

MESU ANDREWS

KING DAVID'S BRIDES

TWO

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THE STORY OF MAAKAH

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To Amanda Geaney

For the fourteen years of friendship, cheerleading, praying, and virtual assisting with all things detailed! I dedicate this book to you, Amanda, because not only could I NOT do this writing thing without you—I'm not sure I'd want to. Love you dearly, my friend.





CHARACTER LIST

- Abiathar*—David's personal priest
- Abigail*—Nabal's wife; David's wife
- Abishai*—David's nephew; Zerry's middle son; Commander of the Three
- Abital*—Asahel's wife; Zerry's daughter-in-law
- Abner*—Saul's general
- **Abraham*—Patriarch of God's Promises to Israel
- Achish (King)*—Philistine king of Gath; appointed David governor over Philistine city of Ziklag
- Ahinoam (Nomy)*—David's wife; from Jezreel
- Amasai*—Kohathite (Tribe of Levi); captain of David's Mighty Men
- Amnon*—David's firstborn son
- Asahel*—David's nephew; Zerry's youngest son; one of David's Mighty Men
- Attai*—a Gadite scout in David's army
- Azam*—King Talmai's Captain of the Royal Guard
- David*—son of Jesse; anointed as Israel's next king while Saul remained on the throne; husband of Ahinoam and Abigail
- Dobah**—wife of Phinehas (a Mighty Man)

- Eglah*—daughter of Moabite maidservant (Keyalah)
- Eleazar*—one of David’s Mighty Men; a member of the Three with Shammah and Abishai
- Eliel*—a Gadite scout in David’s army
- Eliphelet*—one of David’s Mighty Men; a Maacathite
- Haman**—Maakah’s chamber guard
- Jehoiada*—chief priest at Hebron, presiding chief priest over tribe of Judah; Benaiah’s father
- **Jesse*—David’s father; descendant of Ruth (a Moabitess) and Boaz
- Joab*—David’s nephew; Zerry’s oldest son; General of David’s army
- **Jonathan*—King Saul’s crown prince; David’s best friend
- **Joseph*—the patriarch Jacob’s eleventh son; sold into slavery by his brothers and became Egypt’s second-highest ranking leader who saved the ancient world from famine
- **Joshua*—Moses’s successor who led Israel’s troops into the Promised Land and assigned Yahweh’s portions to the twelve tribes
- ***Kepha**—Maakah’s first love
- Maakah*—daughter of Geshur’s King Talmai; sent as treaty bride to marry David
- **Maok*—Maakah’s maternal grandfather
- **Michal*—Saul’s daughter; David’s first wife
- **Nabal*—Abigail’s wicked husband, slain by Yahweh before David married her
- Nakia**—Egyptian slave discarded by Amalekite masters and given shelter among David’s army
- **Nitzevet*—David’s mother (ima)
- **Noah (Japheth, Shem, and Ham)*—they and their wives the only survivors of Yahweh’s Flood
- **Paltiel*—the man Saul gave his daughter Michal to in marriage after taking her away from David

Phinehas (*a Mighty Man*)—husband of Dobah

Raziah (Queen)—King Talmai’s wife; Maakah’s mother (ima)

***Samuel**—a priest and prophet who anointed Israel’s first and second kings

***Saul**—first king of Israel

Shammah—one of the Three

Talmai (King)—Maakah’s father (abba); ruler of Geshur, one of five Aramean kingdoms

Uriah—a Hittite; one of David’s Mighty Men

Vered—Joab’s wife; Zerry’s daughter-in-law

Zeb (Zebadiah)—Asahel’s son; Abital’s stepson; Zerry’s grandson

Zelek—Maakah’s personal guard; an Ammonite; one of David’s Mighty Men

Zerry (Zeruiah)—mother of Joab, Abishai, and Asahel; David’s half sister

Zippor—Maakah’s chamber guard; Geshurite escort

Zulat—Maakah’s nursemaid since birth

*Characters with an asterisk beside their names are mentioned in the story, but they don’t appear in the story.

Characters in **BOLD** are fictional.

NOTE TO READER

Second Samuel 3:2–5 introduces us to the women who bore David’s first six sons while he reigned in Hebron for seven years—two years over Judah and seven years over all of Israel. Because the Bible focuses more on David’s reign *after* he conquers Jerusalem, I wanted to explore David’s life *before* he reigned in Jerusalem. In a four-book series called KING DAVID’S BRIDES, we’ll meet all six women: Ahinoam, Abigail, Maakah, Haggith, Abital, and Eglah.

I began researching these underappreciated women in David’s world and launched Book #1 of KING DAVID’S BRIDES in October 2024, *Brave: The Story of Ahinoam*. *Brave* introduces both Ahinoam and Abigail and gently eases us into a culture in which David, a man after God’s own heart, would have broken God’s law.

He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray.

Deuteronomy 17:17a

For today’s reader, multiple wives can be an emotional trigger. Some women—and men—have been betrayed by a spouse and find David’s sin too great and God’s grace too freely given.

