

CITIES OF REFUGE • 2

SHELTER  
OF THE  
MOST  
HIGH

CONNILYN COSSETTE



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For my precious chickadee, Corrianna,  
whose voice lifted up in song to the King of Kings  
is among the most beautiful sounds in my world.

I am blessed to have a front-row seat to the  
metamorphosis of my sweet-cheeked little girl  
into the beautiful, curious, courageous young  
woman who will someday, all-too-soon,  
spread her wings and fly!



Then the LORD spoke to Joshua, saying, “Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘Designate the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, that the manslayer who kills any person unintentionally, without premeditation, may flee there, and they shall become your refuge from the avenger of blood. He shall flee to one of these cities, and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city and state his case in the hearing of the elders of that city; and they shall take him into the city to them and give him a place, so that he may dwell among them. Now if the avenger of blood pursues him, then they shall not deliver the manslayer into his hand, because he struck his neighbor without premeditation and did not hate him beforehand. He shall dwell in that city until he stands before the congregation for judgment, until the death of the one who is high priest in those days. Then the manslayer shall return to his own city and to his own house, to the city from which he fled.’”

Joshua 20:1–6



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CHAPTER  
ONE



*Sofea*

**Island of Sicily**

**1388 BC**

The pulse of the sea pressed me forward, urging my body deeper into its embrace. I obeyed the nudge and kicked my legs, peering through water-rippled light at the hidden world inside this secret cave. Sea grass slithered along my skin, half-heartedly grasping at my ankles. I fluttered my toes as I cut through the water like an arrow flung from a bow, air bubbling from my nose with measure practiced over every one of my sixteen years.

Sensing that I had cleared the entrance, I allowed my body to float upward until my head broke the surface. The voice of the waters amplified and echoed within the surprisingly large enclosed area, a shush of constant sound at once soothing and exhilarating to one born of the sea. I can say I was born of the sea, for it was into this blue expanse I was delivered, with the clouds above to oversee my birth.

Impatient as always, I'd entered the world within minutes of my mother's first surprised cry at the break of her waters. Surrounded by the other women of our village, who'd been enjoying an afternoon of swimming and combing the pebbled beach for telline shells, I'd been received not by the waiting hands of a midwife but the salty embrace of the ocean.

My mother said I had contentedly floated beneath the surface, unaware I'd even emerged from her body until lifted above the waves with a furious cry at the violence of being removed from my liquid world. "*Born of water and sky and with brine for blood,*" she'd said, and truly this secret grotto felt much like a womb to which I'd returned. My prayer to Posedao, the god of the sea, whispered back to me from the cave wall, echoing my gratitude for the discovery of this treasure to which he'd surely led me today.

With a splash and a light gasp my cousin Prezi's head popped above the water, her dark hair swirling around her. "Sofea! Why did you not wait for me? I was not sure how long to stay beneath the surface before coming up."

"And yet, here you are." I offered her a little grin and a teasing splash.

Blowing water from her lips with a noisy rasp, she blinked her eyes to clear the salt water from them and then splashed me back. "No thanks to you."

"I cannot help that I swim faster than you." I swirled around to take in the algae-slick rocks around us, noting again with pleasure the sound of the water lapping against stone as each gentle swell pushed me closer and closer to the back of the cave.

Prezi muttered something that sounded very much like "full of herself," and I ignored it. I *was* faster than she was and able to hold my breath far longer when diving for mussels—one born of the sea had no choice but to be one with it. Prezi was patient with my compulsion to explore every cave along this stretch of

the shore, even when I'd insisted on pressing a little farther north than she'd been comfortable with. She'd much rather be lying out on the white-pebbled beach with her toes pointing to the sky, basking in the sun, long dark hair fanned around her. Where my blood was half seawater, hers was half sunshine, and the depth of her golden-brown skin attested to such. Having been born only one cycle of the moon apart, we were as close as sisters. Closer.

"Are you done here yet?" She gathered her dark hair into a twisted tail as she braced against another wave, her lithe form swaying with the insistent force of the water.

"Not quite. I want to see what's below us."

Prezi rolled her eyes. "This cave is no different from the last one, Sofea, nor the one before, nor the one before that. And I am getting hungry."

"Please? Just a bit longer?" I pleaded with matched fingertips pressed beneath my chin. "Perhaps I'll find a magnosa."

Although her brown eyes narrowed, I knew she would capitulate. I'd always been able to sway her to my course, and she loved the delicate flavor of a magnosa. Although finding one of the shy eight-legged creatures among the craggy cave bottom might be a challenge in this dim light. She let out an exaggerated sigh that ricocheted off every slanted surface of the cave, and I seized on her moment of indecision to dive and explore the muted world beneath my feet.

Orange-striped donzelle and sea bream with black spots at the hinge of their tails darted among the anemone fronds swaying in the gentle current. A bright red starfish hugged a coral bed, as if desperate to keep from being washed away with the tide. When my chest burned with the effort of clinging to the last of my breath, I pushed to the surface again.

