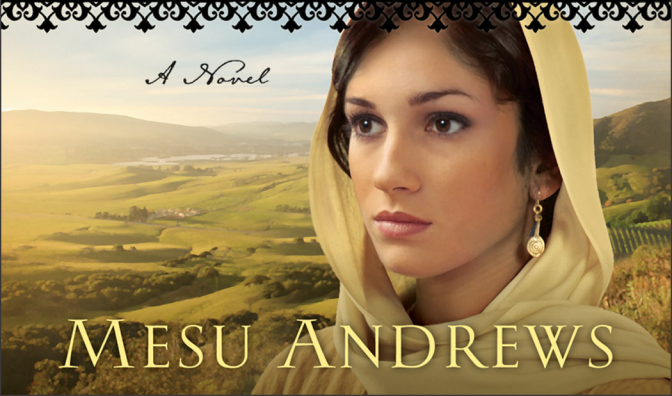




# LOVE'S SACRED SONG

*A Novel*



MESU ANDREWS



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# CHARACTER LIST

Abiathar	David's high priest
Abishag	Shulammitte maiden chosen as David's bed warmer
Absalom	David's third son; ima—Maacah; attempted rebellion when Solomon was a boy
Adonijah	David's fourth son; ima—Haggith; attempted coup while David was on his deathbed
Adoniram	Solomon's administrator of foreign labor
Ahishar	palace high steward; Son of Judah
Ammizabad	Benaiah's son; killed in battle
Amnon	David's firstborn son; ima—Ahinoam; raped his sister and was then killed by brother Absalom
Arielah	daughter of Jehoshaphat and Jehosheba; Shunem's treaty bride
Bakari	Egyptian ambassador
Barzillai	remained loyal to David during Absalom's rebellion
Bathsheba	Solomon's ima; David's wife (taken in adultery)
Benaiah	David's captain of the guard; Solomon's army commander
Bethuel	abba of Daughters of Jerusalem; royal tailor
Dalit	Bathsheba's handmaid
David	second king of Israel
Dodo	weaver in Shunem
Edna	matchmaker in Shunem

## *Love's Sacred Song*

Elihoreph	Solomon's chief secretary; Son of Judah
Eleazar	one of Benaiah's Mighty Men
Elisheba	Reu's ima; palace cook
Hannah	Abishag's sister; Arielah's handmaid
Hezro	one of Benaiah's Mighty Men
Hiram	king of Tyre (Phoenician)
Igal	Arielah's middle brother
Jehosheba	Arielah's ima
Jehoshaphat	Arielah's abba; Shunem's judge
Joab	David's army commander
Kemmuel	Arielah's oldest brother
Mahlon	Reu's surrogate abba; scribe
Marah	prostitute of Shunem; moves business to Jerusalem
Miriam	ima of Daughters of Jerusalem
Naamah	Solomon's Ammonite wife; ima of crown prince
Nahum	one-eyed palace guard
Nathan (prince)	Solomon's brother; son of David and Bathsheba
Nathan (prophet)	prophet; loyal to Solomon during Adonijah's coup
Oliab	watchman in Jerusalem
Phaltiel	chief elder in Shunem after Jehoshaphat
Psusennes	successor pharaoh to Sekhet's father
Rehoboam	Solomon's firstborn; son of Naamah
Reu	palace courier; Jehoshaphat's aide
Ruth	kind old woman in Shunem
Sarah	widow in Shunem
Sekhet	Pharaoh's daughter; Solomon's wife
Sherah	younger twin Daughter of Jerusalem
Shimei (Baal Hamon)	vinedresser at Baal Hamon
Shimei (Benjamite)	cursed David during Absalom's rebellion
Shiphrah	older twin Daughter of Jerusalem
Siamun	Pharaoh; Sekhet's father
Solomon	son of David and Bathsheba
Yoshim	Jehoshaphat's steward while in Jerusalem
Zadok	Solomon's high priest



# PART 1



# 1

## ❧ 1 CHRONICLES 12:23, 32 ❧

*These are the numbers of the men armed for battle . . .  
men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew  
what Israel should do.*

Arielah tiptoed around the sleeping forms of her surly brothers. Empty wineskins served as silent witnesses to their drunken slumber. Kemmuel and Igal would be snoring till dawn. They'd been a disgrace to Abba Jehoshaphat and to the tribe of Issachar since they were old enough to tend sheep.