My biggest challenge when writing biblical FICTION is to remain 100 percent accurate to the Bible's Truth, and it's the one rule I guard with the most zeal. The Bible says Ahinoam, Abigail, Maakah, Haggith, Abital, and Eglah bore David six sons while he ruled in Hebron for seven years.

But why did he marry them? Was it love or lust? Was it to rescue them or an obligation to produce sons for a king's household?

The Bible doesn't tell us—nor did any resources available to me.

When there are few historical details (in biblical or academic resources), I have the joy and privilege of *imagining* David's and these obscure women's motivations for marrying. From the time David, his army, and their families fled from Saul at the Hill of Hakilah, to his escape to Gath/Ziklag, to the whole camp's transition to Hebron where David is anointed as Judah's king—I get to use clues in Scripture, archaeological findings, and some good ol' imagination to write these four books about David's marriages to these six women.

Some will ask, "No, but really—why did David marry six women?" Honestly, there is no definitive answer. David's and his wives' emotions and/or motivations—and even how much they knew of God's Law at this time—it's all a guess.

What we do know is the Truth from God's heart through the prophet Samuel when he levied Yahweh's judgment on King Saul. Remember, this prophecy was likely spoken *before* God knitted David together in his mother's womb:

Your kingdom will not endure; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people, because you have not kept the LORD's command.

1 Samuel 13:14

Keep in mind that I'm writing a *novel*, not an academic report. In *Brave*, David's motivation to marry a second wife (Abigail) **seemed**

like Yahweh was in favor of David marrying Nabal's widow to provide for her (and her maids) and become their *protector*. You're reading the thoughts and desires from David's and Abigail's point of view, how *they* interpret God's will.

In the book you're about to read, David and his wives will meet a Geshurite princess. Again, David, Ahinoam, Abigail, and (spoiler alert) Princess Maakah will find a way emotionally, spiritually, and practically for Yahweh to confirm that David should marry the Geshurite princess.

But would God ever approve of breaking His own Law (Deut. 17:17)?

Surely not . . . would He?

The series, KING DAVID'S BRIDES, is a single story published in four books. With each novel, you'll see how each new bride brings conviction and more understanding that their own hearts may have misinterpreted Yahweh's intention for them because their own desires led them astray. This heart-searching conviction becomes the central issue of Book #3, *Loyal: The Story of Haggith*. Haggith, the daughter of Hebron's chief priest, has memorized the entire five books of God's Law. She's disappointed in Hebron's priests, including her father, when the whole nation of Judah anoints a lawbreaker as Judah's king. When she publicly snubs David and his three wives, the royal household is forced to seriously search their hearts.

What if they did misunderstand Yahweh's will for them, and their marriages broke God's Law? What should they do to make it right—after Nomy has a son and Abigail is already pregnant? Have you ever gotten in the middle of the creek and realized God didn't give you a paddle?

On the other hand, David was the LORD's chosen king. Did he have a special exemption from some laws because he had a 1-800-GOD phone to speak more directly with Yahweh than anyone else? I don't believe God would ever justify sin. For those who have read

my earlier books, I hope you remain confident that biblical accuracy is nonnegotiable.

Can we set aside our twenty-first-century queasiness when David and his two wives *think* they hear Yahweh's approval for David to marry "many" wives? Can we also agree that the repercussions of sin don't always come immediately after the sin?

Read 2 Samuel 3:22ff to count the awful consequences David's household faces right before and after he conquers Jerusalem. David's and his wives' lifelong family woes can be directly linked to his early marriages.

LORD, save us from justifying our sins by finding ways to reshape Your perfect will into our own misshapen, earthly desires.

Follow me, now, out of the twenty-first century, and let's immerse ourselves in the Truth, facts, and fiction of David's life. To prepare your heart and mind, read 1 Samuel 27 through 2 Samuel 2:7, and come with me to the land of the Philistines.

Over a year ago, David, Ahinoam, Abigail, and David's army of six hundred men with all their families fled the Judean wilderness and now live under the protection of Gath's King Achish. David has been so successful in raiding outlying villages and returning plunder to Gath's king that Achish gives David and his camp the Philistine town of Ziklag—and appointed David governor. But life is never as simple as it seems . . .

PROLOGUE

DAVID

In those days the Philistines gathered their forces to fight against Israel. Achish said to David, "You must understand that you and your men will accompany me in the army." David said, "Then you will see for yourself what your servant can do." Achish replied, "Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life."

I Samuel 28:1-2

Sivan (May), 1010 BC
Ziklag, Philistine Territory

My wives, as different as the sun and moon, had each been as essential to me as those lights in the sky during our sixteen months in Philistia. Ahinoam stood two paces away. Those who knew her softer side called her *Nomy*, and I knew her scowl and crossed arms meant she was afraid.

