





a division of Baker Publishing Group Minneapolis, Minnesota

### © 2022 by Toni Shiloh

Published by Bethany House Publishers 11400 Hampshire Avenue South Minneapolis, Minnesota 55438 www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Shiloh, Toni, author.

Title: In search of a prince / Toni Shiloh.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2022]

Identifiers: LCCN 2021040497 | ISBN 9780764239847 (casebound) | ISBN 9780764238956 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781493436033 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Romance fiction. | Novels. Classification: LCC PS3619.H548 I5 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2021040497

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, incidents, and dialogues are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Kelly L. Howard

Author is represented by the William K. Jensen Literary Agency.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the Author and Finisher of my faith.



# Prologue

our Majesty, I am afraid the news is not good."

Tiwa Jimoh Adebayo, king of Oloro Ilé Ijoba of Africa, closed his eyes and lowered his chin to his chest.

But even that slight movement was enough to bring a cough to his lips. His shoulders shook with the effort to expel the phlegm that did not seem to move from his lungs. He wiped his mouth, using a handkerchief embroidered with the kingdom's crest, as his chest ached from the exertion.

"How bad is it?" he rasped.

The doctor sighed, lines furrowing his brow. "I am afraid there is nothing more that we can do, my king. The chemotherapy has been too taxing on your body and ineffective against the cancer." He shifted on his feet. "All we can do now is make you as comfortable as possible." His pause stretched heavy in the room, the only sound the king's struggled breathing. "Dare I suggest, Your Majesty, that you present an heir to our great country?"

Yes. Of course. The time had come for the nation to know his heir—*heiress*. The granddaughter Tiwa had never met. He had wanted to remedy the situation, but regrets and pride had lengthened the time since his gross mistake and expanded the distance.

Tiwa wiped his mouth again. "You are right, Dr. Falade." He

rose unsteadily to his feet. "Rest assured, the kingdom will continue to thrive after I am gone."

Dr. Falade bowed. "You have my direct number, my king. Please call if I can be of service."

Mobo, Tiwa's royal assistant, stepped out of the shadows and offered his aid, ensuring the king did not stumble as they left the hospital. A black SUV waited outside the hospital's private royal entrance. Tiwa had traveled to the hospital for each past visit, but with Dr. Falade's pronouncement, Mobo would be tasked to move his care to the palace for the future.

"It is time," the king declared as lush tropical vegetation flew past the vehicle's tinted window.

"You will call her mother?" Mobo asked.

"Yes." Tiwa sighed. He could only hope his daughter-in-law would accept his call. He would not blame her if she didn't.

"I will await further instructions."

"Please do." Tiwa nodded at his most loyal friend. Entrusting the secret of his heir had been a wise decision. "I am not sure how much my granddaughter knows about her future."

Mobo nodded, his face devoid of all emotion. Tiwa had once joked that his assistant did not know how to feel, to which Mobo had replied, "I feel what my king tells me to feel." Tiwa smiled at the memory. Mobo's stoicism covered a mind constantly thinking and mapping out possible outcomes.

As the driver transported them back to the palace, Tiwa imagined the words he would say to his daughter-in-law. How could he convince her to bring his granddaughter to Oloro Ilé? He feared the number of years that had passed between them would rule against his wishes. He had not talked to Marie since the time he begged for her forgiveness—which she had denied. As a result, he had never once set eyes on his grandchild, now a grown woman of twenty-five. He had much to atone for before the Lord took him.

Forgive me, Father God. May I make wise use of my remaining days.

Palace guards saluted the car as it passed through the iron gate. Palm trees lined the driveway as the white sandstone mansion

beckoned up the hill. Tiwa watched his home grow larger. The three-story structure held many memories. Images of his son playing guardsman morphed into those of his funeral. Despite the heavy memory, Tiwa had peace that his son had lived well. Had time not cut Tayo's life short, he would have stepped into his royal duties with dedication and honor.

Tiwa squinted against the sun's light as Mobo helped him from the car. The guards stood sentry as he made his way into the palace and along the corridors, then up the elevator until he arrived at his personal hallway. He leaned against the wall, struggling for breath. Thankfully, no one other than Mobo was around to see his weakness.

Mobo reached for the ring on the African blackwood door leading to Tiwa's personal chamber. The carvings in the wood depicted the coast of Oloro Ilé with the kingdom's crest in the top arch. The shield depicted a picture of the coastline, and four banner flags fanned out around the shield.

