench in the center of the room and flexed my relieved fingers. Shira added a few drops of rose oil from an alabaster bottle to the water as I uncovered the drain that emptied into the gardens. A little blue-headed agama lizard startled me when I moved the stone, and then scurried back out to the safety of the courtyard. *If only I could follow.*

Every Egyptian woman labored to appear youthful—Tekurah more than most. The many face creams, balms, and ointments she insisted upon complicated an already arduous process. We spent hours tending her body, fetching potions, purchasing magic cures, and delivering offerings to Hathor, the goddess of beauty.

After Shira and I undressed her, Tekurah perched on the bathing slab, lips pursed and pointed chin high. Shira scrubbed our mistress's head with natron soda paste. Then together we sponged her body with rose-scented water and massaged sweet balms into her skin, head to toe. At least I would enjoy soft hands for a few hours. This dry season sucked the moisture from my skin. I savored the heady aroma of the imported oils. The exotic spices, pungent balsam, and sweet myrrh reminded me of Salima.

A full cycle of seasons had passed since Salima had lugged cumbersome pitchers from the river for my own baths and applied perfumed oils to my body. Now I served a mistress of my

own, fetching water and bowing to her every demand. Coveting her luxuries made my labors all the more torturous.

Shira brought in Tekurah's new gown, the delicate weave almost translucent. I ached for the sumptuous glide of fine cloth over my skin. My own abrasive, unflattering tunic provoked my vanity.

I struggled to pull the dress over Tekurah's head, but she jerked away. "Let Shira do it. She is worth three of you."

Slipping her dark braid over her shoulder, Shira reddened and reached up to adjust the mangled neckline before tying a beaded belt around Tekurah's narrow waist, adding some curve to her otherwise willowy body.

Tekurah spoke the truth. Shira's skills exceeded mine. It had surprised me, when I'd first entered servitude, that a Hebrew girl held such a trusted position as body-servant to the mistress. It did not take long to see why, though. She was nimble, efficient, and hardworking. Never speaking out of turn, she served Tekurah with utter, inexplicable politeness.

I worked to emulate her in all our tasks, but sixteen years of soft living had rendered me all but useless as a servant. My strength had grown over the last year, my once-pampered muscles now sinewy, but Tekurah still insisted Shira redo almost everything I attempted.

"Mistress, which jewelry today?" Shira's voice barely broke a whisper.

"The usekh gifted by Pharaoh." Tekurah glanced at me out of the corner of her eye.

Shira bowed, eyes downcast. "I will fetch it from the treasury while Kiya attends to your wig." This was one task I performed with minimal clumsiness.

Tekurah sank onto a low stool by a mahogany vanity, her narrow face reflected in the polished silver mirror. "Make it quick. Don't forget bangles and earrings."

Shira padded out of the room, head down.

“The new wig.” Tekurah snapped her fingers at me. “Now.”

The large closet overflowed with chests, baskets of gowns, countless pairs of sandals, and wooden stands laden with all styles and varieties of wigs. For all the seeming lack of affection between Tekurah and Shefu, he certainly allotted her a generous share of clothing, jewels, and accessories. The Queen herself might covet such a vast assortment.

A new rosewood wig chest was tucked behind a basket. I carried it to the vanity and opened the lid, choking back a sneeze. Spiced to mask the odor of wool and human hair, the box reeked of cinnamon with such potency my eyes watered.

An exquisite hairpiece lay inside, interlaced with gold and red faience beads and braided with the elaborate plaits made popular by the First Wife of Pharaoh. I centered the wig on Tekurah’s bald head. Bodies, candles, and lamps would elevate the temperature of the hall during the banquet, and the weight and heat of such an intricate headdress was staggering. Tekurah would thank the gods for her shaved head tonight.

The one mercy in my downfall was release from wearing wigs. Allowing my hair to grow freely, I escaped the burden and irritation caused by the uncomfortable fashion. I had always abhorred shaving my head, but Salima usually convinced me to at least trim it short during the blaze of the hottest months. My straight black hair brushed past my shoulders now, and I rejoiced to simply pull it back with a leather tie each morning.

By the time I adjusted the wig to Tekurah’s satisfaction, Shira had returned with the jewels. Fashioned from beads of pure gold, multicolored glass, and brilliant blue lapis lazuli, the usekh collar was indeed extraordinary. A large gold amulet embossed with etchings of ibises in full flight sat suspended in the center. The neckpiece extended just past the edges of her wide shoulders. Enhanced by Tekurah’s height and long neck,

the collar did not overpower her as it would most other women. It galled me to admit such a thing, but Pharaoh himself would take pride in the impressive display of his gift.

Shira applied kohl to our mistress's eyes—the art still eluded me. After a few failed attempts and dangerous near misses, Tekurah forbade me to even approach her cosmetics chest. The newest trend—green malachite on the upper lids and gray galena below—accented and widened her black eyes. I loathed the almond-ash-and-water concoction I was allotted to beautify and protect my own eyes. However, after a year, I could finally apply it without stabbing myself in the eye each morning.

Tekurah did not turn, but her gaze pierced me from the distorted reflection of the silver mirror. “You will not embarrass me tonight. Clumsiness will not be tolerated.”

My skin flashed cold.

The Festival of the New Year, birth day of Ra, would be the first celebration I attended as a servant, instead of one being served. Standing behind Tekurah's chair and at her mercy, my humiliation would be on full display for all the guests—many of whom I was well acquainted with.

Tekurah's cruel mouth curved into a smile.