"How can you follow King Achish into battle against Israel?" she snapped. "Against people you'll one day rule?" Her voice broke. She lifted her chin, swiped at her eyes, and waited for my answer.

It didn't matter that we'd discussed the matter privately a dozen times. My sister Zerry had asked the same question repeatedly, as

had her three sons Joab, Abishai, and Asahel. So why had my feisty wife voiced her concern publicly, moments before I led my men out of Ziklag's city gate?

Because Ahinoam bat Toren, my brave Kenite wife, wanted everyone to hear the answer Yahweh had given me last night.

After sharing a knowing look with her, I turned to meet the expectant faces of six hundred soldiers, their wives, and the families who had gathered around the central well at dawn. Their eyes felt like hundreds of tiny arrows piercing me. Could I convince them to follow when even I wasn't sure of Yahweh's reason or purpose?

Follow Me. My Good Shepherd's whisper had woken me in the night. I'd been guided by His rod and staff for nearly eight years—since the night Saul's assassins first came for me in Gibeah—long enough to know His voice.

"The LORD is on His throne," I said for all to hear. "He examines everyone on earth. Those who love violence, He hates with a passion. The LORD knows the righteous because *He* is righteous. He loves justice, and those who are upright will see His face."

Silence answered. I'd hoped for a few nods of understanding, if not approval. Dawn's amber glow revealed not only weary faces but also my men's empty eyes. We were all exhausted from constant raiding, but the wary way they looked at me now had begun two days ago.

I had arrived in Gath with a small contingent of men, going straight to King Achish's court to deliver a large amount of plunder. We'd raided another Amalekite village, but I, of course, told the king what I always said: The booty had come from the destruction of more Judean villages. After praising our willingness to see what Achish called "the larger picture," he then informed us that my entire army would accompany his troops to Aphek. We would then join the four other Philistine nations to completely destroy Israel.

I'd fallen to my knees, head bowed to conceal my horror. "I'm honored," I lied, mind reeling. How could we fight our own kinsmen? But how could we not? What other choice did I have but to continue the deception with this king who had been our only protection from King Saul?

On our trek back to Ziklag, my small contingent had traveled in silence. Though we arrived well after the night watch had begun, I gathered my Mighty Men to ask if any of them could think of a way out. That was when I realized their empty stares had become their new normal. Only the silence was new. Though we'd obeyed God's command given generations ago to Joshua and destroyed our enemies in Canaan—the Geshurites, Girzites, and Amalekites—the ceaseless killing of every man, woman, and child had darkened our souls.

But, again, we had no choice. If we left a single one of those villagers alive, they could have told Achish, and it would have been our women and children who would have died instead.

I scanned my people's haunted faces in the brightening light of dawn. "Our tortured souls prove our righteousness before God." My voice quaked as I added, "We find no pleasure in killing, my friends, but we will *always* obey God."

"God didn't tell us to fight our own people!" someone shouted over the gathering.

"Why not fight Achish?" another cried.

Scattered grumbles rolled like a wave among the throng, and Joab leapt to the top of the well, startling the dissenters to a hush. "The King of Gath has given us this city, its surrounding grain fields, and orchards," he reminded them. "Would you like to return to the wilderness and survive on broom-tree broth and less than a cup of water per day for your family?"

I motioned him off the well, nodding my thanks. However, hearing Joab's fears pierced my heart. Had it really been Achish who

saved us? Was it really my deceptions that had won his favor? *Forgive me, Yahweh.* I'd become too dependent on a Philistine king and attributed Yahweh's protection to merely human efforts.

"Under whose authority do I serve?" Wide eyes met my query. "I've acted as if I'm under King Achish's authority and relegated Yahweh's power to mere prayers at waking, meals, and bedtime. Well, no more!" The sounds of rustling stirred my whole camp. "I am a man under Yahweh's authority, and *He* hasn't yet commanded me to engage the Philistines in battle. I truly believe when we join the Philistine armies in battle against Israel, we will see a miracle on the scale of how God fought for Joshua and the Israelites."

"How can Yahweh expect our husbands to completely destroy the Canaanites in our Land when even Joshua and our ancestors couldn't do it?" This from Joab's wife, Vered, who always spoke her mind. My general lowered his head, unwilling as usual to correct his outspoken wife.

Ahinoam stepped between Vered and me like a shield. "Think of the generations of innocent Israelites who could have been saved if Joshua and the Israelites who wandered that desert for forty years had obeyed God's command. But obedience seemed too hard, God's commands too harsh."

"And it's still too harsh," Vered snapped.

"The LORD is on His throne," I thundered back at the presumptuous woman. "And with His eternal view of past, present, *and* future, He's far more equipped to determine justice than you or I." When she drew a breath to argue, I turned my attention to my men. "We march with the Philistines and watch for a miracle. Yahweh's king obeys His commands, trusting His righteousness and steadfast love to guide His reasons."

Silence met the sunrise, and I looked to Asahel, my youngest nephew, for support. "Do you trust Yahweh?" I asked.

