

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a vibrant blue and purple sari, stands in a lush green valley. She is looking back over her shoulder towards the camera. The background features rolling hills and mountains under a dramatic sky with large, white and yellow clouds, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

UNTILL
THE
MOUNTAINS
FALL

CITIES OF REFUGE • 3

CONNILYN COSSETTE

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Until the Mountains Fall

CITIES OF REFUGE • 3

U N T I L
T H E
M O U N T A I N S
F A L L

CONNILYN COSSETTE



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To Nicole and Tammy
Thank you both for being not only an important
part of the stories I write, but precious additions
to my own story as well. Neither would be the
same without you.

*Perfume and incense bring joy to the heart,
and the pleasantness of a friend springs
from their heartfelt advice.
– Proverbs 27:9 NIV*



“If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her.”

Deuteronomy 25:5 esv



Part I

CHAPTER
ONE



Rivkah

25 Av
1380 BC
Kedesh, Israel

I'd been here before. Seated on this same three-legged stool with the same two girls plaiting the black locks around my head, their hands fragrant with sweet almond oil as they entwined tiny white flowers into the braids. Only this time, their matrimonial blessings rang hollow and the smiles they offered were tinged with grief instead of joy.

Fidgeting in my seat, I tugged at my white linen dress, the whisper-smooth fabric I'd once delighted in now constricting and raspy against my skin. How absurd this day was even called a celebration—my husband, Gidal, having been laid to rest just a month before. If only my father would've had the decency to hand me off like a broodmare quietly. But as the head priest of our city, nothing my father did was without fanfare, so naturally he'd determined we would not

keep this transition to ourselves but make my obedience a shining example of steadfast commitment to the Torah.

“You are as beautiful as always, Rivkah,” Abra said, her tone stilted. “My brother . . .” She cleared her throat, false smile wavering. “Malakhi will be pleased.” I pushed aside any thought of her twin brother and what he might or might not think of me. I may be forced to endure a levirate marriage, but no one could strong-arm me into being glad of it.

At sixteen Abra might soon find herself ensnared in a betrothal as well. With sleek black hair and silvery eyes, the exotic shape of which attested to the strength of her mother’s half-Egyptian heritage, the girl was already generating interest from the young men of Kedesh and beyond. But with a father who commanded a contingent of spies and an older brother also counted among that well-trained group of warriors, none had been so bold as to approach her yet.

Chana, two years younger than her sister, was as much a beauty but lacked the outward vibrancy that defined Abra. She peered shyly at me, her gaze catching mine in the wavy image of the polished copper mirror. Her lips parted as if to say something, but then she turned away, a glimmer of tears in the corners of her eyes. Of the two girls, she’d been the apple of Gidal’s eye, a constant shadow of her older brother, and his near image in so many ways. Therefore, in the month since he had died, I’d avoided her as much as possible. My late husband had been nothing but kind to me, but her grief far eclipsed my own.

A vision of Gidal’s pale face, shining with sweat as he lay dying in our bed, arose to jeer at me. If I’d been the wife he’d deserved, more attentive and less demanding, or if I’d gone to search for him in the orchard when he hadn’t returned by dusk, my husband might still breathe.

A knock sounded at the door and my heart clattered an uneven response as I stood, spine straight and chin high, poised to accept my lot. Moriyah, Gidal’s mother, entered the room, her gaze meet-

ing with mine. Although there was no accusation in her expression, I glanced away, but she approached to place warm hands on my shoulders.

“Rivkah,” she said. “Daughter. Look at me.” I cringed at her choice of words, but obeyed nonetheless. “I understand that this day is difficult for you, and I above all others wish you had been given more time to grieve. But I want you to know that I am grateful to you.” Her voice faltered, her silver eyes filling with tears. “Through you, a piece of my precious son will live on, and his name will not be forgotten.”

A sharp response sprang to my tongue, but I had no cause to disrespect Moriyah. She had welcomed me to her family, treated me as if I were one of her own children, and advocated that instead of being given directly into marriage after the customary thirty days of mourning, I be allowed at least a three-month betrothal before being claimed by Malakhi. However, the idea that my submission to this arrangement would somehow protect Gidal’s legacy was beyond preposterous. Not only was his inheritance of little value—the firstborn status claimed by his adopted oldest brother—but the man was dead. Nothing remained of him but memories.

“I am pleased to do so.” The words were bitter on my tongue, but she accepted the falsehood with a gracious nod. Then, as was my duty, I followed Moriyah out into the courtyard of her inn, as prepared as I would ever be to enter into a betrothal with my husband’s younger brother.

Although tempted to latch my eyes on the ground to avoid the inevitable stares, I affixed a bland smile on my face as I followed Moriyah through the courtyard, keeping my head high. If only my own mother were here to hold my hand and whisper reassurances as I marched toward the destiny chosen for me. Instead, Yahweh had ripped her from my life, leaving me with nothing more than the faint memory of her face, older siblings who were entirely wrapped

up in their own lives, and a father whose priestly duties took precedence over everything.

Since my grandfather Dov had been the first priest to settle in Kedesh twenty years ago, our ever-expanding clan had taken root and flourished here. A large number of the crowd in attendance were members of my own family: cousins, uncles, aunts, nieces, and nephews. But although every few steps I was stopped by another relation offering a kiss or a quiet blessing, the atmosphere was significantly more subdued than when I'd married Gidal four months ago. There would be no seven days of feasting, no dancing, no lighthearted teasing about the wedding night. I hoped by the time Malakhi claimed me as a bride that I could dissuade my father from making another fuss over the confirmation of our marriage covenant, but in all honesty I did not expect to be successful.