"Did you find one?" Prezi asked, one hand gripping a nearby outcropping.



“No, I’ll go back down.” I pointed at the far edge of the cave.  
“There must be at least one or two in here.”

“We need to return to the village. Our mothers will be searching us out.”

“They know where we are. We cannot return empty-handed. Give me a few more moments, I’ll find something to bring back.”

“But the men will be back soon. And we will be needed to help clean and salt the tuna.”

Prezi was right. Even on this, the third day of the traditional mattanza hunt, there would be many fish to haul to shore from the boats, to gut and salt, and to lay out on the mats for drying. The men would be exhausted from the effort of herding the multitude of enormous tuna into a series of ever-smaller nets between their longboats and slaughtering the flailing creatures within the bloody corral. We women were needed to help finish the job. And then tonight we would again feast as we praised Posedao for guiding the schools of tuna near our shores, as he had for as many years as our people, the Sicani, had lived on this island.

After telling Prezi to go on and wait for me out in the sunlight, I dove again to search along the western wall of the cave for one of the stalk-eyed lobsters among the pitted rock. Coming up without a prize in my hand, I sipped another mouthful of air before arching my body through the mouth of the cave, knowing Prezi would be annoyed that I’d tarried so long.

Shattered light glittered on the water, blinding me as I blinked my eyes and swiped the salt water from my face. The sun peered with such direct glare that I could not see Prezi within the tiny cove we’d emerged into. I called her name and swam forward. She must have become aggravated with my delay and headed back to the beach. I pushed hard against the persistent tide until I was free of the cove. Then, standing in the waist-high water, I called

her name again, lifting my voice to overcome the whoosh of the ocean and the piercing cries of seabirds circling above.

A hand reached to me from a hidden nook between two sea-pitted boulders, and turning, I laughed, “Prezi, you fright—”

But it was not my cousin’s hand that snagged my elbow and jerked me nearly off my feet, and not her face I stared into as realization slammed into me like an errant wave. Grasping panic snatched the breath from my lungs. An enormously tall man, dressed only in a rough-woven brown kilt, had Prezi smashed into a crevice with his body, an obsidian blade to her throat.

With dark eyes as wide as sand dollars and waist-length wet hair tangled over her face and around her bare torso, my cousin shivered violently.

“Two!” said the man, his unfamiliar accent digging deep into the word. A leering grin split his pitted and scarred face as he took in my naked chest. “As if you girls were just waiting for me here.”

“Please . . . please let her go.” My strangled plea was nearly swallowed up by the crash of the waves against the rocks around us. I curled my arms around myself, as if they could allay the feel of his eyes on my body. If only I had heeded Prezi’s insistence that we not enter this one last cave . . .

He ignored me and gestured with his bristled chin. “Those your tunics on the beach?”

Heart beating so furiously I barely heard his question, I nodded.

“No one else with you?”

“No.”

His mud-brown eyes narrowed, and he pushed the point of his knife deeper into Prezi’s flesh. “One lie and she dies.”

“It is just the two of us. My cousin and me. Please, take me and let her—”

Again he sloughed off my pleading. “You go on ahead, back

to the beach, and me and this beauty will follow. Don't bother running, or the fish will feast on her corpse."

Prezi's eyes begged me to comply with the brute's demands, so I turned and made my way through the waves. Digging my nimble toes into the pebbled ground, I fought the surf out of the cove and followed the rocky outcropping all the way back to the beach.

Another man waited on the shore, arms folded over his chest, severity in every line of his sun-browned face. His head was shaved clean, and a white scar slashed through one black brow above the cold gaze he directed at the three of us as we emerged from the water. Thankfully I'd chosen to swim with a linen wrap around my hips, to at least cover the bottom half of my body—as if it mattered when these strangers had already seen the two of us bare-chested, the way we always swam in the ocean. Somehow it had never bothered me until now.

"No others with them, Akato?" asked the man with the scar, his eyes skimming over Prezi and then coming to rest on me before darting away again. Prickles traveled across my skin that had little to do with the breeze off the sea. Something about him seemed vaguely familiar, but my scrambled mind could not fit the pieces together.

"No, they say it's just them." Akato pointed his blade at Prezi's jawline. "Should I just take care of them here, Seno?"

A shiver expanded from the center of my chest. Would they kill us? Or worse?

Seno glanced up at the ridge, toward the direction of our village, a look of contemplation on his face. If I screamed, would someone hear us and come to our rescue? Or would the breeze simply carry my voice out to sea? These men must have come from some rival tribe nearby, for Seno, especially, spoke our dialect with ease.

“No.” Seno turned to look straight into my eyes, some strange emotion lurking in the piercing gaze. He lifted a large bag from the ground near his feet and hefted it over his shoulder, the metal items within clanking against one another. “We will take them with us.”

Akato stared at the man he obviously held as an authority, disbelief on his face. “But—”

With bridled fury in the look he directed at Akato, Seno took one menacing step forward. “I said, we take them.”

