



LIKE  
FLAMES  
IN THE  
NIGHT

CITIES OF REFUGE • 4

CONNILYN COSSETTE

Christy Award–Winning Author

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For the Wanderers who began  
this journey with me  
and the ones who've joined  
along the way.

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The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs. The anger of the LORD burned against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years. But when they cried out to the LORD, he raised up for them a deliverer, Othniel son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother, who saved them. The Spirit of the LORD came on him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war.

Judges 3:7–10a



☆ = Cities of Refuge

# Part I

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CHAPTER  
ONE



*Tirzah*

**3 Tishri**

**1367 BC**

**Near Shiloh, Israel**

Nothing would stop me from claiming this victory. Keeping my eyes on the rocky path ahead of me, I pushed harder as I came around a sharp bend in the road, ignoring the burn in my legs, the cramp in my side, and the squirming burden on my back that had somehow grown heavier with each stride.

My three-year-old nephew was breathless with laughter, his sweaty grip around my neck nearly choking me as we bounded along. This final portion of the road from Ramah to Shiloh was narrow, winding over and around many thick-forested hills. Since my brothers' children had begun to tire of the journey home, their complaints increasing throughout the day, I'd challenged them all to beat me to the top of the next rise. Much to my nephew's delight, I'd not held back when I bolted off, ignoring Malakhi's command to stop.

"Faster, *Doda* Tirzah!" Imri's little voice prodded, and although my



calves screamed as I pushed up the steep incline, I submitted to his joyful demand, leaving the rest of our clan far behind and out of sight through the trees that lined either side of the road. Hitting a patch of loose gravel, my right sandal skidded to the side, but I caught my balance as Imri screeched in alarm.

“Have a little faith in your doda,” I said, squeezing his ankles tight against my middle. “I’ve yet to lose a footrace.”

“Not even against Abba?”

“Not since I was a girl,” I said, stretching my stride even farther as we neared the pinnacle of the rise. The youngest of my brother Malakhi’s children had me firmly wound about his smallest finger—twice, and I refused to disappoint him today. He cheered as I trotted to a halt, then twisted around to lift his fists in the air and jeer his siblings and cousins from his victorious perch on my back.

“There’s no one there!” he said, clearly disappointed that his triumph had gone unwitnessed.

I turned back to take in the winding road we’d just ascended and indeed all that could be seen behind us was the shade-dappled path. Malakhi must have stopped the children from taking up my challenge soon after I’d run off. Now we’d have to wait for the rest of our caravan to catch up.

“See now,” I said, poking a finger into his side to elicit a giggle. “Told you there was no cause to worry. They must have given up when they saw just how fast we were.”

Bleary-eyed from sweat, I swung Imri to the ground, then bent over to catch my breath as we waited. “Doda Tirzah” may still be the fastest at footraces, but she was no fresh maiden anymore. Two years of marriage and two more of mourning had taken more out of me than I’d realized. I pressed a palm to the sharp pain in my side, determining that from now on I would run each morning with Malakhi’s men as I used to—whether they wanted me to or not. I refused to be pinioned by weakness, physical or otherwise.

“And what do we have here?” came a voice from behind me, the clipped accent distinctly Aramean.

I jerked my body upright, slinging Imri behind me as I spun. Three

soldiers blocked the path to Shiloh, all at least two handspans taller than me, their bronze-scaled armor flashing in the sunlight.

For once I wished I'd not run so far and fast. I prayed fervently that my brothers would see me standing on this rise. Willing the thrashing of my heart against my ribs to slow, I twisted my other arm back around Imri, not only to reassure him, but to hide the three fingers I'd lifted behind him, a signal that I hoped keen-eyed Malakhi would not miss.

"A young woman should not be out here alone," said the one who'd spoken before, his position at the head of the pack making his status clear. He was handsome, tall and lean, his fair skin and light brown hair speaking to a heritage far north of here. "Perhaps you have need of an escort?"

"Thank you, no. We are simply making our way back home from attending a wedding in Ramah." I thought it wise not to disclose where we lived, nor that in truth we'd also been celebrating Yom Teruah with my mother's family. Congregating in Shiloh for ingathering festivals had been banned by the Arameans, forcing us to find different methods of coming together to worship Yahweh. Wedding feasts were still allowed, for now.

The man narrowed his black eyes, a sneer forming on his lips. "You Hebrews certainly seem to have a lot of weddings."

His derisive tone provoked my ire, along with the reminder that it was because of men like these that I was a widow. I set my jaw and straightened my spine. "Our God commands us to be fruitful and multiply. We obey by marrying and filling the Land with our children so we can never be uprooted."

Two of the men laughed, entertained by the flare of pride in my people and my God. But the leader's top lip curled with disgust, and he advanced on me with slow, loose-limbed menace until I could see that his eyes were not black but a deep blue, like a spill of indigo ink. "Your people stole this land."

I held my breath, praying that the trembling of my hands was not visible to this awful man. The small flint knife tucked into my belt was useless against soldiers in full armor. What was taking my brothers so long?

“This land was given to us by Yahweh,” I snapped, determined to show no fear and hoping to distract them for as long as possible. “The One who created these hills and valleys has every right to determine who should inherit them.”

