

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANGELA HUNT

ESTHER

ROYAL BEAUTY

A DANGEROUS BEAUTY NOVEL

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Angela Hunt Presents The DANGEROUS BEAUTY Series

“The Hebrew text has two words that are typically used to describe personal appearance. One, *yapeh*, is rather mild and means ‘good looking.’ The other, *tob*, when applied to women’s looks, conveys sensual appeal. This woman is so beautiful that she arouses the desire of men who see her.”

—Sue Poorman Richards and Larry Richards, authors of *Every Woman in the Bible*

Beauty does not always benefit the woman who possesses it. On occasion it betrays her, and at other times it endangers her, even to the point of death.

These novels—*Esther*, and the upcoming *Bathsheba* and *Delilah*—are the stories of three *tob* women.

The light that lies
In woman's eyes
Has been my heart's undoing.
—Thomas Moore

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Chapter One

Hadassah



YOU MAY THINK YOU KNOW ME, but how could you? Others have related my story, and most of them paint a pretty picture. But unless a woman is allowed to speak for herself, no one will ever fully understand the events of a lifetime . . . and the secret recesses of a woman's heart.

Growing up, I was and yet was not like any other girl. My family was neither wealthier nor poorer than the families of other children in Susa. The cousins who reared me were neither more nor less loving than the parents of my friends. Staring into the polished bronze circle that served as Miriam's mirror, I knew I was neither more nor less beautiful than the other girls in our Jewish community.

Yet while my playmates cherished their dolls and the grown-ups pined for Jerusalem, I dreamed of being a queen.

Not *the* queen, of course. My ambition was not like that of certain men I would meet later in life, bitter men with ice in their veins. Being unfamiliar with power, I did not crave it: being adequately fed and clothed, I did not covet wealth.

I wanted to be beautiful. From an early age I had been aware that certain things possessed perfection in their aspects—the arrangement of a vase on a windowsill, translucent clouds scuttling past a round moon on black velvet, a lotus beginning to bloom. On two or three occasions, when my cousin chanced to whisper in his wife's ear, her eyes sparkled, a smile molded her cheek into a soft curve, and joy transformed her face into something so attractive that I could not speak.

I loved Miriam and her fleeting loveliness, but I wanted a beauty that would not fade with irritation or illness or the passing of years. And since everyone knew that only the most beautiful women in the world were fit to be kings' wives, I yearned for a queen's abiding beauty and flawlessness.

If I had been born with more attractive features I might not have been so fascinated with outward appearances. As a child, I would stare into the polished bronze and appraise my eyes—too big for my face—and my nose, which flattened into a spear shape whenever I smiled. My teeth were too large, my hair too coarse, my feet too long for my body. Being struck anew by my vast array of imperfections, I would lift my gaze to heaven and ask the Holy One of Israel to grant me beauty, fleeting though the gift may be.

My prayers intensified after I actually glimpsed a queen.

Miriam and I were shopping at the King's Gate bazaar, though I had wanted to stay behind. At eleven, I thought myself old enough to remain home alone, for who would want to bother me? The house I shared with my cousin Mordecai and his wife, Miriam, lay in the center of a street occupied by Jews on every side—merchants, jewelers, lenders, and scribes. Many of our neighbors ran businesses

from their courtyards, so if anyone dared molest me, I had only to shout and the curious faces of half a dozen friends would have appeared at the top of our courtyard wall.

I shuffled reluctantly to the bazaar, but the bright sights of the marketplace lifted my spirits. The booths of merchants, farmers, and workmen stretched along both sides of a long street, and hundreds of people crowded the pavement. A girl could find anything at the bazaar, if she had a pocketful of silver talents and time to explore.

Though my pockets were empty, I had time to spare. While Miriam argued with the fruit merchant I pulled my headscarf forward to shield my face from the sun, then strolled through the crowd and surveyed the wares in each booth.

I glanced across the crowded street, where several of the king's officers labored in a complex known as the King's Gate. The sprawling series of storerooms sat at the base of the royal fortress and next to one of the grand staircases that led up to the king's palace. In those stone warehouses, dozens of scribes and accountants accepted tribute from the citizens of Susa and distributed goods from the king's bounty. Mordecai worked in one of those offices, toiling six out of every seven days for the king. He knew Miriam and I were visiting the bazaar at midday, so I hoped he would step out to greet us.