"I do." He kept a possessive hand on his son's shoulder.

“And why do you fight for Yahweh?” I asked, coaxing him with a grin.

He inhaled a deep breath and bellowed his declaration. “Because my obedience helps save my children’s future!” His son, Zebadiah, danced and clapped, spreading his excitement.

I shouted over the rising noise. “I would not choose a life of violence, but I will always choose to obey our God.” Hoisting my sword overhead, I shouted, “For Yahweh!”

My nephews and captains gave a hearty war cry, and a few others joined them. Others drew their families close and still avoided my gaze. I opened my arms, beckoning Nomy and Abigail to nestle at my sides. As the noise settled into sad good-byes, a low hum snagged my attention.

Then, with the practiced resonance of a Levite anointed to worship, Amasai sang the words of a familiar chorus. “I keep my eyes always on the LORD. With Him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.” The captain of my Mighty Men often led us in worship, and this morning, his loud, clear voice was more soothing than birdsong. Men’s bass rumble added low tones while the women’s lilting harmonies set the children to dancing.

Our wives had sacrificed much to keep their families strong during our years of fleeing Saul in Judah’s wilderness. When Yahweh revealed that Saul would indeed kill me if we remained within Israel’s borders, my men and their families followed to Philistia, leaving behind everyone and everything they knew.

Abigail, tall and willowy, slipped her arm around my waist and captured my gaze. “Nomy and I trust Yahweh to bring you home safely.”

Nomy, petite but full of fight, turned my chin toward her. “You’d better come home safely.” Placing her free hand on her rounded belly, she added, “Abigail and I don’t intend to raise your son alone.”

I pulled them both into a ferocious hug. Nomy had miscarried

our first baby last year, and Abigail had taken the loss as if it were her own child. All of us poured out our weeping and groaning before the God who both gives and takes away. So when the Lord opened Nomy's womb for the second time, Abigail seemed as delighted as the woman who carried my child. Though Abigail's womb remained empty, these two women loved each other as sisters and allowed me to love each of them wholeheartedly. It seemed to me another of Yahweh's miracles—akin to the Red Sea's parting.

Nomy used the cloak draped over my shoulder to wipe her tears and runny nose.

"Stop that!" Abigail handed her a cloth from her waist belt.

Nomy waved away the offering. "I don't need it now."

With a good-natured huff, Abigail tucked the cloth back into her belt.

The two shared a grin, and my chest ached at the thought of leaving them for so long. Achish had said we'd meet with the other Philistine kings and their four armies at Aphek, which was a three-day march from Ziklag. They anticipated another day or two to reach the Jezreel Valley, where the battle would likely take place.

"We could be gone as long as a month if we're involved in the cleanup." A knot lodged in my throat. *Yahweh, please protect Jonathan.* Saul's crown prince had been kinder to me than any of my brothers and as dear as my closest kin.

Nomy held my face between work-callused hands. "Jonathan is Israel's best warrior. He'll be fine. You must concentrate on protecting *yourself*." She often could read my thoughts. It was sometimes annoying, but this time it was comforting. "If you must fight," she continued, "don't hesitate. Use spear and sling at a distance. Let the larger warriors fight hand-to-hand with sword and dagger." My Kenite wife was a better military strategist than my captains and the best dagger thrower in camp.

Thankfully, she no longer begged to fight beside me. When she conceived, the realization came that she could serve our army best by working the metal forges as her abba, Toren the Kenite, had taught her. They'd forged every blade our army carried.

I realized she was trembling and opened my arms to offer comfort if she wanted it. She came willingly, my little warrior. I heard her sniffing. "I'll be all right," I murmured.

She only nodded. Nomy hated to cry—hated even more when anyone saw her crying.

Before she could wipe her nose on my shoulder again, I nudged her forward and lifted her chin. "While the men are gone, you must keep the women's throwing skills sharp. You've made them as capable at wielding a blade as most farmers."

"Our women could best any farmer." She gave me a rueful smile, and I laughed with my sassy wife.

Too quickly, we were interrupted by nine quick shofar blasts—the official call to arms. Abigail's breath caught, and Nomy's eyes widened.

"Take care of each other," I told them.

Abigail offered Nomy the cloth from her belt. This time she took it and ran toward our stacked-stone home. Abigail remained. I knew she would. I brushed her cheek, silently thanking her.

When I turned away, I left behind all tenderness. My muscles tightened. My focus narrowed to a single truth. To stay alive, I must only be David ben Jesse, Yahweh's anointed. Forget all else.

I walked away from the families, through my army, and toward the gate. Joab called the men to ranks. The Three fell in step behind me, and the Mighty Men led their contingents in groups of twenty. I had barely marched a hundred paces beyond Ziklag's gate when my heart betrayed me and I glanced over my shoulder.

Abigail was standing at the gate. Of course she was. We kept marching. I kept looking back. Abigail remained until the distance

pulled her beneath the horizon. Abigail needed to experience everything, the best and worst Yahweh gave us. Nomy needed to process hard things alone, and she loved more fiercely than anyone I'd ever known.

