



*Between the
Wild Branches*

THE COVENANT HOUSE 2

CONNILYN COSSETTE

CHRISTY AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



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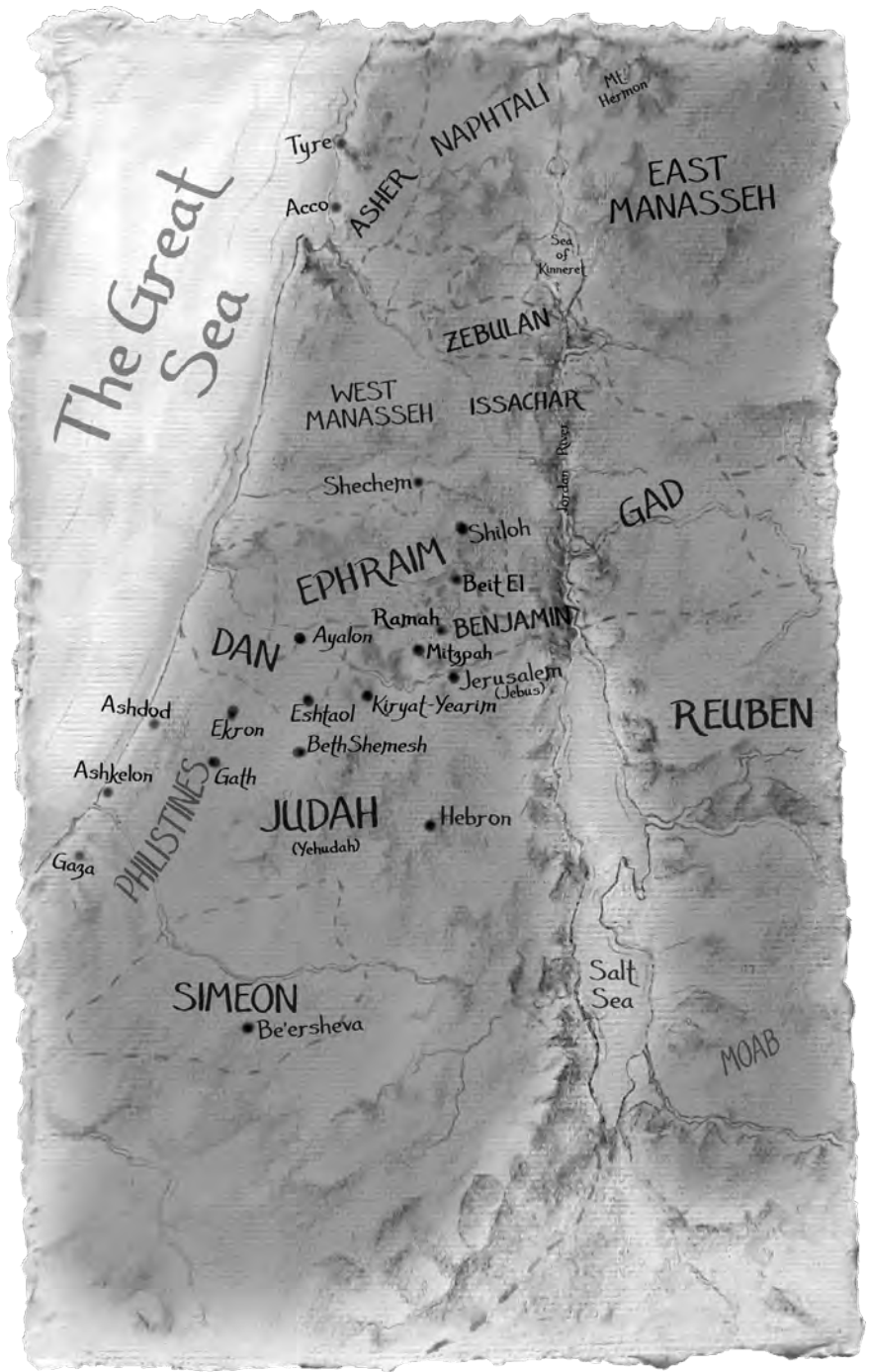
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For my brother, Sam.

Your arrival in our family was the very first time I saw God directly answer a prayer from my lips, but certainly not the last. No matter the physical distance between the two of us wild branches, the name I helped choose for you will always be a reminder of the blessing you are to me.

“For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him.”

1 Samuel 1:27



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“If you will return, O Israel,” declares the LORD,
“Then you should return to Me.
And if you will put away your detested things from My presence,
And will not waver,
And if you will swear, ‘As the LORD lives,’
In truth, in justice, and in righteousness;
Then the nations will bless themselves in Him,
And in Him they will boast.”