I smiled as he emerged from a doorway and approached the marketplace. He lifted his head, caught my eye, and acknowledged me with a little wave. He took a step in my direction, but before he could make any forward progress, another man caught him by the sleeve and proceeded to vent his unhappiness about some matter.

Not wishing to interrupt, I made my way back to Miriam and desperately looked for something more interesting than rotting dates. The bazaar seemed especially busy, ripe with sounds, scents, and odd sights. A cacophony of animal noises accompanied the chorus of human voices—braying donkeys, the clip-clop of the occasional horse, the chatter of a caged monkey, and the whining of skinny dogs that scurried underfoot in search of crumbs dropped on the cobblestones. Soldiers from the king's vast army laughed as they shouldered their way through the crowd, leering at any woman bold enough to meet their gaze. Along with the usual merchants hawking their wares, Persian women in bright tunics carried wailing toddlers and tried to bargain with the tradesmen.

Of all the sights in the marketplace, the Persian women and their babies fascinated me most. I love babies and hoped to have a dozen. The native women of Susa—who had been Elamites before Cyrus the Great made them Persians—were unlike the women from my neighborhood. They seemed freer, happier, and they wore lavish clothing that reflected their delight in vibrant colors, luxurious fabrics, and glittering jewelry.

The Jewish women I knew were not dour—they strove to be beautiful for their husbands—but their tastes were more constrained, as if they feared being too self-indulgent. Sometimes, given our people's tragic history, I wondered if they worried about being too happy. They spoke often of the exile and of our beautiful, ruined Jerusalem. They thanked HaShem that a handful of Jews had rebuilt the temple, but from their conversations I gathered that they considered Zerubbabel's effort a pitiful replacement for Solomon's masterpiece.

Still waiting on Mordecai, I turned to study a man bargaining with a rug merchant in the next booth. The buyer didn't like the color of the carpet spread before him. He spoke with an accent I didn't recognize, but Mordecai would. My cousin met travelers every day, for Susa, like Persia itself, was a stew of nationalities. The Medes and the Persians had conquered the world through assimilation, wielding the sword only long enough to force a rival kingdom's ruler to submit. Unlike the Babylonians who had destroyed our holy city, taken our people captive, and demanded that we worship their graven images, Cyrus the Great and his successors Cambyses and Darius did not force the aliens living within the empire to conform to Persian ways. 'Twas all part of HaShem's plan,

Mordecai frequently reminded me, for Adonai himself had elevated Cyrus to liberate us from Babylonian captivity and open the door for some of our people to return to Jerusalem.

Yet not everyone had the means or the inclination to return to a ruined land. Thousands of Jews remained scattered throughout the empire, including our strong community in Susa. Mordecai felt that Adonai wanted us to remain where we were, though he couldn't explain why he felt that way.

As for me, I couldn't imagine living anywhere but Susa. The land was beautiful, the climate comfortable, and the bazaar fascinating. I loved visiting the marketplace and running my hand over rugs and fabrics woven in vibrant colors. I loved the freedom granted to our people, and I especially loved living in the shadow of the royal palace.

Like a dutiful daughter I stood beside Miriam and pretended to listen to her give-and-take with the fruit vendor. But my gaze wandered, and as the glittering curtain of an approaching litter caught my eye, curiosity overpowered my manners.

I couldn't see who rode in the litter, but gold and silver ribbons on the four upright supports fluttered in the slight breeze. No less than eight uniformed guards accompanied the mysterious traveler, four marching in front, two beside, and two behind, each man carrying a spear while a sword swung from his belt. A fifth man—one dressed in a hooded white robe, not the garb of a soldier—walked alongside the carriage and frequently inclined his head toward the curtain as if listening to someone within.

Being a native of the royal city, I often saw fine litters and carriages. But I had never seen anything to rival this entourage, and my curiosity yielded quickly to amazement: what sort of man or woman rode in such luxury and with so many guards? Only someone wealthy and important could command such a conveyance. The occupant might even be a member of one of Persia's seven noble families.