“Oh now, she’s a feisty one, isn’t she?” said the shortest of the three, a malevolent edge to his smile. “I bet she’d put on quite a show—”

The leader ignored him, those midnight eyes seeming to darken. “Your god is weak. We took this land with barely a fight eight years ago. It is *our* gods who have the power here. You stay on in these hills and valleys at the behest of our king, and only then to fill his coffers.” Spittle formed at the corners of his lips as he spoke, and he moved so close that the bitterness of his breath filled my nostrils. “And when your people become too much of a problem, we will crush you into dust.”

I’d had contact with Aramean soldiers many times before, both in Kedesh as they drove us from our inn a few months after our final defeat, and in Shiloh, where our clan had settled on my grandfather Ishai’s vineyard. I’d been there when they’d hauled my husband off to forced labor with callous indifference, treating him and the other men as if they were nothing more than animals to be corralled, but this man’s vitriol was shocking in its intensity. Something personal had shaped his fury toward my people. He regarded me with sheer malice, as if he did not see a young woman standing in front of him but an enemy on the battlefield.

“Come, Alek,” said one of the men, shifting his weight as if unsettled by the force of his companion’s rage. “We have messages to deliver.”

Alek slid a contemptuous gaze to the man, a muscle twitching in his jaw, then locked his attention on me again. My heart faltered as the full force of his targeted glare hit me. “I will do what I please.”

A flicker of movement behind the Arameans caught my eye, a shadow among the trees that lined this rough path. Then a swift flash of metal in sunlight flickered from the opposite side. The men of my family were moving into position, encircling us with silent skill. My knees threatened to waver, but I held steady, not allowing a hint of relief to show on my face.

“Please,” I said with a feigned warble, hoping to give Malakhi and the others a few more moments to prepare their strike. “Please allow my nephew and me to turn back. We should not have run on ahead of our grandparents by ourselves.” Let them think I was a brainless woman without effective escort, not the daughter of a master spy and in the company of some of Israel’s most lethal warriors.

Alek peered over my shoulder at the road behind me. “Seems as though you ran a bit too far, little rabbit. There’s no one anywhere in sight.” He leaned down to rasp in my ear. “Or within shouting distance.”

“Let my nephew go,” I pleaded, everything inside me screaming for Malakhi and the others to hesitate no longer. “I’ll do whatever you ask.”

He ignored my plea, instead sliding the backside of his hand down my cheekbone, the touch causing a shudder deep in my bones. “Oh, that you will, little rabbit. And unfortunately for you, my father taught me well—”

I never would know what horrific thing he’d learned from his father, for in that moment his head slammed into my shoulder, a result of the stone that had smashed into the back of his skull and knocked him forward. I spun away, pulling Imri with me as the man toppled into the dirt at my feet.

My brothers, my father, and his enormous friend Baz barreled out of the trees, heads wrapped in their wives’ scarves to obscure their faces. Eitan’s sling whipped through the air again before letting another stone fly. The other two Arameans had already drawn their swords and turned to defend themselves, so the rock swished by without hitting its target. Unfortunately for our opponents, however, Eitan never missed twice in a row. The second soldier received a precision strike in the hollow of his throat. Choking and spitting, his hands wrapped protectively around his neck, he dropped to one knee. The third soldier engaged Malakhi, swords flashing, men grunting, and sandals scuffling as they slammed into each other.

Baz went after the man Eitan had hit in the throat and within moments had him on his stomach, hands bound behind his back with a belt. Coming to my senses, I realized that Alek, whom I’d thought had

been knocked unconscious by Eitan's first stone, was moaning in the dirt two paces from my feet, but my father pounced on him before he had a chance to recover. Imri burrowed his face into my waist, his tears soaking my tunic as his small body vibrated with shock and horror.

I'd heard many tales of secret missions among the enemy from my father and Baz, and I'd seen Malakhi and Eitan spar and practice with weapons, but I'd never seen these four men actually engaged in a fight. They were as nimble as dancers and swift as wildcats as they subjugated the Arameans without even speaking a word to one another. It did not matter that my father and Baz were grandfathers now, their beards laced with silver; they were just as skillful as they'd been as young men fighting for the Land of Promise.

I was left stunned, in awe, and wholly frustrated by my own inability to defend myself. King Kushan's forces had swept into this land with unparalleled cruelty during his quest to build an empire to rival his Akkadian ancestors, horror after horror causing the tribes of Israel to bow far too easily to his yoke. They'd stolen our land and our wealth, violated our women, slaughtered our children, and aimed to break both our bodies and our spirits with forced labor. Yet the majority of us had been too cowardly, too complacent, or like I had been at fifteen years old, incapable of fighting back when they viciously drove us from our home.

But I was no longer a girl. In fact, I'd weathered so much loss and heartache since we'd left Kedesah that it seemed I'd aged far beyond my actual years. And I was part of a family who'd never given up the fight against the enemy, even if their efforts had gone from lauded among our people to clandestine. I could not lift a sword in battle, but there had to be *something* I could do, some way I could be useful in the struggle. I felt certain that I'd been made for more than the desolate and dependent existence of a childless widow.

My heart began to pound, but no longer with fear. Instead, a heady rush of anticipation flowed through my limbs as I vowed that I would never again be so helpless, so weak. I would arm myself with skill and knowledge and become integral in the fight for my people and our land. My husband may have died for nothing, but I refused to ever again surrender.