Judges 4:1–2

One

Lukio

1052 BC

ASHDOD, PHILISTIA

My fist slammed into my opponent's jaw, the collision so jarring that I felt the vibration of it all the way to my shoulder. His head snapped back, blood trickling from his mouth. Perhaps he'd bitten his tongue all the way through, like my last opponent, but I did not relent. Before he'd steadied himself, I struck again, this time with a kick to the knee. Leg buckling, he lurched sideways but somehow remained standing, shaking off my blow. With a growl he charged at me again, a sneer on his face.

Before his punch could connect, I spun, the action so ingrained in my bones that I barely had to think before I was behind him, driving my elbow between his shoulder blades. He tripped forward, nearly going down, but somehow found his balance before he landed in the dirt, where it would have been all over. No one could beat me on the ground. No one. Not even this champion of Tyre, who had a reputation that stretched all the way here to Ashdod.

Myriad voices hummed around me like the constant buzz of a disturbed hive, but I remained immune to their bidding. For years now, the cheers and chanting of my name had been little more than an irritant, not the impetus for the pulse-pounding rush of anticipation I used to crave more than anything.

The one voice that broke through the haze was Mataro's—and only then because he was at the edge of the fighting grounds, screaming at me to finish the man, as if I actually planned to let my opponent get the best of me. My cousin knew me better than that; I didn't know why he bothered goading me. I'd not lost a fight in years. Not one that counted, anyhow.

Even as I threw my weight forward, slamming full force into the Phoenician, my mouth soured at the proprietary tone of Mataro's commands, As if it was him and not me who knew the correct placement of my feet, which weaknesses to look for, and how to clinch victory. The thought almost made me laugh as I wrenched my opponent's dominant arm back. Mataro was little more than an overfed jackal these days. Nothing like the man who'd opened the door to me ten years ago—the man who had been on the verge of ruin, inebriated and unsteady on his feet as I explained who I was and that I'd come back to Philistia to build the fortune he'd promised me.

Mataro may have arranged the first of my matches and coached me to fight like the ruthless demon I was rumored to be, but the urge to wrap my fingers around his fat neck and squeeze was increasing. It seemed that the fuller his purse, the larger it grew, always making room for more. And along with the accumulation of his wealth, his mouth seemed to grow larger and larger as well, boasts gushing out like rancid wine with every ridiculous demand and every public declaration that it was *his* guidance that had made me an unmatched champion on the fighting grounds.

The Phoenician snarled a curse as I jerked his arm harder, then hissed as pain I knew well shot through his body. I took advantage of the momentary distraction and swung, grunting as I jammed my leather-wrapped knuckles into his ribs in a series of unrelent-

ing blows. He hissed out a pained curse that told me this bout was nearly finished. A jolt of triumph surged in my chest, but instead of lingering the way it used to and curling around my bones in a delicious embrace, it burned away like mist on a summer morning. I'd claimed countless victories since I returned to Ashdod as a fifteen-year-old boy with my hopes crushed and my blood boiling with betrayal, and yet each one seemed to matter less than the last.

My opponent wavered on his feet, catching his breath from the relentless attack I'd delivered to his torso, and in that brief moment my attention flitted up to the balcony that surrounded this royal courtyard. The crowd was thick today, gathered to revel in the violence between us and the events that would follow, but somehow my gaze snagged on one face out of the multitude that were gleefully screaming for the Phoenician's downfall. Everything inside me slammed to a halt.

Surely it was only a trick of the light that familiar hazel eyes gazed down at me, their depths filled with an expression of stricken recognition that swiftly flared into panicked horror.

It could not be her. Could not be the one who'd left my heart in tatters ten years ago.

Sweat rolled into my eyes, blurring my vision for a moment, and I blinked it away, heart pounding as shock and confusion gripped me in an iron hold. But by the time I could see again, whatever illusion that had deceived me had vanished—nothing left of it but a ghost of a memory that had taunted me for far too long.

A fist hit my cheekbone, rattling my teeth as I tasted metal. Lights flashed and pain radiated across my face as I realized that I'd been far too absorbed in the absurd vision I'd seen among the raving crowd to notice my opponent had regrouped.