“Your decision,” Akato said with a shrug, but tension still seemed to vibrate between the two men. He pushed Prezi forward with a jerk. “Put your clothes on, and be quick about it. But if either of you try to run, we will kill the other . . . slowly.” The way his eyes flared as he drew out the word assured me he would enjoy such a thing. Although he released my cousin’s arm, his knifepoint hovered near her throat. There was nothing to do but comply.

Plucking my sun-bleached white tunic off the ground, I slipped into it as quickly as I could with trembling hands and a wet body, then secured my leather belt around my waist before sliding the necklace I’d recently made back over my head. Holding the purple-and-white mussel shell that hung from its center between my thumb and forefinger, I rubbed at its rippled back while silently begging the gods for deliverance.

Tears streamed down my cousin’s beloved face as she fumbled with her own belt. Reassuring her with my eyes, I pressed her fingers away from the snarl her nervous hands had wrought and retied the braided leather rope about her waist.

As soon as I’d finished, Akato snagged Prezi’s elbow again. Seno gestured for me to lead the way back up the rocky trail that led to our village. Why would he lead us that way and not to wherever they’d come from? Before we’d even reached the lip of

the hill the answer was made clear. It would not have mattered if I had called for help. There was none to be had.

Smoke billowed into the sky as our homes burned and my whole body shook with horror. A ship perched off the coast, patched sails flapping in the ocean wind and men streaming between the shore and their vessel, using our longboats to transport spoils. All the tuna that had been hard-won in the mattanza over the last few days was being ferried away. These men were no rival tribesmen—they were sea marauders, a ship full of thieves and murderers who made their fortune razing villages and plundering the many trade ships that traversed the Great Sea.

Screams sounded from every corner of our village as we approached. Men. Women. Children. I longed to slap my palms to my ears and block out the desperate keening, but Akato ordered me to move forward on the path, toward the devastation.

Bodies lay everywhere. Every one of them someone I knew. Someone I loved.

At the edge of the village, one of my father's six wives lay unmoving with her arms around her three small boys, a trail of blood near her feet. She'd dragged herself through the dirt to pull them into a final embrace while they had breathed their last. Grief seared my throat, a sob building into a scream within my core just as my eyes landed on my mother's sister Jamara and my uncle Riso facedown near the entrance to their caved-in and smoldering hut. Prezi's five older siblings were nowhere to be seen.

Before I could warn my cousin to turn away from the sight of her murdered parents, I vomited on the ground. Prezi folded into a faint against Akato, who grunted as he held her upright and then shook her until she came to.

"Let's go," he snarled at her. "You do that again and it'll be you on the ground with the rest of them." Although she remained standing, her legs wobbled as the man pushed her forward.

The two men guided us down to the shoreline and away from the horror—away from my home.

Although my terror-stricken mind screamed that I flee somehow, get back to my little round hut, to my mother and brothers and sisters, I could not abandon Prezi. The sounds of agony behind us and the smell of smoke and burning flesh assured me that if they were all not dead already, they would be before I could do anything to help them.

My numb body was incapable of doing anything but walking forward, past the broken bodies along the beach and past the corpses floating in the surf—the men of our village who had rushed to its defense. As the chief and high priest of our village and a powerful man among the other Sicani on the island, my father's head would be a prize for these pirates. But somehow I suspected that his body would not be found among the brave men who'd died on this beach. No, he'd save himself first.

After a brief discussion, in which Akato again questioned Seno's decision to keep us alive, he lumbered off to join the chaos and Seno directed us to a longboat beached nearby. We clambered aboard to sit on the floor among the giant fish carcasses, bundles of flax that the women of our village had spent weeks preparing, and the casks of wine that had been awaiting a celebration that would never happen. My cousin and I tangled our fingers together, gripping each other in icy, trembling desperation—neither of us able to speak as Seno climbed aboard and used an oar to push off the beach.

*Matere.* My mother, with her sun-kissed hair and warm skin and midnight lullabies, was gone. My two little sisters with their frizzy golden braids and my tiny brown-eyed brothers would never grow to marry or have children of their own someday.

These evil men had stolen everything. Only death and ashes remained.

## SHELTER *of the* MOST HIGH

Hot anger burned in my body as the boat pushed off the beach, each dip of the oars stirring my fury higher and higher as my mind conjured the grisly images. Had they suffered? Or had the brigands had enough mercy to make quick work of slitting their throats?

If I'd listened to Prezi and returned earlier instead of heedlessly frolicking in the waves and satiating my ridiculous curiosity in the underwater grotto, my blood would now mingle with theirs as it sank beneath the skin of the island that was my entire world. I had the overwhelming urge to lunge from the boat and swim back now, to greet death alongside my family.

But for my cousin, I sat still. For my cousin, I kept my eyes trained on the ship looming larger and larger ahead of us as we sliced through the crystal blue water. For my cousin, the only person I had left, I would do anything.