My wives. So very different. And I loved them both.

Lord God, be our Shield until we're together again.

PART I



The Philistines gathered all their forces at Aphek, and Israel camped by the spring in Jezreel. As the Philistine rulers marched with their units of hundreds and thousands, David and his men were marching at the rear with Achish . . . But the Philistine commanders were angry with Achish and said, “[David] must not go with us into battle, or he will turn against us during the fighting.” So Achish called David and said to him, “As surely as the LORD lives, you have been reliable, and I would be pleased to have you serve with me in the army . . . but the rulers don’t approve of you. Now turn back and go in peace; do nothing to displease the Philistine rulers . . .” So David and his men got up early in the morning to go back to the land of the Philistines, and the Philistines went up to Jezreel.

1 Samuel 29:1-2, 4, 6-7, 11



ONE

MAAKAH

Ner was the father of Kish, Kish the father of Saul, and Saul the father of Jonathan, Malki-Shua, Abinadab and Esh-Baal.

1 Chronicles 8:33

Sivan (May), 1010 BC

The girl in the mirror wasn't fit for a prince, not even King Saul's fourth-born. Staring at my drab reflection in the body-length polished bronze, the future of our Geshurite kingdom weighed heavy on my shoulders. "What if Prince Esh-Baal rejects me, Zulat?"

My maid stopped humming and looked up from packing our wooden trunk. "Prince Esh-Baal likely had no more choice than you did in the betrothal. Kings make those decisions to secure peace and power. A woman's power is strengthened when she brings pleasure to her husband, and Asherah's priestesses have trained you to do so."

I examined my reflection again. "The high priestess said, 'Women love with their hearts and men with their eyes.' Esh-Baal's eyes will not love a dowdy princess devoid of cosmetics who wears peasant's clothes."

"Those clothes will keep you safe," Zulat said, then looked over

my shoulder into the polished bronze. “Remember what your ima and I have taught you: ‘Royalty is born, not worn.’ Your prince will see your beauty soon enough, and then you’ll do as every shrewd wife does. Allow him to believe he’s in control, then slip a gold ring in his nose and lead him wherever you desire.” With a tap on my nose, she added, “Focus on our new home. In five days our caravan will reach Gibeah, and you’ll sit at King Saul’s table as his honored guest.”

“Or I’ll skulk back to Geshur after his son rejects me.”

“Stop that.” Zulat turned my shoulders to face her. “Israel needs this alliance as much as Geshur. Israel needs our favor to send their trade goods through Damascus, and whoever wins Israel’s favor controls the trade routes between Egypt and the East. A treaty with Israel strengthens our position among the other Aramean nations.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “It’s barely dawn, Zulat. Too early for a lesson. Let’s just say I’ll be amazed if the marriage actually happens.” *Especially considering Kepha died in battle only two weeks before we were wed.*

My longtime maid could see through my words and into the window of my soul. “How can you still be afraid to hope? It’s been six years, Prin.”

Shame sent a flame up my neck and into my face. “Why would I fear to hope? Simply because Prince Kepha chose to go to war and get himself killed rather than marry me?”

“No one chooses to die in battle. Any man, no matter how brave or skilled, is in danger on a battlefield.” Waving away my emotions, she returned to her packing.

Again swallowing the pain—as fresh as it still felt six years later—I tried to tamp down thoughts of Kepha and returned my attention to the mirror’s reflection. I looked worse than a kitchen maid in our palace. Kepha wouldn’t even recognize me. No matter how hard I tried, the memories of him were everywhere and always haunting.

I'd been infatuated with the Damascus prince since childhood. I was barely twelve harvests old when he was declared a great warrior. He was only sixteen.

I watched for him at the annual Aramean harvest festivals and could hardly tear my eyes away when I found him among the other princes. When he was eighteen harvests old, broad-shouldered and wearing a golden jeweled crown, he caught me staring. Rather than the snide squint I expected from such a god among men, his mouth curved into an appreciative smile.

I'd quickly looked away, hoping none of the royalty in the crowded hall had noticed our exchange. Likely, everyone else was too busy enjoying Baal's priests and Asherah's priestesses sacrificing their firstfruits of harvest. Why did I suddenly feel embarrassed by the intimacy of their worship? I stole another glance at the handsome prince. This time, he was whispering something to his abba and mine. The men laughed together, and after all three gave a curt nod, both kings turned toward the crowd and clapped their hands, halting the celebration.

The Damascene king announced, "My son, Prince Kepha, has asked to begin betrothal negotiations with King Talmai in order to marry his daughter, Princess Maakah. It is our hope that such a union will strengthen the bonds of Damascus and Geshur, thereby increasing the power of our entire Aramean empire." The gathering erupted in applause while I covered a gasp.