Cursing myself for such a foolish mistake, I shook off the blur in my sight, spat out the blood that coated my tongue, and plowed forward into him. Grunting as I rammed my knuckles directly into his side once again and felt a rib give, I let out a foul word of my own as he recoiled from the hit. He tripped back a step, chest heaving, but his eyes never lost their focus on me, even though he had

to be in extraordinary pain. Although he was heavier than I was, he was younger by a few years, his face free of the many scars that marred my own, and the glint in his eyes told me he was hungry enough for this win to ignore any and all injuries.

I, however, was undefeated. A record that would remain unbroken because I refused to let the last year of planning and maneuvering go to waste, especially for the elusive memory of a girl who'd tossed me aside like a soiled garment. The Phoenician and I both braced ourselves for the next strike—panting, sweating, and bloody.

“What are you waiting for?” screamed Mataro. “This should already have been over! Stop hesitating!”

I blinked the sweat from my eyes again, every muscle in my body going still as granite. But instead of letting my cousin's taunting words crawl under my skin and steal my focus, I allowed them to burn in my belly, stoking the fire higher and higher until everything outside this match was nothing but ash. Mataro could rant all he wanted today; he could seethe and snarl and hiss out demands, but this would be the last time. Tomorrow I would cut the cord I'd too-willingly bound myself with, and he could hang himself with it for all I cared.

I unleashed the rage I'd been harnessing, giving it permission to flood my limbs and propel me forward as quick as a wildcat to grab the Phoenician's head with both hands. My fingers locked around his neck and dug into his skull as I yanked it forward to collide with a powerful knee strike. Before he'd even hit the ground, I'd turned away, not bothering to wait for the announcement that he'd been knocked insensible and my victory was secure. I left the fighting grounds, ignoring the clamoring crowd as they parted before me, the multitude of hands that slithered over my bare skin as I pressed past, and the lurid invitations that followed in my wake. I'd long ceased being flattered by the attention I'd once reveled in.

Even more bodies than I'd guessed were packed into this space, stirring up the dust with their sandals and adding their voices to the cacophony. Now that the long-anticipated fight between myself

and the Phoenician had been decided, the dancing and storytelling would begin. This festival, dedicated to the gods and goddesses credited with leading our forefathers across the sea, would culminate with the impossible and fascinating leaping of the bulls like our ancestors had enjoyed on the island of Caphtor so long ago. It was a celebration I'd dreamed about participating in when I was a boy, before my sister Risi forced me to leave Ashdod in pursuit of a magical golden box.

I tried to shut down the memory and the ache that never failed to build in the center of my chest whenever I gave myself permission to think of Risi or her beloved mountaintop in Hebrew territory that I'd never fully been able to call home. But whatever delusion had gripped me earlier must have forced open a door I'd been certain was nailed securely closed.

Helpless against the urge, I paused to peer over my shoulder, allowing my eyes to swiftly scrutinize the face of every dark-haired female on the balcony where I'd seen the apparition. Then, disgusted with my own weakness, I headed for the gates, shaking off the ridiculous notion that the girl I'd once thought to be my future would be here in Ashdod, among people who hated her kind so vehemently. The sooner this day was over, the better.

Two

Shoshana

I pushed my way back through the crowd on the balcony, bones vibrating and eyes burning. But I had to get away before anyone saw the grief on my face. I'd been reckless enough as it was today, slithering closer and closer to the parapet so I could catch a glimpse of him down below. Too helpless against the pull he had on me to restrain myself any longer.

When I was finally safe in the shadows, I slumped back against the wall and dropped my chin, doing my best to restrain the hot tears that glutted my throat.

Lukio. My Lukio was here.

After over an entire year and a half of avoiding him, of praying that he and I would never cross paths, I'd finally given in to my fierce curiosity and slipped in among the revelers, my greedy eyes feasting on the sight of the boy I'd loved since I was nine years old. But that boy was now a man. One who'd far surpassed even the superior height of his youth and whose enormous body was cut into lines that even the fiercest warrior might envy.

His golden-brown hair was nearly to the center of his back, the

curls I'd once adored now oiled and pulled back, secured by a series of gold clasps that ran the length of the long queue. His face was clean-shaven, revealing the sharp lines of his strong jaw, and his earlobes were studded with ornate ivory plugs. Dark tattoos in distinct Philistine shapes swirled around both of his arms and across his impressively broad chest as well. He'd been handsome as a boy, far more than any of the other young men in Kiryat-Yearim, but now he was devastating—a trait not lost on the hundreds of people in this courtyard who'd been screaming for him, their suggestions becoming more violent and more lewd as the fight went on.