I tugged on Miriam's sleeve, hoping she could provide a clue, but she was too intent on her debate with the seller of dates. So as the litter drew closer, I broke every rule of etiquette she had ever drilled into my head.

If you see a person of high rank, you must lower yourself and get out of the way.

I rose on tiptoe to see better.

If you meet an elder or someone of slightly higher rank, you kiss them on the cheek.

I crept into the clearing that had opened for the approaching guards.

If you meet someone of much higher rank, you prostrate yourself on the ground.

Instead of crouching on the street like everyone else, I remained erect and staring, fascinated by the possibility of a brush with nobility.

Miriam turned and caught me gaping. "Hadassah!"

Her hissed rebuke brought me to my senses. I knelt on the cobblestones and swallowed hard when the litter slowed and stopped in front of me. A thick blanket of quiet fell over the immediate area, silencing the merchants around us. Even the chickens across the way stopped their cackling.

Slowly, I lifted my head to see what damage I'd done.

The slender, beardless man who walked beside the carriage caught my eye, then swiveled his gaze toward Mordecai, who was hurrying toward us. "Good day, my friend," the man in white called, his voice high and reedy. "I hope the gods are treating you well."

My cousin nodded to acknowledge the man's greeting, then moved to stand next to me. "Good day Harbonah," he said, bobbing in a quick bow. When he straightened, he smiled at the man. "Have you been assigned to another post?"

I stared, my thoughts whirling. Mordecai knew this man? Maybe the conveyance had stopped to salute my cousin and not to rebuke me for my bad manners.

Harbonah laughed. "The king has other eunuchs to attend him, but he insisted that I serve as an escort during outings like this. He is careful to guard his treasures."

This man knew the king? And what was a eunuch?

Like an unsophisticated child, I stared first at my cousin, then at the tall man in the spotless tunic. How did he know Mordecai? His garment was well cut and of fine linen, so he had to be wealthy. So why wasn't he riding in the litter?

I didn't have time to consider the question. At that moment the curtain rustled and a feminine voice filled the silence. "Good morning." A bejeweled hand pushed the iridescent fabric aside to reveal raven hair, wide eyes, high cheekbones, and perfectly sculpted lips. The object of the king's protective attention was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She was even more breathtaking than my imagined images of Abraham's Sarah and Jacob's Rachel. . . .

At the sound of her voice, both Miriam and Mordecai knelt on the cobblestones. I remained on my knees, but I still didn't understand why we had to kneel in the middle of a busy bazaar. This woman was probably a concubine, and everyone knew the king had hundreds of them.

I lifted my head in time to see the lovely passenger glance at Miriam, then turn her attention back to Mordecai. "I could not help noticing your daughter—she is quite lovely."

My cousin lifted his head and gave the woman a polite smile. "You are most kind to notice my family. The girl is not my daughter, though my wife and I have raised her as if she were our own. She is my uncle's child, and he died years before your husband ascended the throne."

I blinked. Could my cousin be talking to the *queen*? And could the queen be talking about *me*? Surely not.

I hung my head and wished for invisibility. I had been staring at a royal litter, gaping like an ill-mannered slave at the wife of the most powerful man in the entire world. I ought to eat dirt, I ought to grovel for the rest of my life, I ought to be forced to climb the grand staircase on my knees until they were bleeding and torn—

Before I could declare my willingness to perform a proper penance, the woman spoke again. "She will make someone a fine wife. I have been considering brides for my firstborn, the crown prince. Your daughter could never be a royal wife, but Darius might fancy her as a concubine."

Wonder of all wonders, was she offering me an opportunity to live in the palace? Before I could cast a hopeful glance at Miriam, Mordecai answered in a firm voice: "I am truly sorry, my queen, but my young cousin is soon to be betrothed to a fine man from our neighborhood. I'm sure you understand that these arrangements must be respected."

"Must they?"

I did not dare lift my head, but I couldn't help but hear Miriam's quick intake of breath. From where I knelt I could also see Mordecai's hand, which had clenched tightly behind his back.

Buoyed by hope, I cast a quick glance toward the litter and saw a look of regret flit across the queen's perfect features, then she smiled again. "The man who takes her for a wife will be blessed by the gods—and you may tell him I said so."