I could only stare as Kepha left his family table and walked straight toward where I sat with Ima on the royal women's elevated dais. With three long strides, he bounded from the floor to the platform—skipping the three steps—and knelt before me while cradling my right hand between his. "If you agree to begin negotiations," he whispered to only me, "then I will visit you regularly in Geshur so we won't feel like strangers on our wedding night." His lips brushed the back of my hand, which somehow made my

heart race yet calmed many fears. I had no words but emphatically nodded my approval. The whole banquet hall had erupted in celebration.

For three months, he'd made weekly visits to Geshur's palace. My training with the priestesses to ensure I knew how to please a husband increased, but the tenderness Kepha displayed during his visits seemed to contradict the lessons from the power-hungry priestesses, my ima, and Zulat. Could the two women who taught me all I knew of life be wrong about how to love *my* husband-to-be?

During Kepha's last visit, he'd said, "In one month's time, as soon as our Damascene troops quash the Syrophoenician uprising, I'll make you my bride."

So I waited. A week. Then two. On the twenty-third day after Kepha left me, Abba barged into my chamber, his face crimson with rage. "Your prince got himself killed! What sort of imbecile dies two weeks before his wedding?" He picked up an Egyptian vase and threw it against the wall, then marched out of my chamber.

The next day, when I appeared in Abba's courtroom for my daily lesson on judicial wisdom, my eyes were puffy and red-rimmed. Abba and Ima asked why I appeared out of sorts, and I'd barely spoken Kepha's name when they ordered me out of the courtroom. "Return when you've regained your royal composure," Ima said.

I fled the throne room, and when Zulat finally returned to my chamber, her knuckles were swollen and bleeding. "I've taken the beating for your lapse in royal behavior—as I always do." She straightened her spine and looked down her button nose. "The Damascene king has refused to offer another prince in Kepha's stead."

"I don't want another . . ." Emotion overwhelmed me.

"Good, good," Zulat said. "If you so much as mention Prince Kepha's name or shed another tear on his behalf in your parents' presence, I will be beaten again."

“Am I to forget he existed?” I shouted. “Can my heart forget how to beat?”

“Tears show weakness. If you must grieve, Prin, speak of him only to me.”

Since that day, I’d seldom spoken his name—not even to Zulat. Yet Kepha still haunted my dreams. Studying the peasant girl in my mirror, I think he would have loved me even in this drab robe. “Perhaps the gods will send Esh-Baal to war before we marry.”

Zulat slammed the trunk lid closed and stood to face me. “I should hope you’ll never say such a thing outside these walls, Princess Maakah. You’re Geshur’s only hope.”

Unfortunately, she was right. I was considered an old maid at twenty harvests and was Abba’s only political bargaining power as Geshur’s royal heir. But our nation’s hope for an influential marriage had begun to wane. The betrothal to Esh-Baal was like piercing the bloated carcass of a long-dead camel. Though it relieved the building pressure, it also released a humiliating stench since my bridegroom was a fourth-born, second-generation donkey farmer who had refused to personally come to Geshur and escort me back to his home in Gibeah.

“I know leaving Geshur for the first time is frightening.” Zulat placed a hand on my shoulder. “And every bride is nervous about that first—”

“I’m not afraid.” I rushed toward the door, refusing to stir more emotions before my farewell to Abba and Ima. “It’s well past sunrise, and I’m tired of waiting for Abba’s summons to the throne room.” I flung open the door, startling my chamber guards. Nodding curtly, I marched past them, trying not to think about this being my last journey down the harem hallway.

“Princess Maakah!” Zulat’s angry tone halted me, but I refused to face her. “You will not enter the throne room uninvited.”

“Sometimes you forget I’m no longer a child in your care. Can you

think of anything more important to Geshur than my betrothal?" I stared straight ahead, waiting for an answer from the tutor who had taught me of national politics. "Well? Can you think of *anything* more important?"

"Yes—you."

I wanted to scream. *If I'm so important, why did Abba promise me to a fourth-born prince?* Instead, I resumed the hurried pace down the hall, determination driving me to the hardest farewell of my life.

Winding through the palace hallways, I approached the throne room and noted Abba's guards widening their stance. "Princess Maakah," said the ranking officer. "King Talmai has ordered that we allow no one to enter until he and Queen Raziah resolve a difficult matter."

With regal calm, I threatened deadly consequences. "My caravan waits to leave for Gibeah. How will King Talmai punish you if you're the reason for my late arrival in Israel, my canceled betrothal, and our ruined peace treaty?" I paused only long enough to lift an eyebrow. "My abba keeps no secrets from me. Open those doors immediately."

"Yes, Your Highness." The guard nodded to his partner, and they swung open the cedar doors.

I crossed the threshold, victorious, and only then heard Abba's angry voice. He'd descended the dais and stood with his back to the doors, face-to-face with a dust-covered messenger. The other man spoke Hebrew—the language of my soon-to-be husband—which I'd learned in order to rule and trade. Before I could interpret his words, Abba reached for his sword and swung backhanded. The man's eyes widened as a glint of bronze approached his neck. Then a terrible shoosh. Then a thud when his head hit the floor. His body slumped at Abba's feet. Blood poured out—a river of it—flowing over and between the mosaic tiles.