Tiwa nodded his thanks and trudged into his bedroom. His canopy bed beckoned him, but he needed to place the call to the States before he could rest. Perspiration beaded along his hairline as he sank into the wingback chair behind the blackwood desk. After gathering his breath, Tiwa pulled his personal mobile phone from his suit pocket and selected his daughter-in-law's number from the contact list. Although he had not spoken to her in years, Mobo had kept tabs on her and updated Tiwa when necessary.

```
After four rings, a voice answered. "Hello?"
```

"Hello, Marie."

"Who—"

"It is I. Tiwa." Silence met his ears. Had she hung up?

"Your Majesty."

He winced at her icy tone. "You are well?"

"I'm fine," she snapped.

She was still sore with him. *And she has every right to be*. If he had not tried to denounce her relationship with Tayo—

But no, the insult of offering her money to disappear had sealed

# In Search of a Prince

his fate. It did not matter that grief had clouded his judgment. He had harmed an innocent.

Tiwa licked his lips, trying to keep a cough at bay. "My time is coming to an end, Marie. I would like to see my granddaughter."

"What's happened?"

He exhaled, wincing at the ache in his lungs. "I am sick." He grimaced at hearing the admission aloud.

"How sick?" she asked cautiously.

"My doctor told me to get my affairs in order."

There was a pause. "I'm sorry."

"The price I pay for smoking my pipe." He glanced at the empty piece carved from okoume wood resting on his desk. A reminder of what the vice had cost him.

"It's cancer then?"

"Yes. It is . . . extensive." He muted the phone and let loose the cough that had been building. He dabbed at his upper lip and pressed the button again. "Chemotherapy is no longer an option."

"And you want me to bring her there for what purpose?"

He could not tell which emotion lurked in Marie's tone. Was she concerned for him? Herself? His granddaughter—the princess?

"She is my heir apparent, Marie. I must ensure the people have someone to lead them and look out for their best interests." Though that was not the only reason he wished to meet her.

"Who will look out for hers?"

Tiwa wished he could say he would, but time was not on his side. "When I am no longer here, the royal council will." They would not be happy to find out he'd kept the princess a secret, but their sworn oath would ensure they came to her aid.

Marie sighed. "She knows nothing."

"I am sorry." He had feared as much. "But it is time to tell her everything."

"Everything?"

He grimaced, knowing Marie would not paint him in a good light when telling his granddaughter what had transpired all those years ago. Not that any of what Marie would say would be lies. He had tried to annul her marriage to his son, stopping only at

the confirmation of her pregnancy. Then he had signed a check and washed his hands of them.

His head drooped. "Yes, everything."

A long pause filled the air. "I will talk to her."

"Mo dúpę." He blinked. "I am grateful, Marie."

"Hold your gratitude. You may not feel that way after I talk to her."

His lips twitched at her dry humor. "Whenever she is ready, I will see to your travel arrangements."

"If we come—and I do mean if—we will pay our own way."

"As you wish. Do know that both of you will have rooms waiting for you here at the palace." He would have Mobo see to everything and maybe even appoint a secretary for his granddaughter. She would need one in the upcoming days.

"How long?" Marie asked softly.

He closed his eyes, his heart still reeling from the verdict. "Six months at the most."

"I will tell her soon. Good-bye."

Before he could express his thanks, the call ended.

Tiwa set his phone on the desk. God willing, he would see his granddaughter for the first time very soon.



h, summertime in New York City. Could there be anything better? The greenery of the trees made me smile. Unlike others, I was a fan of the heat and thrived under the warmth beaming on me. I wanted to take a moment to soak it all in, but my mother expected punctuality, and I was already ten minutes late. I glanced down at my Apple watch. Okay, fifteen minutes.

As one of NYC's top pediatric surgeons, my mom had to squeeze me into her fully packed calendar. But when she could, I considered it a win. I bumped into a man in a suit arguing on his Bluetooth and sidestepped a mom pushing her kid in a stroller. Finally, I broke free of the crowd and lengthened my strides.

Nonna's came into view, and I sighed in relief. The Italian restaurant would most likely be packed at this hour, everyone attempting to grab lunch before heading back to their offices. Fortunately, it was a school holiday, and I didn't have to worry about rushing. I bounded up the steps of the stone-marble building and through the automatic doors. An air-conditioned breeze welcomed me with a *whoosh*, and my arms pebbled with goosebumps as I headed for the hostess podium.