She dropped the curtain, cutting off all further conversation. The beardless man, apparently her servant, nodded at Mordecai and called a command to the litter-bearers, who squared their shoulders and moved forward. But my gaze caught the tall man's as he looked back at us, and I couldn't help noticing that a corner of his thin mouth had lifted . . . as if he were silently laughing.

He was probably tickled by the notion that I might be fit for a prince.

Chapter Two

Harbonah



OF COURSE, I WANTED TO LAUGH at Mordecai's young cousin when we first met. Though pretty, the girl was so obviously impressed by the queen that she could not possibly have possessed a woman's sophistication or intuition. A more experienced female would not have been awed by Vashti's striking face and sparkling jewels. She would have glimpsed the ambition shimmering in those bright eyes and heard the avarice in her tone. Mordecai's Hadassah had not yet learned, as I had, that a devious and jealous heart lay behind the woman's beauty and ostentatious adornment.

The queen spoke the truth when she remarked upon the girl's comeliness, but I had been struck by the obvious longing in the child's expression. Rarely had I seen such wistfulness in a girl's eyes, and never had I seen it in the eyes of a youngster from Judea.

Experience had taught me that most Judeans kept to themselves, conducting their business within the city without ever becoming a part of it. They worshipped, socialized, and arranged marriages only within the small scope of their community.

I chuckled as I dodged a runaway chicken that darted in front of the queen's litter. Mordecai's pretty ward might be obedient in word and action, but I'd wager a fistful of silver that restlessness stirred in her heart. I might have enjoyed talking with the girl, but given our circumstances I could only smile and wonder at the reason behind her wistful smile.

Did she long for romance? She was old enough to be betrothed, so perhaps her young heart pined for love. Did she long for wealth? Mordecai was not wealthy, yet neither was he impoverished. He had earned a responsible position at the King's Gate, which meant he was well compensated and well respected. He probably lived in a comfortable dwelling within walking distance of the palace, and the closer to the palace, the more luxurious the home. So the young girl had not known poverty in her short life.

I stopped walking as a babbling child broke free from his mother and ran toward me, then nodded understanding as the mother shouted apologies and gathered up her headstrong son. A sidelong glance at the litter assured me the queen had not noticed the interruption, so Vashti must be deep in thought. A happy coincidence for all.

I resumed my steady pace as my thoughts returned to Mordecai and his lovely little ward. Perhaps the girl felt overprotected. Perhaps the child had heard stories of foreign lands and exotic kingdoms, and perhaps her encounter with the queen had revived buried dreams. She had probably never met anyone from the royal family, and if that were so, I felt pleased to have had something to do with bringing her joy. Few girls of her station would ever have an opportunity to see the queen, and even

fewer would have a chance to be acknowledged by the king's wife.

Vashti had been correct about one thing—Mordecai's young cousin possessed a rare loveliness, evident even though her face still bore the soft plumpness of childhood. She would soon blossom into a radiant flower, perhaps one fit for the palace.

I was certain the girl would prove to be exceptional. For I, being a eunuch since boyhood, knew far too much about women.



I might never have seen Mordecai's wife and ward again, but in the third year of his reign my master decided to hold a banquet unlike any in the history of the world. I smiled when he shared the news and naturally assumed that the burden for planning the celebration would fall on my shoulders.

Later, one of the scribes read the official proclamation to me:

"Saith Xerxes the King: Ahura Mazda, the greatest of the gods—he created me; he made me king; he bestowed upon me this great kingdom, possessed of good horses, possessed of good men.

"By the favor of Ahura Mazda I abolished the Kingdom of Babel and carried away the golden statue of Marduk, the hands of which the king of Babel had to seize on the first day of each year. By the favor of Ahura Mazda I killed the priest who tried to hinder me. By the favor of Ahura Mazda, Babel is no more, and Ahura Mazda has made me king in his earth. Unto Ahura Mazda, thus was the decree: he chose me as his man in all the earth."

"Get to the point," I urged the scribe. "I don't need to hear all of that ritual talk."

The scribe shrugged, then moved to a paragraph further down the parchment.