Kemmuel rolled on his side and smacked his lips, and Arielah stood like a stone. A moment later, she reached for the iron handle and tugged open the rough-hewn cedar door. The bottom corner scraped the dirt and creaked on leather hinges. She held her breath. Glancing slowly over her shoulder, she sighed her relief at the steady rise and fall of her brothers' chests.

A shadow of melancholy swept over her. They looked so peaceful lying there, but their rage was a living thing boiling just beneath the surface. If only they would let her love them. But her big brothers rebuffed even the love Abba and

Ima tried to over. Arielah had learned at an early age to keep her distance or reap her brothers' wrath, and now she spent most of her time avoiding them. Tears blurred her vision.

Focusing beyond them, she saw Ima Jehosheba seated by the cooking stones, waving her out the door. Ima's wink and loving smile nudged Arielah into the shadowy courtyard. Abba Jehoshaphat had already gone to Shunem's well for the elders' meeting. Both parents had known Arielah planned to observe the meeting from a distance, since a woman was never welcome there. And though Abba was a righteous man of faith and prayer, tonight he condoned Arielah's deception.

Keeping to the shadows, Arielah left their courtyard and slipped behind a few stacked water jars, feeling more like a bandit than the daughter of Shunem's most revered judge. Silently she moved among the merchants' stalls toward the well at the center of Shunem. There every town meeting was held and every bit of gossip found its voice. Crouching behind crates and tables, she remained under the shadow of goatskin canopies covering the empty booths. No merchants lingered this late to hawk their wares. Only dogs and vermin loitered to clean up the scraps.

She smiled, remembering a time when her childish spying had taken her into the busy streets of Jerusalem. She was only seven when King David had summoned Abba as a northern advisor to consult on a civil matter. The whole family accompanied Jehoshaphat to the capital city. *That was the first time I saw Solomon.* Arielah's heart skipped a beat at the thought of the young king. Tonight's meeting would be very different from the one in Jerusalem so many years ago.

Inching closer to Shunem's well, she could hear the buzz of the crowd. Tension showed on men's perspiring brows, though the early spring winds whipped their robes. Over two hundred men, leaders from all ten of Israel's northern tribes, now gathered at the city's center. The fury that brought these men to Shunem had been building for years, but the disgrace



of one Shulammite maiden provided the straw that broke the proverbial dromedary's back.

Arielah remembered the day Ahishar arrived in Shunem nine new moons ago as the palace high steward. His grand escort was pompous and proud, but his close-set eyes and thinning, straight hair reminded her of a weasel. Abba Jehoshaphat had taught Arielah that outward appearance wasn't the defining measure of a man; however, after only a day in Ahishar's presence, Arielah was quite sure the steward's weaselly appearance matched his character. He had stood at the very well where the angry northern leaders now gathered and announced the search for the most beautiful Israelite maiden to care for the aging King David. Abishag, a girl just one year older than Arielah, won the distinction and was immediately taken to Jerusalem. Word of the girl's true fate had come through a Shulammite merchant whose sister served in the king's kitchens. Abishag had become nothing more than David's belly warmer—taken to his bed but never becoming wife or concubine.

Now the question that burned in every heart had become an inferno. What would become of Abishag when King David cast her aside? No man would want her after she'd been defiled in another man's bed—even if the palace vowed the relationship was never consummated. Would King Solomon toss her away like refuse, or would he include her in the ongoing care of David's wives and concubines?

While Arielah's heart broke for the girl she'd seen drawing water at Shunem's well, the men of their town and tribe felt a different emotion. Disgrace blighted the whole tribe of Issachar. Fury over Abishag's rejection spread like wildfire. Their most beautiful daughter was sacrificed to the whims of Judah's royalty. Men from Shunem traveled from one tribe to another, stirring the emotions of other hardworking, honest men of the north.