"Do you have a reservation?" The cool disdain on the hostess's face would have put a damper on my mood if it weren't for the fact that most hostesses in the city had that practiced bored look.

"Yes. It should be under Marie Bayo." I smiled, hoping kindness would chip away at her bad mood.

She scanned the readout before her. "This way." She pivoted on her heels and strolled through the busy dining room. As if Moses led her way, the other waitstaff moved, making the aisle clear for her procession. The restaurant was filled with families, businessmen, and couples bonding over Italian dishes.

A nervous energy filled my gut as I followed the hostess to the second dining area. Mom only ate here when she wanted to share important news. No matter how hard I'd tried to think of what she could possibly want to talk about, my ideas fizzled.

The hostess came to a stop and motioned toward a table for two, then made her way back up to the front of the restaurant.

My mother stood, a grin covering her face. "Brielle, I'm so happy to see you." She wrapped her arms around me.

"Me too." I returned the hug, resting my chin on her shoulder, and soaked up the contact. Two months had passed since I'd last seen her, but the time seemed to span further. She pulled back and kissed my cheek before breaking the hug altogether.

We stood the same height—five feet five inches—though my mother's flats put her at a disadvantage to my wedges. Our thin eyebrows (courtesy of great threading), pert noses, and full lips resembled each other's. But my mother had a great chestnut color to her skin, and mine resembled a lovely shade of espresso. Our long hair did hold the same wave, though mine was black and hers dyed a light brown shade she spent hundreds on in the salon.

I lowered myself into my chair and spread a maroon cloth napkin across my lap. "So what's the big news?"

My mother's dark brown eyes flashed before she gave me a *no-no* signal with her pointer finger. "First, tell me how the end of the year is going. How are your students?" She smiled, the crow's feet around her eyes crinkling.

I shook my head at her diversion tactics but complied. I loved talking about teaching—the joys and pitfalls of eighth grade civics. "They're antsy, ready for school to end. Hopefully the Memorial

Day holiday will ease some of their jitters." I sighed. "I can't wait for our summer vacation."

Mom laughed. "You just like the beach."

Understatement of the year. The ocean was my happy place, and our yearly vacation to Martha's Vineyard centered me. I couldn't wait to return.

"You do too." I rested my elbow on the table, propping my chin on my hand. "Have we done enough small talk now? We could have discussed our vacation over the phone." Not that I didn't appreciate seeing her face-to-face, but I wanted to know her big news.

A grimace stole across Mom's face, lines framing her mouth. Her brow wrinkled, marring her smooth skin.

Unease churned my stomach. "What is it?" The words seemed to stick on the unexpected lump in my throat. Was she ill? Her features held no signs of sickness. No pallor. No jaundice. But who was I kidding? I wasn't the doctor, she was.

"I have a story to tell you, Bri, and I need you to listen without interruption." Mom licked her lips. "I promise to answer all the questions you have at the end. Can you do that for me?"

I nodded, my heart knocking against a wall of fear. Was it worse than being sick? Was she . . . *dying*?

"After graduating high school in Jersey, I came to New York to get a college education. To become a doctor. I'd dreamt of being a doctor since I was a child. I used to pretend to heal my dolls and stuffed animals."

Where was she going with this? I'd heard this tale more times than I could count. My mother enjoyed retelling the story as an example of the importance of perseverance and hard work. It was why she'd encouraged me to be so passionate in my studies growing up. It turned out I didn't have the fortitude to work around blood like she did, but teaching fit me.

Before she could continue, our server appeared with two glasses of water and their complimentary bread-and-oil platter. He took our drink and entrée orders, then moved on to the next table.

My mother's gaze met mine. "My studies were all I thought about until I met your father. He didn't see my dedication to my

degree as an obstacle but a challenge." She paused and reached for the bread plate in the center of the table, dipping a breadstick into the small saucer of herb-infused olive oil.

Her languid movements got under my skin. I wanted her to jump to the point, but no one could rush Marie Bayo.

"Your father believed we could be together and still have enough time to devote to our courses." A wistful smile curled her lips. "He passed me notes in the classes we shared, took his meals with me, and studied in the library simply because I was there." She blinked. "Before I knew it, I had fallen in love with Tayo Bayo."

Her nostalgia and the rhyming of my father's name brought a smile to my lips. I used to wish my mother had carried on the tradition with me instead of naming me Brielle, but once she told me it meant *God is my strength*, I'd fallen in love with my name.