My oldest brother, Tal, and his wife, Prezi, stepped forward to embrace me, and three of their five daughters trailed behind me, carrying baskets of flowers to hand to well-wishers along the way. Only missing were the second- and third-born sons in our family, Kolel and Alon. They'd each departed for Shiloh when they turned twenty to be trained for their role as *kohanim*, priests in service to Yahweh.

Seated on the stone stairs that led to the upper level of the inn, my future bridegroom lounged back on his elbows as he held court with three young women his age, a sultry smile curving his lips as he listened to their flirtatious chatter. With his shaggy black hair and well-defined features inherited from some Egyptian ancestor—including bronze skin and silver eyes that brimmed with mischief—Malakhi was widely regarded as the most handsome young man in Kedesh.

Since the age of thirteen, when he'd begun the transformation into manhood, Malakhi drew girls to him like drunkards to choice wine—something he'd barely seemed to notice at first. But then, a little over a year ago, around the time I'd become betrothed to Gidal,

something changed. Suddenly he reveled in the attention, taking full advantage of the effect his looks and innate, roguish charm had on females. More than a few angry fathers had shown up at the family inn to demand that the boy stay away from their daughters or offer up a bride price. His father, Darek, a master of negotiation after years of spying among our enemies, somehow convinced each girl's father that his wayward son was not yet prepared to support a wife and that indeed they were fortunate to avoid such a match.

I huffed a silent laugh at the irony, for none such excuse was given to my father when Darek agreed to a levirate marriage. Within a week of Gidal's death, it was determined that I would be passed along to his brother for the sake of continuing my husband's line through my body. Of course Malakhi could have refused, could have demanded the town elders release him from the obligation, but the longtime friendship between our families was a cord of many threads. Darek had agreed to the match without condition, and though he was under no obligation to do so, offered up an additional bride price to secure the bond.

Malakhi caught sight of me trailing after his mother and sat up, brushing back the unkempt hair that perpetually hung into his eyes. The simpering girls at his feet were seemingly forgotten, and his carefree expression became sober. His gaze met mine, and something passed across his too-handsome face that I could not decipher.

Although Gidal and Malakhi shared a mother and a father, their similarities were few. Gidal's hair had been a rich reddish-brown, his form tall and lanky, and his eyes dark like Darek's. Malakhi's build was only now beginning to broaden, and although we'd rarely been in close proximity in past years, I guessed he would stand barely three fingers taller than me. I was only two years older than him, but I had the distinctive sense that I was marrying a boy, not a man. The thought curdled my stomach as I turned my face away.

I did not even like Malakhi. He'd spent much of his childhood pulling my hair, throwing pebbles at me, and sticking all manner of

insects down the back of my tunic. Although Gidal had participated in some good-natured teasing when we were small, he'd always come to my rescue whenever Malakhi stepped over the line, ordering his younger brother to leave me alone and then making his parents aware of the offense.

But in spite of the many consequences Malakhi received because of such instances, my complaints only served to encourage his beastly behavior, especially after my mother died, and he'd become nearly relentless in his provocation. The harassment abruptly ended a few years ago, not long before I was betrothed to his older brother, but nothing could wipe away the distaste I had for the boy who'd tormented me for so long.

It was because Gidal had been my champion in such matters that I'd agreed to my first marriage—although my father had given me little say, finding in me the perfect vehicle to strengthen ties with Darek and Moriyah's family, since we were not affiliated by tribe.

"Rivkah!" My older sister, Lailah, approached, arms outstretched and saffron-colored headscarf billowing around her. "You look lovely." She kissed both my cheeks, then leaned to whisper in my ear, "Smile. You look as though you are headed to your execution, not your betrothal."

Are they not one and the same?

I attempted to comply, wiping away any trace of trepidation in favor of a passably bright expression. She curved her palm over my cheek, as if to emphasize the four-year gap between us and the maternal role she'd slipped into since our mother died. "I know you miss Gidal, but this union will be pleasing to Yahweh," she said. "And I am sure you and Malakhi will be blessed with children very soon as well."

With a smile that bordered on condescension, she laid a hand over her own rounded belly, her second child with her husband, Oded. I'd once adored my older sister, but when our *ima* died seven years ago, she'd transformed from sibling to authority overnight,

and the sisterly bond between us was gradually ground to dust. Her public display here now served only to sharpen the ever-present ache for my mother. Keeping my expression placid, I accepted her well-wishes but inwardly questioned why I must be passed off like a used sandal in order to please the Almighty—especially to Gidal’s smug, irritating younger brother.

“That she will,” said my father. “Her obedience to the Torah will be rewarded.” He smiled down at me warmly, but his rebuttal to my arguments against this marriage would linger in my memory. They cycled over and over in my mind as my family and Malakhi’s gathered around us.

“I have chosen what is best for you, daughter, even if you do not understand all my reasons now. You must trust that Darek and I have only your good in mind. Malakhi is able and willing to take on this responsibility, so the betrothal will go forward. And you, my daughter, have a duty to honor your husband, your family, and your God in this manner.”

However, even as I prepared to declare my willingness to be bound in covenant to the boy across the courtyard, my heart vowed differently. If there were even the slightest opportunity to escape this prison my father had built for me, I would take it.