And then, he'd seen me. And everything had stopped for the space of five eternal heartbeats. In those moments he was not the brutal champion of Ashdod, known for his unapologetic and emotionless method of beating men senseless on the fighting grounds, but the boy who'd taught me how to climb trees and differentiate between bird calls, who'd left sycamore figs on my windowsill as a sign to meet in our special place. For the four years that he and I had enjoyed a secret friendship, he'd insisted that I call him by his Philistine name instead of the one he'd been given by his sister Eliora and the Hebrew family that had adopted him. They'd known him as Natan, but he'd always been Lukio to me—the designation something sweet and sacred between just the two of us. So much had transpired since those quiet days when our innocent friendship had slowly shifted into something deeper as we explored the woods outside Kiryat-Yearim together under full moons. But I could not help but hope that behind that vicious façade my tenderhearted friend was still there.

However, at the same moment that his opponent regathered his wits and struck Lukio with a ferocious hit that jerked his head to the side, a woman beside me screamed encouragement to “Demon Eyes,” and those hopes shattered to pieces.

Not only was he no longer using the name Natan, but he'd embraced the horrific moniker used to mock and humiliate him as a child because he had one brown eye and one green. A jeer that had been invented by none other than Medad, his former friend

and my own husband. Why Lukio would use such a demeaning name to fight under, something meant to strip away his humanity and highlight the fact that he'd been an outsider in our town, was far beyond me; but it had been the reason I'd known it was him in the first place.

For months I'd heard tales of a ruthless fighter whose fame had spread throughout the Five Cities of Philistia, heard my mistress and her sisters exclaim over his dangerous beauty. But it was not until I'd heard him called Demon Eyes that I realized it must be Lukio, the young man who'd run away from my hometown after I'd trampled his heart into the dust. The one whose pleas I'd ignored as I fled our last conversation and ran toward the destiny chosen for me, even if it meant my own heart was left in pieces beside his.

An even louder swell of shouts and cries of joy from the mass of people gathered on the balcony told me that Lukio had thrown off whatever hesitation he'd had the moment our gazes met. The sounds of delight at his victory, undoubtedly achieved with the same cold-blooded execution of the final blows he was famous for, jerked me away from my childhood memories and reminded me of my true purpose here today.

My mistress had given me leave to watch the match from the upper level of the palace, and now I had only a short time to deliver a message before she sent someone to find me. I should not have paused to indulge in foolhardy curiosity. Lukio was no longer the boy he'd been, but neither was I the same girl, so it did no good to wish away the chasm between us. It was just as immovable as the mountain I'd grown up on and as deep as the valley I'd walked since he'd left Kiryat-Yearim.

Besides, for as much pain as I'd endured in my marriage to Medad, and even after I'd been enslaved by the Philistines, there were three very important reasons that I would not change the outcome of that fateful last conversation with Lukio. And right now, I had much more important things to deal with than thoughts of a man who'd likely forgotten me long ago anyhow.

Pushing away from the wall, I was glad that I'd not allowed any tears to slip down my face. To any of the revelers around me, I was nothing more than one of the many slaves in Ashdod, albeit garbed in a linen tunic that gave away my status as a maidservant to a family of means. No one would notice me spiriting through the shadows behind the vibrantly painted columns that held aloft the top story of the sprawling residence of the king of Ashdod.

Descending the wide stone stairs that led to the ground level, I strode down the shady hallway away from the central courtyard and toward the farthest corner of the palace, keeping my head down and my steps measured so as not to draw any attention. Thankfully, with all the excitement of the festival that had begun at sunrise with a series of sacrifices to the Philistines' gods and that would end with debauched rituals I'd rather not dwell upon, none of the revelers took any notice of me. I made my way toward the small storage shed on the southernmost outside corner of the palace, one that held garden tools that would certainly not be of any use in the midst of a festival and therefore a perfect place for meeting in secret today.

After a quick sweep of my gaze to ensure that no one's eyes were on me, I unlatched the door and slipped into the black room. Holding my breath, I waited, my heartbeat the only sound for a few long moments in which I wondered whether the detour to slake my curiosity about Lukio had meant that I'd missed my contact. Or whether he'd even come in the first place.

"Do you have the names?" said a low voice, one that was familiar now after a few months of meetings like this one. However, since I'd never seen the face that matched that deep voice, nothing about this encounter was safe. It was not wise to remain here any longer than I must.

"I do," I said. "The house of Kaparo the High Priest took in two young boys of perhaps ten or eleven, and that of Runit the scribe purchased a girl of fourteen or so."

"Any others that gave you cause to worry?"

"They all give me cause to worry," I retorted. "They are my countrymen. Brothers and sisters from the tribes of Yaakov."