My father came from a small island off the coast of West Africa and passed away before I was born. My mother didn't share many details about him with me. It was as if everything about him was too painful to repeat, too unbearable to relive. Which made her words now all the more captivating. I leaned in, eager to hear more about my father.

"As you know, we married one weekend." She swallowed. "Pure spontaneity, and an occasion I still marvel at. It was totally unlike me. We got a license one day and said *I do* the next." Mom exhaled. "I was so happy, Bri. Until—"

"Until he died," I said, breaking my silence. I knew how the rest of the story went.

What would life have been like if I had known him? Growing up, I'd make up reasons he was away, preferring imagined dreams to the truth of his death. I'd pretend he was a spy who needed to save the world from imminent doom. Even an astronaut studying the heavens. Or simply away on a visit to his native country, unable to come to us for whatever reason my mind could conceive. My mother had never taken me to see his birth country, and the desire to visit remained a constant one, but a teacher's salary wasn't conducive to world travel.

"Actually, no."

I blinked. "What?"

"I was happy until he sat me down in our five-hundred-squarefoot apartment to tell me there was something important that I didn't know about him."

My breath hitched. What did that mean? Why hadn't I heard this part of the story before?

"His full name was Naade Tayo Adebayo." My mother took a sip of ice water. Then her eyes met mine, piercing me with their sorrow. "And he was the crown prince of Oloro Ilé."

My breath whooshed out of my body. Time slowed as my pulse pounded in my ears. I stared at her, trying to gather my wits. "Are you saying . . . my dad was a prince? Like, an heir-to-a-throne type prince?" I forced a laugh. Surely she was joking.

Instead of the mirth I wished for, she simply nodded, gaze somber.

"That can't be right. You wouldn't have kept a secret this big from me." Would she? I swallowed. "Did he even really *die*?"

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Yes, baby. But let me back up to that moment in our apartment." She shook her head, her brown hair swaying against her shoulders. "I was livid when I managed to move from disbelief to realizing he was telling me the truth." She pressed a hand against her forehead.

I gripped the napkin in my lap. This was insane.

"I told your father to get out. To leave. And after weeks of me ignoring every form of contact . . . he did just that. He left the country and returned to his homeland without me." Mom's lower lip trembled. "I found out about his departure from a college friend and realized the cost of my pride. I called the phone number your father had left for me, hoping we could work things out, only his father, the king, answered. After I explained who I was, he told me Tayo had died two days before my call." Her voice broke, and tears spilled down her cheeks.

My heart ached, torn between wanting to comfort my mother and fury that she had kept a secret of this magnitude.

She took a sip of water, then dabbed the napkin against her cheeks. "I went to the funeral and was permitted an introduction

to the king." Her jaw tightened. "He informed me that he would arrange to have the marriage annulled. Apparently, I should never have been permitted to marry Tayo."

I gasped. How many more twists could there be? I wanted to run away, hands over my ears. But the trembling in my stomach told me to keep listening. To hear the *whole* truth.

"What your grandfather didn't expect was you." Mom traced the condensation on her water glass as a soft smile covered her lips. "When I told him I was pregnant, it changed everything. He agreed to keep the marriage intact and filed paperwork to make our union legal in Oloro Ilé as well. Although, from my understanding, he kept all that information secret. He then wrote me a check to cover any expenses you could ever possibly have." She paused. "And told me never to contact him again."

I blinked, thoughts whirring faster than a blender. Which controversial subject did I dissect first? "He didn't want to know me?"

"He blamed me for your father's death. Accused me of driving his son to a depression."

"I thought he died in a boating accident," I accused.

"He did, but your grandfather said he was an excellent swimmer and should never have drowned."

I covered my mouth at the image my mind immediately conjured. Could all this really be true? I'd had no reason to doubt my mom before today, but now . . .

"When you were five, your grandfather called to apologize, only I..." Mom looked away, sorrow etched into every line on her face.

"You said no, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"And the money? Are we talking about enough to cover clothing expenses?"

"Whatever you needed, Brielle. I tried not to spend it, but . . ." She shrugged.

Certain things began to click into place. "Is that why you pressed me to do cotillion and debutante balls? Language lessons?" She'd known I would need to move in a world I'd never imagined was a possibility.

She nodded. "I used the money to pay for all of those things." She swallowed. "Plus your college education. The rest I placed in an account for you."

Disbelief filled me. "Why?" I whispered. "Why tell me all of this now?"

"The king is dying." Her gaze met mine. "And you are the heir to the throne."