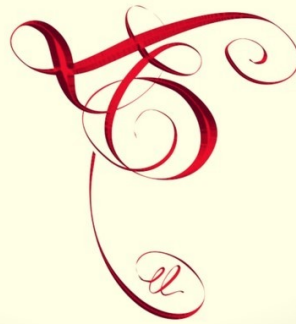


# ISAIAH'S DAUGHTER



*eShort Preludes*

*by Mesu Andrews*

UNWELCOMED CHANGES -  
AYA'S STORY

PRELUDE TO: ISAIAH'S DAUGHTER



MESU ANDREWS

## CHAPTER 1



Aya gasped awake in the darkness, shutting out the haunting shrieks in her dream to hear the soft snores of her three little sisters. Shaking as if in the dead of winter, Aya rose from her sweat-soaked mat and looked out her window. The moon was bright in a cloudless summer sky. There would be plenty of time to tell Abba and Ima about the dream before the family woke. She had promised to tell her parents every time Yahweh spoke to her. The night visions were coming more often. This one had come three nights in a row.

*Why have You chosen me, Yahweh? Please, choose another.*

Her small room was littered with younger sisters. She stepped carefully over little Sarah and then over the two older girls by the doorway. Three more siblings lay in the main room. Aya tip-toed over her brothers, past the smoldering cook fire, and stopped at their parents' bedchamber. Pressing her ear against the door, she heard the hum of faint whispers.

Why would her parents be awake? Cold dread snaked up her spine as a drop of sweat ran down. Surely, the dream couldn't yet have begun its fulfillment already.

She pecked lightly on the door and heard a halting, “Come in.” The leather hinges groaned as she pushed her way inside. Abba’s head lay in Ima’s lap. Ima looked up, eyes pleading. “Another dream? Was it the same again?”

The answers stuck in Aya’s throat when she saw her abba’s red face, the bowl of water, and the presumably cool cloth Ima used to dab his fevered brow. Aya could only nod as her eyes filled with tears.

“Tell me again. All of it.” Ima’s tone brooked no argument, but Aya shook her head.

She refused to repeat the awful truths she’d spoken last night—and the night before. A plague was coming to Jerusalem. Many would die—including Ima, Abba, and Aya’s three brothers.

Abba groaned and lifted his hand, calling Aya to his side.

Unable to deny him, she hurried to the straw-filled mattress, fell to her knees, and buried her face against his hand. “I’m sorry, Abba. I wish I could change the dreams or make them stop. I don’t want to lose you and Ima. Or the boys. I don’t want the death angel to visit Jerusalem.”

“Go, to the Temple, Aya,” he whispered. “Bring Zechariah here.”

Her head shot up. “The high priest? Why?” Terror shoved aside her grief. “What will he do to me? I’ve heard people do terrible things to prophets who speak doom.”

Abba’s lips curved into a grin. “You know Zechariah and his wife Beriah would never harm you, my girl. They’ve been our friends for years. I must tell them how to care for my family when your ima and I are gone.”

Aya covered a sob and frantically shook her head. “No, Abba. We must find a way to change Yahweh’s mind. We must ask Master Zechariah to present an offering or—” Aya’s panic rose with the ever-increasing resolve as she watched her parents’ faces. “How can you be so calm?” she shouted at her ima, exasperated.

They hadn't seen the vivid dream, the streets filled with mourners, every household in Jerusalem touched by death.

Ima kissed Abba's brow and gently moved his head from her lap to his lamb's wool pillow. She scooted off the mattress and cupped Aya's elbow, leading her away from the bed and keeping her voice low. "I remain calm for your abba's sake. I suspect I'm as frightened as you are."

For the first time, Aya noticed a sheen of sweat on Ima's brow, and felt the heat from her fevered hand. Ima swayed slightly, and Aya steadied her. "You are of marriageable age, Aya, but your abba has been slow to begin betrothal proceedings because Yahweh began speaking to you through these dreams. He asked Zechariah to inquire at the prophets' camp in Tekoa if a prophetess should marry or remain single."

Aya's thoughts swirled with the new—and unwelcome—information. "I don't want to marry! I must care for you and Abba and the boys and—"

Ima placed two fingers against Aya's lips, silencing her. "As I said, no betrothal proceedings have begun. Since the plague has likely started, your abba and I think it best if Zechariah and Beriah take you and your three sisters into their home."

Aya agreed for the first time. "Sarah and their daughter Abijah are good friends. But I don't need to be a burden to the high priest and his wife. I can work for someone else and earn an income to help with the three little girls' care."

Ima drew Aya into her arms. "My brave girl. I know you can take on the world, but your abba and I think it best to have all four of our girls in Zechariah's care for a while. Then, at the proper time, your abba's position as second commander in the king's guard will leave a plentiful dowry for each of you to marry well."