These were the common folk of Israel, faithful in their

annual treks to Gibeon for Passover. These were shepherds, farmers, fishermen, men of the soil and stream. They cried when they were sad and laughed when they were happy. They made no apologies for their lifestyle, or for their emotions. Much to the contrary, they drank deeply from all the well-springs of life. And tonight, these hardworking, deep-feeling northern officials would spew their fury.

Arielah searched the crowd for her abba's silver-streaked head and finally spotted him at the front by the well curb. Her heart swelled, love and pride competing for first place. Her wise abba stood a head taller than the rest of the men, full in form, yet not an ounce of unmuscled flesh. His reputation as a shepherd, vinedresser, and elder had earned him not only the respect of every man in northern Israel but also the approval of King David. Frequently, he sat on the king's council, each time representing the tribe of Issachar—the tribe famous for understanding their times and knowing what Israel should do.

Arielah stubbed her toe on an awning post and pressed her lips together to keep from crying out. She must hurry to find an appropriate hiding place. Finally, spotting a donkey attached to a small cart, she knelt between the beast and a merchant's booth not far from the last row of men in the crowd. She felt as though she needed the reassuring sight of her abba's strong features, and this vantage point would provide the perfect cover for her to see his changing expressions.

For weeks, they had tended his flocks together, speaking of the plan Jehoshaphat would present tonight. They had contemplated Israel's fate and Arielah's future—and tonight the two would merge.

"To be used in the king's bed but rejected as a true bride . . ." one of the tribal leaders bellowed. "Abishag's humiliation will not be ignored! It's an insult to our tribe!"

Another man beat the air with his fist. "The house of David will abuse us no more!"

“Let David answer to *all* of Israel for this abomination!” a third cried.

Arielah settled into her quiet hiding place for the long night of blustering, and her mind wandered again to that moment when she saw Solomon for the first time. *How could I, at seven years old, know I would marry Solomon someday?* The question had never occurred to her before. She’d always just *known* the young prince would be hers—like one knows her own name.

More than ten Passovers ago, King David had summoned her abba to Jerusalem as an advisor when a northern landowner cheated a Judean merchant. Arielah’s brothers had begged to go, and Jehoshaphat agreed, telling Ima he hoped to use the journey as a bonding time with his sons.

Kemmuel, the older of the boys, seemed especially contrary toward Abba. When Jehoshaphat disciplined, Kemmuel’s sullen countenance screamed of injustice. When Jehoshaphat was merciful, Kemmuel’s smirk challenged his abba’s perceived weakness. Igal, the younger of the boys, simply worshiped the ground his brother walked on and followed his lead in every matter.

When Arielah heard her brothers were accompanying Abba to Jerusalem, she asked Ima, “Why can’t women travel to Jerusalem too?”

After a few strategic whispers from his wife, Jehoshaphat agreed to take Jehosheba and Arielah as well.

“We must travel as quickly as possible,” he said, feigning a stern gaze at his wife and daughter. “No dawdling over intriguing desert animals or flowers.”

The two earnestly nodded their agreement.

“It is only one day’s journey for a man on a camel, but we’ll take the donkey and make it in three days.”

On the fifth day of the journey, Jehoshaphat’s family arrived in Jerusalem with necklaces of woven desert flowers draped around every family member’s neck—including the donkey’s.

Arielah remembered traveling the long road up to Jerusalem, thinking the city resembled a long-necked queen with a crown on her head. Three sides of the city's walls were bordered by deep valleys, and the towering fortress of Zion stood guard on the northern edge of the City of David. As their family entered the eastern gate, Jehosheba tightened her grip on Arielah's hand. Merchants shouted. Goats and chickens ran through the streets as children chased them. Beggars reached out, and musicians strummed their six-string lyres. Looking to see her ima's reaction, Arielah caught sight of the magnificent fortress that Abba had described from previous visits. Its imposing walls had been created as empty rooms and then filled with dirt and stones. He had called the fortress *impenetrable*. She hadn't known what he meant until she saw the grand structure. Now she understood.