"Saith Xerxes the King: At Susa, built by my father, an excellent feast has been ordered. The rulers of all twenty satraps are to come, all one hundred twenty-seven provincial governors are to come partake of a grand celebration, and all who fought with me at Babel are invited to come partake as well. All noble families of Persia are invited to Susa as enjoy a magnificent feast and the splendor Ahura Mazda has granted to me.

"Thus saith Xerxes the King."

The scribe lowered his parchment. "That's it. The king is giving a feast."

"For every noble, governor, and soldier?" I asked. "From throughout the empire?"

The nerves in my neck tensed when the scribe nodded.

So the king wanted to give a banquet—wonderful. He would realize that someone had to feed and entertain his guests, but he wouldn't give a single thought to the fact that his guests would also need place to live, bathe, and relax for as long as they remained in Susa. They would come with horses and tents; some of them might bring their families. Somehow Susa, an already crowded city, would have to make room for all of them.

I stifled a groan and went straight to work. Never in the history of the world had a king made so generous an offer, and never in the short history of my life had I faced such an undertaking. I found myself hoping the king would never extend such generosity again.

The king's visitors journeyed from every corner of the empire, and all of them were eager to share in the king's largess. From as far away as India and Ethiopia the provincial governors came, along with every nobleman, soldier, and military officer in each of the twenty satraps. When every structure in Susa bulged with guests, I ordered the king's servants to spread luxurious white tents on the plain to house the late arrivals.

Those of us who served in the palace gritted our teeth, girded our loins, and pasted on polite smiles.

For one hundred eighty days, the king's guests raped the city of Susa, trampling crops planted outside the city walls, ransacking the bazaar, and foisting unwanted attentions on the wives and daughters of Susa's citizens. These men, whose customs were as foreign as their faces, brawled at

night and stayed abed through the morning. In their hosts' homes, they tossed chicken bones out the windows and allowed their horses to defecate in courtyard gardens. They bathed their dogs in lavish fountains and used so much water that several of the city's wells ran dry.

After two weeks, I was sick of our visitors, but the king was far from weary. For defeating a mere handful of rebels in Babylon and Egypt, he had become drunk on the praise of his guests.

For those of us who had not been so richly blessed by Ahura Mazda, the months of the royal banquet were more about exhaustion than celebration.

As the king's chamberlain, I was responsible for making sure every aspect of the feast met with the king's approval. Every morning we who served the royal family rose early to bathe and don white garments before we began to prepare the midday dinner. The gardeners pruned and raked and lit incense to sweeten the air; the cooks slaughtered and salted and baked, desperately trying to remain ahead of the guests' appetites. Slave girls mopped and swept and polished the marble columns and hallways while stoneworkers checked every inch of the glazed brick walls in case one of the revelers had managed to chip a delicate pattern.

I began to resent the feast, because it kept me from the work I enjoyed most—attending to the king's personal needs. Though my king had a host of eunuchs to attend him, I yearned to be the one closest to him and most in tune with his variable emotions. But I found it nearly impossible to serve my king and oversee the mother of all feasts.

When my master took a nap or went out for a ride, I remained in the palace and flew from station to station, ensuring that every possible problem had been considered and prevented. If a slave had fallen ill, I stepped in to do whatever had to be done: grinding wheat, basting a roasted pig for the flustered cook, refreshing a wilted flower arrangement, straightening the fluttering banners in the garden, or hiring replacement musicians. The only task I refused was slaughtering animals—I have never been able to stand the sight of blood.

The work was tiring, boring, and thankless, yet I understood my master's desire to please his people. A king without satisfied subjects would soon find himself no king at all, so every night I would retire to a quiet corner of the palace, close my eyes, and try to imagine what each guest must have seen, heard, and smelled after they left their animals at the livery and climbed the stairs that led to Susa's splendid fortress.

From the plain beside the river, the royal mountain was a spectacular sight, rising from the flat earth and dominating the city, one of several capitals in the Persian Empire. Four grand staircases led up to the fortress, but visitors on horseback approached from the Ville Royale, where they crossed a sloping bridge that ended on a landing that flanked the garden.

Whichever approach the guests chose, they would stroll past glazed walls decorated with reliefs depicting courtly processions, the presentation of gifts, and preparations for ceremonies, all designed to remind the visitor that he was about to experience the full splendor of the king's majesty.