Aya simply nodded and squeezed her ima tighter. Arguing wouldn't help. And she couldn't bring herself to tell Ima that in tonight's dream she saw the high priest mourning his own wife's

death. How could Yahweh's high priest care for his two-year-old daughter by himself—let alone four more girls? Aya closed her eyes and inhaled the sweet scent of her ima. Lavender and honey.

*Please, Yahweh, I'd rather be a poor farmer's wife than a prophetess of doom.*

## CHAPTER 2



Master Zechariah held his daughter Abijah in his arms, walking so quickly Aya found it difficult to keep up. She carried her two-year-old sister on her hip, while her other two sisters fairly jogged behind her.

They'd left Jerusalem immediately following the morning sacrifice on the first day the city gates had reopened. The mysterious plague, beginning with a stiff neck, fever, and headache, had spread through Judah's capital like a wildfire, killing hundreds.

King Uzziah had closed the city gates on the day not a single booth in the market opened for business. The mourners wailed in the streets. The dead burned in Ben Hinnom Valley. And Aya sat with her sisters alone for seven days in their house—unclean because they'd wrapped their family's dead bodies.

Her night visions had proven accurate to the last detail. But now a more recent dream cast a ray of hope into the dark corners of Aya's heart. Little Abijah looked over her abba's shoulder and grinned at Aya, waving timidly with a precocious grin. *Yes, that's the face I saw in my dream. Older. Radiant. With a crown on her head, she was seated beside a red-haired king of Judah.*

The joyous thought kept Aya's legs moving though they ached with the fatigue and sorrow of loss. She stepped around slow-moving travelers on the road south to Tekoa and called over her shoulder to her sisters. "Hurry, girls. Master Zechariah must deliver us to the prophets' camp and return to Jerusalem before the evening sacrifice."

Letting her gaze linger on the girls, she noted their stony expressions. They'd barely spoken since the high priest told them he couldn't care for them in Jerusalem. He said the prophet Amos had made arrangements for the high priest's daughter to live with a woman at his fig farm in Tekoa. And the girl to whom Yahweh spoke in dreams could live in a neighboring shack with her sisters. She must be with other prophets to hone her prophetic skills.

But a neighboring shack? Aya inhaled a sustaining breath and reminded herself that her parents had thought her old enough for betrothal. Surely, she would be capable of caring for her sisters alone in a shack.

"I know you girls are tired," the high priest called out. "But please hurry. I must get home before the evening sacrifice."

Little Abijah patted her abba's cheeks. "Abba go home?"

He pulled his daughter into a tight hug. "You're going to a new home, Abbi." "Ima home?" Abijah's eyes grew wide, her voice full of excitement.

Aya's battered heart felt every bruise during the long hesitation. Finally, Master Zechariah answered. "Ima is in Paradise, Abbi. Remember? You're going home to Tekoa." The man sniffed back emotion, maintaining the control demanded of a high priest by the Law of Moses. He'd been unable to rend his garment or shave his beard in mourning as other husbands had done.

Perhaps that was why Master Zechariah seemed so unfeeling. Cold. And Aya had determined to be equally strong. There was no time for tears or weakness. Her sisters required constant atten-



tion. Aya had fixed their meals. Bathed them. Planned and packed for this journey. It been two weeks since Aya had felt the reassuring arms of her parents' hugs. How long would it be until she felt anything but sorrow?

The sun was past midday when they crested the final hill overlooking the prophets' camp. "There it is." Master Zechariah pointed at a gated village in the valley below, an emerald jewel in the rocky-red Tekoan wilderness. "Amos and his wife, Yuval, are expecting us."

Flocks dotted the jagged rocks and cliffs surrounding the village. A thriving orchard bordered the east side of the valley, and fig trees in abundance sheltered stone houses from the harsh Tekoan sun.

The knot in Aya's stomach tightened with each step toward the city gate. When they finally reached the prophet Amos's doorway, Aya thought she might be sick. Before Master Zechariah could knock, a short, plump woman opened the door. Her smile drew them inside, and she patted little Abijah's cheek as Master Zechariah led them into the main room of the small home.

"Welcome, Zechariah," the woman said. "Please, rest by the table, and take your midday meal. I'm sure you're hungry." While the high priest settled himself and Abijah beside the table mat on the floor, the kind woman took Sarah from Aya's arms, her expression still warm but tears now gathering. "You poor dear. Did you carry this child all the way from Jerusalem?" She brushed Aya's cheek. "My name is Yuval, and you're a brave girl to care for your sisters through such a nightmare. Now, you must let the women in camp care for you. You're not alone anymore."