Abba spit on the dead man. Only when he lifted his head did he turn and see me.

I covered a sob. Swallowed back the gorge in my throat.

He flung his sword across the floor. "Maakah, come to me."

His open arms beckoned, but I couldn't move. I glanced at Ima, still on the elevated dais and seated on her small throne. She said nothing. Rather, with only a raised brow, she demanded, *Remember your training!* How many times had she stanching my tears or calmed a tantrum with the same silent stare? I was born royal, yes, but I would remain royal only by the same iron will.

"Maakah." Abba commanded my attention.

I looked at him again, this violent stranger.

He walked toward me, hands extended. "We have much to discuss." He looked like a monster, blood dripping from his beard.

"Wipe your face!" I stepped back and bumped into Zulat.

Cradling me in arms meant to both comfort and control, she whispered, "You must obey our king."

Abba stopped two paces before me, suddenly examining his blood-stained hand and chest. He pulled a cloth from his belt, wiped himself clean, and tossed his soiled cloth and breastplate aside. When he focused on me again, the slight crease between his brows forecast the gentleness in his voice. "You're trembling, little one. Let me hold you."

There he was. My protector. My champion. The dripping proof of the violent stranger wiped away, I fell against his muscled chest. Here was the safe place I'd found refuge from many storms. These were the arms that comforted me after Ima's miscarriages. His were the tender words that patiently corrected my frequent missteps as a princess learning Geshur's rules of law and social justice.

"Azam." Abba quietly addressed his captain over my head.

"Yes, my king?"

"Didn't I specifically say *no one* was to enter this room until my business with Saul's messenger was concluded?"

“You did, my king.”

“You will execute the guards who allowed my daughter to enter.”

“Abba, no!” I pushed away. “It was my fault.”

He frowned. “Did you physically overpower the two guards at the throne room doors?”

“No, but—”

“Then my guards chose to disobey me. Their choice was not your fault.” His small black eyes bored into mine. I looked away, ceding the battle to my king.

The captain’s sandals made no sound as he strode toward the door. No one could save the guards I’d convinced to disobey. My regret bowed to birthright, and I embraced my royal acquittal: *Their choice was not your fault.*

So why did I feel as if I’d just killed two good men?

A commotion near the dais brought me back to the moment. Two royal guards dragged the dead messenger toward the throne room’s side door, where four maids entered with buckets and rags to wash away the mess. Everyone seemed so proficient, as if their tasks were a common occurrence. With gut-twisting recollection, I recalled the many times before I’d been denied entry into this throne room.

How many people had lost their heads in King Talmai’s court? How naïve I’d been to tell those poor guards my abba kept no secrets from me. Such a gullible princess would make a poor political bride.

Political bride? My breath caught. “Abba, did you say that man was King Saul’s messenger?”

“He was.” Abba held my gaze, allowing silence to dismantle my future.

I choked out a dry laugh, then glanced at Ima on her throne and back at the madman who beheaded King Saul’s messenger. “Should I assume my betrothal to Prince Esh-Baal is now canceled?”

He produced a small scroll from his belt. “The messenger deliv-

ered King Saul's betrothal termination, so I thanked him for doing his duty."

"You killed a man simply for delivering a message?"

"Saul would have expected it and likely sent someone disposable."

His smile chilled my blood. I stepped away and whispered, "King Saul canceled the betrothal before he even saw me?"

Abba brushed my cheek. "You still haven't learned, Prin. Your marriage will never be based on your beauty or companionship. You are the tip of Geshur's sword and will lead your nation to greatness by your ability to manipulate the husband we choose." A slight grin curved his lips before he extended his hand toward the dais. "Let's join your ima to discuss our new plan."

"Come, Prin." Ima beckoned with an outstretched hand, wiggling her fingers as if I were a toddler learning to walk. Her perfectly applied cosmetics starkly contrasted her pallor. Was she ill? Or was she equally horrified at the violence and Abba's sterilized thoughts on marriage? Of course I knew my role as Geshur's only heir, but Abba had never described my life so austere.

I ascended the few steps and sat on the plush tapestry between my parents' thrones. Examining Ima's pale features, I asked, "Are you well?"

"As well as any ima whose daughter is leaving today."

I turned to Abba. "I'm still going to Gibeah?"

"Of course not." He waved a dismissive hand where the dead messenger had lain, then handed me the small scroll from his belt. "In the interest of time, I'll summarize King Saul's message. The scroll says King Saul broke the betrothal out of concern for your safety during Israel's tumultuous time. He and his troops have already marched to the Jezreel Valley to battle the Philistines. His oldest three sons lead Israel's army, but his fourth-born coward was left to rule at the palace in Gibeah. However, my spies say

Saul broke the betrothal because he feared offending his priests and a dead prophet named Samuel. Yahweh's priests warned him that marrying a pagan princess would offend their invisible god. So, in hopes of appeasing them all, Saul canceled the betrothal and removed *Baal* from Prince Esh-Baal's name, now calling him, Ish-Bosheth." Abba leaned forward with a sneer. "Saul should have feared offending me because soon his fourth-born son shall be called *dead*."