As she gawked, her gaze wandered to an army officer on the wall near one of the fortress parapets. He was leading five finely dressed soldiers in military drills with swords and shields. That's when she saw him. Solomon. All five young soldiers wore royal purple tunics under their leather breastplates, and each bore David's insignia on his shoulder. But Solomon was easy to distinguish. Just as Abba had once described the fortress as *impenetrable*, he had described Bathsheba's favored son as *extraordinary*. There was indeed nothing ordinary about Prince Solomon.

With luminous dark eyes and raven hair more silky than curly, Prince Solomon wore an air of royalty. He was the tallest of his brothers, his shoulders square. Arielah guessed him the same age as Kemmuel—twelve Passovers old. As she was pondering, Solomon rested a moment from his training and glanced through the crowd, catching sight of little Arielah's bold inspection. When she didn't turn away, he studied her and finally offered an amused nod. She returned it—a sort of truce. She knew in that moment Solomon would be hers someday.

Ima Jehosheba tugged on her hand, and their family arrived at one of Jerusalem's small inns. Abba kissed Jehosheba good-bye, and she resumed unpacking the supplies. Abba gave each of his sons a piece of carved leather to barter in the bustling marketplace and hurried off to the palace. Arielah slipped out the door behind him, finding dozens of hiding places in the narrow streets of the City of David. Abba looked back once as though he felt her presence, but he soon turned and continued on his way.

Pretending she was the daughter of a woman with a basket, she walked past the guards at the fortress gate and entered a different world on the unwallled northern side of the city. David's luxurious Phoenician-style palace hummed with activity. It didn't squawk or shout or screech. The palace built as a gift by King Hiram's carpenters and stonemasons purred with elegance. Arielah watched Abba Jehoshaphat ascend the stone stairway and disappear into the grand cedar doors. Quickly giving up the hope of sneaking past palace guards, she skipped back to the inn. Ima Jehosheba had finished unpacking and asked, "Where are your brothers?"

Arielah shrugged her shoulders and quickly joined in Ima's meal preparation, hoping to let the matter drop. Kemmuel and Igal returned at sunset, as did Abba, and Arielah's spying expedition was almost a secret success—almost.

"I think I know why King David built his palace on the other side of the fortress of Zion," she said, munching absently on her last crust of bread. The room fell utterly silent, and she realized she'd revealed her afternoon mischief.

Jehosheba balled her fists on her hips. "And just when did you see the king's palace?"

Arielah swallowed the last bite of bread past the lump in her throat. "I'm sorry, Ima. I wanted to see where Abba was going."

Jehoshaphat raised an eyebrow. The gesture seemed to Arielah like both a reprimand and a request to hear more.

Glancing from one parent to the other, she decided to address Abba's curiosity rather than Ima's wrath. "North Jerusalem is much quieter than the southern City of David. A shepherd king needs peace to sleep soundly at night."

Abba combed his fingers through his beard as he often did when deep in thought. His frown gave way to a slight grin. "You are perceptive, my lamb. The king said to me this afternoon, 'I'm quite safe on the north side of the fortress since any enemy would have to conquer our ten northern tribes before arriving on my doorstep. I'd have plenty of time to move my household into the fortress before they reached Jerusalem.'"

The memory jolted Arielah like a splash of cold water, and she became suddenly aware of the cries of revolt resounding from beside Shunem's well.

"What if it's my daughter next time?" one of the elders at Shunem's well shouted.

"We should be sharpening our plowshares."

"Judah must pay for their arrogance, and David's family repent of their pride."

The sun had taken its leave behind the foothills of Mount Gilboa, and torchlight cast eerie shadows across the distorted faces of angry men. How could King David have guessed that his most dangerous enemy might be Israel's northern ten tribes?

A shiver crept up Arielah's spine, raising the hairs on her arms to attention. *Why do I feel as though I'm being watched?* She glanced behind and around her, then set aside the thought, straining to hear what another elder was saying. It seemed the crowd was beginning to quiet, a sure sign that Abba would soon speak. Jehoshaphat always listened well and spoke last.