He paused, only his slow measured breaths reaching out to me from the blackness. When he spoke again, there was a deep note of compassion in his voice. “You know what I mean. We can only do so much, my friend.”

I cleared my throat of the thick coating of remorse. I had no cause to snap at this man who risked so much to meet me and who relayed the names of recently sold slaves on to people who carried out more dangerous tasks than I could imagine for the sake of the most vulnerable.

This man I met in the dark could be anyone. I’d never seen his face, and for his sake and mine, had never even considered breaching the trust between us to tarry outside the storage shed and discern his identity. He did not sound Hebrew, so either he’d been in Philistia so long that the peculiar sound of our tongue had been washed away or he had chosen to help with this mission purely from a sense of compassion. I had no idea. But whatever his motivations and however he’d fallen in with those of us who did our best to help other slaves escape their bonds, he’d never given me cause to doubt his trustworthiness.

“From what I was told, there were not more than ten brought in before the festival, likely a raid on a small hamlet, and most of them were men,” I said. “Only two were sold locally. The rest were taken to the port.” They were probably already on a ship bound for some unknown destination so far from the shores of the Land of Promise that they would never return.

I had not seen the captives with my own eyes, of course, being only one link in a chain, but every time I received information about new victims of the Philistines’ campaign of targeted attacks on Hebrew villages, my chest ached with empathy. I did not have to guess what it was like to be dragged from your home, to watch your neighbors and friends slaughtered, to pray that the vicious men who’d stolen everything from you would simply kill you instead of—

I pressed down those disturbing memories and the swell of nausea that always accompanied them.

“I’ll pass the information on to my contact,” he said. “Send word when more arrive.”

And there would be more. Whatever fear had been put into the Philistines’ hearts by the resulting plagues and famine from stealing the Ark of the Covenant had eroded with every passing year. By the time my husband moved us to Beth Shemesh just after we were married, raids on villages in the *shephelah* were commonplace. True, our enemy had not come at us with their collective might like they had at Afek, when the five kings of Philistia took the Ark from the battlefield and then laid waste to Shiloh, but they’d been relentless in nipping at our heels, making certain that the people of Yahweh were never able to rest in the peace we’d been promised a thousand years ago. Peace I would never have again but hoped that I might give others a chance to reclaim.

“I should go,” I said. “My mistress will be looking for me now that the fight is over.”

“Who won?” he asked, the question dragging me right back to that balcony when I’d looked into Lukio’s eyes for the first time in ten years.

I swallowed down a sharp response. He would have no reason to know of my connection with one of the fighters in that match today and had not meant to wound me by asking.

“The champion of Ashdod,” I replied, the words feeling like rusted blades in my throat.

“Of course,” said the man with a chuckle. “He doesn’t lose. Perhaps I should have put a piece of silver or two into the pot.”

With that comment, one of my many questions about the man I’d been passing information to was answered. No kind of slave would have a piece of silver to gamble on a fight. And certainly not two. This man was free. Someone able to walk about unfettered in the city, to come and go when he pleased.

I left the room without further comment. I had no interest in discussing Lukio’s violent tendencies with anyone, let alone a faceless person in the dark.

Slipping back into the palace through a rear entrance, I made

my way toward the opposite side of the complex, where those with more than enough silver to waste had gathered to observe the festivities and make their own wagers. By the time I found my mistress, any evidence of the fight on the courtyard grounds was gone, replaced by a troupe of half-naked dancers who were performing a complicated sequence of movements, leaping and contorting their bodies in impossible ways. To my profound relief, Lukio was nowhere in the vicinity.

As was my duty, I took my place behind her shoulder, grateful that she was so absorbed in an animated conversation with her two sisters about the dancers that she did not seem to notice my return at all.

Once my heartbeat returned to a normal rhythm, my eyes dropped to the infant in the arms of her oldest sister. The little one gazed over the woman's shoulder toward the vibrant blue-and-red walls at my back, drawn to the ornate shapes and swirls, even though she could not yet comprehend the mural depicting the subjugation of my people by the Philistine ancestors who'd arrived on our shores hundreds of years before. Then the baby turned her eyes toward me, peering up at me with her wispy brows drawn together, and I was nearly leveled by an overwhelming wave of grief and longing.

Ten years ago, I'd lost the boy I'd thought I would marry, and at that time, it had been the most devastating thing in my life—even more than my mother slipping away after a long illness when I was eight. But nothing compared to the soul-shattering loss of my children, and nothing ever would.