My mouth was suddenly dry, realizing again the level of violence my abba was capable of.

"You deserve a warrior, my beautiful girl." He leaned back and exchanged a glance with Ima. "Our lovely girl will marry a man favored by all gods and many nations; a man who fights with the Philistines against Saul's weak leadership. You will marry David ben Jesse—the *next* king of Israel."

I recoiled. "You want me to marry an outlaw?"

"A *warrior*," he said sternly. "David ben Jesse is shrewd and worthy of a throne. He's avoided Saul's capture for years and won the favor of your *dohd*, King Achish."

Ima laid a hand on my shoulder, gently coaxing my attention. "My brother isn't an easy man to impress. Yet even after David ben Jesse killed Achish's champion, Goliath, several years ago, this Hebrew has somehow won my brother's trust."

"Your *dohd* Achish made David the governor of Ziklag." Abba tilted his head, features softening with the familiar tenderness saved only for Ima and me. "If this David has the courage and charisma to win Achish's approval, I believe he might even win your heart, Prin. So I sent a messenger with the betrothal proposal shortly after Saul's messenger arrived."

"Without my consent?" I turned to Ima for support. "David ben Jesse has no royal blood, and worse, no loyalty. He fights with the Philistines and betrays his homeland."

Her coloring still looked gray. “A betrothal to Israel’s next king is better than a marriage to a royal coward.”

“It’s decided.” Abba pounded the arm of his throne. “David has already marched north with the Philistine army. Our messenger will wait south of Jezreel until the battle is over. My spies say the Philistines will place David on Israel’s throne when the Philistines destroy King Saul and his successors. In the meantime, my best guards will escort your caravan to one of our Geshurite villages in the southern kingdom, where you’ll wait for David to return to his home in Ziklag.”

“I’m going to the southern kingdom?” The thought of it soothed today’s unrest. “Have you instructed the caravan leader which village we’re to visit first, or may I decide?”

Abba grinned, revealing the single dimple at the top of his beard on his left cheek. “If you’re to be Israel’s queen, you must begin to rule.”

I leaned up to kiss that dimple and tried to suppress a squeal. It had been nearly ten years since I’d seen the governor’s family. “Alannah is probably married with children of her own by now.” She’d been my favorite friend in Geshur before she and several other noblemen’s families traveled into Dohd Achish’s territory to expand Geshur’s influence under Philistine protection.

“While you’re waiting, you must do more than just visit with friends.” Abba’s dimple disappeared. “We’ve had reports that some of our southern villages have been attacked, probably by Amalekites, which is likely the reason their tribute payments have lapsed. You will summon the elders from each village and demand an accounting. Whatever their explanation, you must decide which is deserved—punishment or mercy—and then dispense it judiciously. Understood?”

“Yes, Abba.” The responsibility felt like a sack of grain on each shoulder.

“After David ben Jesse has been anointed Israel’s king and agrees

to marry you, Achish will order him to fetch you from our southern villages. Israel's new king will recognize the brilliant work you've done with our southern villages and most likely declare you Israel's queen before your wedding week has ended."

Israel's queen. The title was a balm over my trepidation. I glanced at Ima again. Her pallor was more than concerning. "Are you sure you're all right?"

She exchanged an unreadable look with Abba. He nodded, and she smiled at me. "I'm with child, Prin."

Fear shot through me. "You're . . . No!" Her last miscarriage nearly took her life. "I can't leave until I know you're safe."

She cupped my chin. "You'll leave as planned and without argument. Your marriage to David ben Jesse will secure Geshur's trade and strengthen our role among the Aramean nations." She leaned forward and kissed my forehead. "Remember, royal blood means kingdom first—always."

When she leaned back, Abba reached for her hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze. "If we have a son," he said, returning his attention to me, "I'll have an heir to the throne. If we have a second daughter, you and David ben Jesse will inherit Geshur's throne."

More unknowns. And Ima's pregnancy had been another secret they'd kept from me. I stood, bowed, and etched my parents' hopeful faces into my memory. "I love you," I said, turning quickly so as not to be disappointed when they didn't reply. My parents had never spoken of their love for me. Knowing it was true had always been enough.

I walked on wobbly legs out of the palace, and Zulat steadied me as we descended the long staircase toward the grand entry. The morning air carried with it the freshwater scent of Yam Kinneret. I would miss Asherah's sacred sea amid our southern kingdom's arid lands. Though I'd never traveled beyond the walls of Geshur and my future felt as if I were grasping smoke, by the gods, I would make Geshur proud.