Once the guest had arrived at the top of the royal fortress, he would find himself in a great hall furnished with benches. Surrounded by gleaming tiled walls, here he would wait until summoned or until a servant arrived to guide him to the proper palace within the royal compound. A guest would be most likely to be escorted to the *apadana*, the magnificent columned hall designed for receiving processions and gifts. This audience hall, built on a plateau high above the river plain, featured towering columns, each taller than ten men standing one atop the other. As many as ten thousand guests could mingle in the *apadana*, though not many of them would be able to catch a glimpse of the king.

If the guest were well-known, respected, or of high rank—a general in the king's army, for instance—he might be escorted to the palace of Xerxes, the king's personal residence. He would walk past dozens of heavily armed guards from the elite corps known as the Immortals, and he would meet with

the king either in a reception room or the king's personal chambers.

Other high-ranking guests might have reason to visit the treasury, where priceless objects were catalogued and stored after being presented to the king. Dozens of accountants and scribes worked in the treasury, recording payments and dispensing gifts to those who had earned the king's favor. Other valuable items, most of them given as tribute or collected as spoil from conquered kingdoms, remained in the treasury as a constant reminder of the king's conquests.

Only a fool would approach the palace that housed the king's harem. Guarded and attended by a staff of eunuchs, the high-ranking royal women lived in these apartments, including the king's mother, his queen, and his concubines. These apartments differed from one another in size and luxury according to the occupant's rank.

During the banquet, slaves escorted guests directly to the apadana, which occupied the north side of the fortress and offered access to the exquisite grounds. The visitors began to arrive at midday and mingled in the garden until servants led them to the dining couches scattered throughout the apadana and the gardens, and among the fountains. As they ate, the guests bragged of their exploits in Egypt and Babylon, their encounters growing bloodier and the enemy more threatening with each repetition. The soldiers, generals, and governors participated in a continual game of one-upmanship, stopping only when they neared the king's level; then each man praised the king's military genius, power, and skill until Xerxes approached the pinnacle of greatness occupied by the divine Ahura Mazda.

But my master was no god, and I suspected that he often doubted his own suitability for the throne. During the banquet, he continually referred to his father, the great Darius, as if emphasizing their relationship to legitimize his leadership. "By the favor of Ahura Mazda," he would say as each night of revelry drew to a close, "Darius the king, my father, did much good. And by the favor of Ahura Mazda, I will also add to that work and build more. May Ahura Mazda, together with the gods, protect me and my kingdom."

I knew, though few others did, that while the guests laughed and exchanged stories in the gardens, the king held secret meetings with his generals in his private quarters. Eager to avenge his father's only defeat, the king was designing a military campaign against a western nation. His victory in Babylon had been little more than a suppression of rebels, and he knew it. He wanted new territory, and he had turned his gaze upon Greece.

The vast majority of military men at the banquet had no idea they were being fattened like pigs for slaughter. As the sun dipped toward the western horizon, the generals emerged from the meetings and slaves carried trays of food through the crowd, allowing each guest to take whatever he liked. During the meal, servants hovered near with rhytons molded in the shapes of winged lions, many of pure gold. These vessels held the kingdom's finest wine, and slaves stood ready to pour whenever the king raised his glass. No one drank unless the king did, and though some may have quietly grumbled about the king's restraint, I felt grateful for my master's self-control. These were soldiers, after all, so they should be men of discipline.

As the guests ate their fill, slaves lit oil lamps suspended in the trees, and evening crept over the garden. Musicians strummed the lute and lyre while the royal concubines walked throughout the crowd, exuding a feminine loveliness that charmed and fascinated the men in attendance. Not a man present, however, would have dared to touch one of the king's women.

After a suitable interval, the curtains around the king's private enclosure dropped softly to the floor, creating a wall between my master and his guests. The one thousand Immortals assigned to guard the king shifted their positions in order to escort him to his bedchamber.

Our banquet guests recognized their cue to depart.