Mistress Yuval's kindness stripped away the armor that had shrouded Aya's heart since the plague began, and she dissolved into tears—then racking sobs. The woman passed Sarah to another sister and gathered Aya into a soft, warm hug. An ima's hug—that felt like a soaking rain on desert soil.

A large hand rested on Aya's back, startling her. She looked up to a tall, thin man with gray hair. "I'm Amos," he said, warmly. "We're glad you've come to Tekoa, little prophetess." He patted her back and nodded toward the high priest. "Have you told Zechariah of the dream Yahweh gave you about his daughter Abijah?"

The sticky-hot air in the room suddenly cooled, and Aya felt Yahweh's presence as surely as Amos's touch. "I haven't told anyone. How did you know?" It was a silly question to ask Yahweh's prophet.

Amos simply grinned. "Yahweh told me you were the one to declare it to the girl's abba." "What dream?" Zechariah rose from the mat and lifted Abijah into his arms.

Aya wiped the tears from her cheeks, now conscious that every eye in the room was on her. She offered her hand to little Abijah, who took it gladly as she'd done a thousand times before. "Master Zechariah," Aya began, swallowing audibly, "I saw Abbi with a jeweled crown on her head, seated on a throne, beside a red-haired king of Judah."

The high priest's expression was unchanged when he turned to Amos. "Surely, you can't agree. Royalty never marries the priesthood."

"Prince Ahaz has red hair." Amos lifted both brows, waiting for Master Zechariah's response.

"But Abbi won't be raised in Jerusalem. She'll be overlooked when the king seeks a nobleman's daughter for betrothal to his son. Why would he even consider the daughter of a priest?"

Amos ignored the protest and turned to Aya. "Because a prophetess will help raise her in this camp, and that prophetess will soon be betrothed to the king's cousin."

Aya nearly swallowed her tongue. He couldn't mean her. "You have another prophetess here?"

Amos' rich, deep laughter resonated through Aya, loosening

her tension. "Perhaps I should have warned you before I declared your involvement in Yahweh's plan." He offered an exaggerated bow and peeked up from beneath bushy gray brows. "Would the Lady Aya be agreeable to a match with Isaiah ben Amoz, cousin to the king?"

## CHAPTER 3



A week had passed since Aya, her sisters, and Abijah had arrived in Tekoa. The five girls were given a small house to live in together, and Mistress Yuval's promise had proven true. Not once had Aya felt alone. At least a dozen women had checked in on them. They'd helped with cooking, took the two-year-olds for play time, and invited the older girls to find friends among other children in camp.

Aya stayed busy with daily chores: grinding grain, carrying water, spinning and weaving wool from Master Amos's flocks. Everyone on the farm helped with whatever tasks needed doing in order that the prophets could remain focused on their training.

*The prophets.* Aya wondered what it would be like to be a *real* prophet? She'd only experienced a few dreams before and during the plague, but the men in camp actually heard Yahweh speak. Since arriving in Tekoa, Aya hadn't had any dreams. Had they stopped because she'd complained about proclaiming doom? Or was Yahweh silent because in the secret places of her heart, He knew she was angry that He'd taken away her parents and brothers?

"I think you would spin a goat bald if it stood beside you."

Yuval opened the door, chuckling. "I knocked, but you were focused on your spinning."

Aya looked at the basket beside her and realized she'd spun nearly all the wool while the other girls were out playing. "I'm sorry I didn't hear you. I've been keeping my hands busy so my mind doesn't work too hard."

Yuval tipped her chin up, inspecting her eyes. "I'd say your mind has been working even harder than your hands. Are you worried about meeting Isaiah?"

At the mention of her betrothed-to-be, Aya's stomach did a flip. She took a steadying breath before answering. "A little. Master Amos said *he* received direction from Yahweh for this betrothal, but I wonder if Isaiah heard the same." She tried to keep her voice light, but her concern weighed heavy.

Yuval pulled up a stool and sat opposite her, taking the spindle from Aya's hand and laying it aside. "Isaiah was born into the royal family, but his heart beats to the rhythm of the prophets. He wants nothing more than for Yahweh to rend the heavens and speak to him as He does to Jonah, Amos, and Hosea." She grinned, mischief in her eyes. "He's a little jealous of your dreams and is honored to marry a prophetess. Amos says he's more nervous about this meeting than you are."

The thought was so absurd, Aya felt her lips curve into a smile. "Royalty afraid to meet a soldier's daughter." She shook her head. "Yahweh has a way of turning our world upside down."

"He does indeed." Yuval sobered and reached for Aya's hands. "But I've watched you during these past days, my girl. You have the strength of a soldier and the grace of royalty."

Yahweh's wisdom is apparent in choosing you."