My fellow slaves and I stood with hands clasped as they bundled the remnants of their feast and headed toward the stairs, some leaning on each other, others accidentally dropping the food intended

to sustain them during their stay in Susa. Even though the king discouraged drunkenness during the banquet, his men were not so temperate when away from the royal presence. As I watched one bleary-eyed captain take a long drink on a bottle he'd hidden in his tunic, I marveled that such an army had been able to crush a revolt.

But they had been sober in battle. I knew I should not resent this feast, their reward for valor and victory.

But I did.



After six full months of feasting and drinking, the soldiers, commanders, generals, and governors gathered their servants, piled their pilfered treasures into carriages and chariots, and followed the king's highways back to their distant homes. While I knew they would never forget this experience, I fervently hoped I would.

Then the king decided to host *another* banquet.

I was not with my master when he made the decision, so the announcement reached me through Memucan, the eldest of the seven vice-regents who advised the king on matters of law and policy. "The people of Susa have been sorely abused by the king's former guests," Memucan explained in the hushed tone suitable for speaking to a slave. "So to placate the populace, he will give another banquet to rival the first."

Tension ratcheted up my nerves. "Surely not for another six months."

"For seven days," Memucan replied. "For the next week we will feast as before, but without restriction as to the wine. As a special dispensation to his put-upon people, no servant is to refuse a guest if he asks for more wine, and no one is to compel a guest to drink. Furthermore, all the citizens of Susa are invited, including the women, who will be entertained by the queen in her chambers. The people have borne much for the sake of the king's graciousness; now they will be rewarded for their hospitality, grudging though it may have been."

Knowing we had to work or face the lash, we slaves set to work again. We replaced faded hangings, polished gold and silver goblets, cleaned silver couches, and refilled silken cushions.

"For all the people of Susa," one servant remarked as he hauled a pile of soiled pillows away, "except those who serve in the palace. When will the king give a feast for us?"

I caught him by the arm and gave him a stern look. "You feast in the king's palace every day, so hold your tongue lest someone chop it off. Your duty is to obey and remember that you could be outside planting crops."

"Like that'd be so terrible," the slave grumbled, shifting his burden to his hip. "Fresh air, the freedom to move about and keep a woman in a hut—that wouldn't be such a bad life. But what would a eunuch know about it?"

I stepped back, repulsed by the derision in his tone. I might have given him a snappish reply, but his words had transported me to a distant place, a vault filled with violent memories I had locked away and sworn never to release.

I knew what he meant because I had once been free. But I had also known starvation and poverty. And I had not always been a eunuch.

Chapter Three

Hadassah



MIRIAM WAS FINGERING THE DELICATE FRINGE on the border of a rug when I spotted Parysatis in her father's booth across the bazaar. My friend waved, then tilted her head in a small gesture that clearly said *get over here*.

I glanced at Miriam. While she and Mordecai did not keep to themselves as much as some of our neighbors, I knew they would be disappointed if I spent too much time with a girl who didn't know a forbidden food from an acceptable one. Parysatis was as Persian as the carpet beneath Miriam's hand and she probably worshipped Ahura Mazda, Mithras, or no god at all. But we didn't talk about gods when we were together, and sometimes a girl needed to talk to another girl. . . .

"I'll be back soon," I told Miriam, squeezing her elbow. "I'm going to see Parysatis."

Miriam looked across the road, bewilderment and concern in her eyes. "You're going alone?"

"Parysatis is with her older brother. We'll be perfectly safe."

"Hadassah, I don't think—"

I didn't wait to hear the rest. Miriam was as soft as a feather bed, and I had always been able to work around her gentle protestations. And we *would* be safe, for Babar, Parysatis's handsome brother had proved himself worthy of a name that meant *tiger*. At eighteen, he seemed to prowl through the marketplace, his muscles gleaming as he glanced left and right for anyone who might dare challenge his skill with a sword and spear.

Babar barely glanced at me as I hurried over and slipped my arm through Parysatis's, but I felt the touch of his gaze like a current on my skin. "I got away," I told Parysatis. "It's so good to see you."

"And you." Parysatis leaned into me as a sister might, then glanced across the road at Miriam. "I don't understand why she's so protective. You're thirteen, practically a grown woman."

"She's old-fashioned."

"And so much older than you. How did you end up with your cousins, anyway?"