Feeling her cheeks warm, Aya ducked her head. "Thank you, Mistress Yuval." She hesitated, wishing for the hundredth time her *ima* was here to ask all the questions a girl needs to ask when facing marriage. "When exactly am I to meet the king's cousin?"

"He and Amos should be returning for the midday meal

anytime now.” “Now?” Panic shot through Aya, making her voice squeak.

Yuval squeezed her hands. “Remember, Yahweh has given you to Isaiah. You are a treasure in God’s sight and a precious gift to the young man you’ll marry.”

Trying to sort through her ragged emotions, Aya’s tears came unbidden. “I don’t feel like a treasure. I feel like Yahweh took away my parents and then left me. I haven’t had a dream since I arrived. If Isaiah only wants to marry me because I’m a prophetess, perhaps he’s making a mistake.”

Yuval kissed Aya’s forehead and drew close. “I don’t know why Yahweh took away your parents, but His silence doesn’t mean He’s left you. To the contrary. Yahweh has entrusted you with great hardship at a very young age.”

“Entrusted me?”

“Yes, little Aya. **Yahweh gives the most difficult trials to those He trusts will seek out the deepest corners of His heart.**”

Before Aya could ask more, a knock on the door stole her breath. She shot a panicked look at Yuval and found her smiling. “I told Amos to bring Isaiah here first so he could see how neatly you keep your house.”

She hurried to the door, leaving Aya to inspect all the little imperfections of her home. A dirty dish towel lay on the table. Abijah’s leather hair tie sat beside her sleeping mat, reminding her she’d neglecting to braid the little one’s hair. Aya heard the door scrape against the packed dirt floor and immediately studied her hands.

“Welcome!” Yuval’s voice was overly cheerful, and Aya wanted to wilt into the corner. “Come and meet Aya before we go to our house for the meal. Aya, dear, Isaiah’s here to greet you.”

Since there was no back door for escape, Aya rose slowly from her stool and turned toward their midday visitors. Amos’ brows were drawn up with anticipation. At the first glimpse of Isaiah, Aya’s breath caught.

He was nearly as tall as Amos with dark hair and intense, black eyes softened by long lashes. He crossed the room in four strides led by a radiant smile filled with straight, white teeth. When he reached Aya, he lifted her hand to his forehead—a sign of fealty as if she were royalty.

Her lips wouldn't move. Her tongue felt weighted, her head completely empty. What could she say to a cousin of Judah's king who knelt before her in a prophet's brown robe? And why was his hand shaking?

Finally, he looked up, still smiling, and stood slowly. "Thank you for agreeing to meet me today."

"I didn't agree. I just found out you were coming a few moments ago." The shock on his face told her how awful that sounded. "But I'm glad you came," she added when Amos and Yuval chuckled in the background.

"Well, that's a relief." Isaiah squeezed her hand, and it was only then she realized he was still holding it.

She didn't pull away. "I'm only a soldier's daughter, and I haven't had any dreams from Yahweh since arriving in Tekoa." Surely her confession would change the dreamy look on his face.

It did. A shadow of sadness darkened his features. He dropped her hand and cupped her cheeks. "My abba is a potter—who happens to be the uncle of the king of Judah. And Yahweh has never spoken to me. I'd say if you agree to be my wife, I'm marrying above my station."

Something in those dark eyes danced, and Aya knew then that she could get lost in them—for the rest of her life. "If you marry me, you'll have an instant family. My sisters and Yahweh's chosen queen of Judah are mine to help raise."

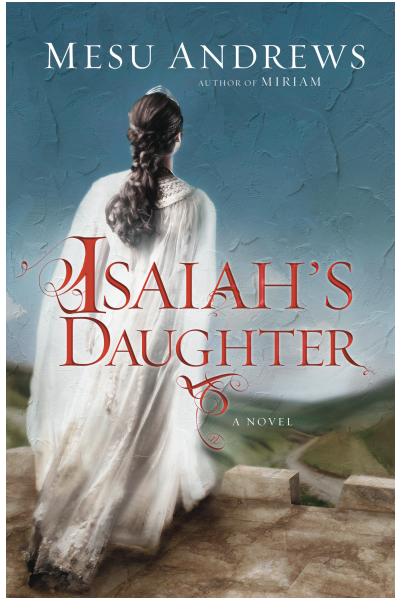
"I've heard," he said, grinning. "I'm an only child. I've always wanted a big family." She saw mischief but sincerity in his eyes. "All right then."

"All right?" Isaiah dropped his hands and stepped back. "You mean you'll marry me?"

Shy again, Aya felt her cheeks warm, and she peeked over his shoulder at Amos and Yuval. “I’m not sure what to do next, but yes.” She returned her gaze to Isaiah. “After all I’ve lost, I can only hope you are Yahweh’s gift to me. **I dare not dwell on the past and lose a future beyond my ability to see.**”



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