I shrugged and ran my fingertips over a bolt of blue silk. "My grandfather, Shimei, had two sons, Iair and Abihail. Iair had a son, Mordecai, and many years later he sired Abihail. The younger son was my father."

"Did you ever know him?" When I shook my head, Parysatis's eyes softened. "I can't imagine not knowing my father. Every day he comes home and asks what I would like him to bring me from the bazaar. But if Mordecai does this for you—"

Again I shrugged, implying that Mordecai asked me the same daily question, when in truth he rarely asked if I wanted anything. When not working on the king's accounts, Mordecai spent his time

studying Torah or in prayer. Our home was comfortable, not elaborate, and if my cousin had extra money, he was more likely to give it to the poor than to buy some frippery for the house.

Parysatis's father, however, lived for art, beauty, and music. The aromatic perfume of myrrh filled my head every time I visited their luxurious home, and I could have spent hours examining the vases, statues, carvings, and artworks without seeing everything. Every wall, floor, fountain, and furnishing in the silk merchant's dwelling had been designed to delight the senses, and I drank them in until I fell drunk on beauty. I loved hearing the silk merchant talk about the foreign lands where so many of his exquisite pieces originated. I would have given anything to be able to visit those exotic locations.

But even as I reveled in the stimulating aromas, the amazing sights, and the musical splash of the fountains, I could almost see Miriam shaking her head in mournful reproach. "You are too charmed by the world, Hadassah," she would say. "This place is not our home. Do not let yourself be blinded by trinkets."

But what was wrong with having nice things? Parysatis had everything a young girl could want—lovely garments, a maidservant, fine jewelry, and the most exquisitely wrought sandals. Her family kept horses at a stable near the river, and she could take a guest out riding whenever she wanted. Though Mordecai would probably say that my friend had been spoiled, Parysatis had never been anything but kind to me. She never criticized, never made me feel guilty for enjoying myself, and never asked why my guardians were so dour.

Not even now.

"I saw him earlier today." She pinched my arm in an overflow of excitement. "He was at the stable where my father keeps our horses."

"Who?" I asked, though I knew perfectly well whom she meant.

"Mushka." She breathed the name. "And he looked so handsome on his stallion! My father says he is destined to grow up to be a very important man. I only wish I could know that I am destined to become his wife."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Parysatis was in love with the king's seventeen-year-old nephew. The young man *was* handsome, but Mordecai said Mushka spent far too much time in the pursuit of pleasure. If the boy really wanted to learn how to help his royal uncle, he should take a post in the military or the treasury and not spend his time splashing silver around at the bazaar.

I, on the other hand, felt my heart turn over whenever Parysatis's brother entered the room. I tried to pretend he meant nothing to me, but Babar was the most beautiful youth I'd ever seen.

"So." Parysatis ran her palm over a lovely selection of silk, then held it up to her cheek and grinned at me. "Have you heard the amazing news?"

I hesitated, not wanting to appear completely ignorant. "The news about silk?"

She tipped her head back and released a charming, musical laugh. "The royal banquet, you silly. The feast for *us*."

My heart did a double beat. "Us?" The word came out in a squeak. "As in you and me?"

"As in you and me and your family and my family and all the citizens of Susa. My father learned the details last night. Apparently the king intends to reward us for our patience with his soldiers. He is giving a banquet to honor every citizen of Susa, from the noblest family to the most common. Father says our banquet will be every bit as grand and glorious as the feast for the king's army. And Mushka is certain to be present!"

Stunned speechless, I shifted my gaze to the wide bowl of sky overhead. I had dreamed of visiting the palace ever since meeting the queen, but in my daydreams I was a grown woman and I climbed the steps to the palace with a wealthy and well-bred husband at my side. My dream self wore a long silk gown with dozens of delicate pleats, and my hair was laced with gold cords and pinned up in a riot of curls. My beautiful jewelry gleamed in the sun—gifts from my husband, who bore a striking

resemblance to Babar—including a richly decorated necklace, a carved gold bracelet, and a pair of shimmering earrings. In that imagined moment, I felt I could finally be called *beautiful*. . . .

But if Parysatis was telling the truth, I would be visiting the palace soon. I wouldn't be nearly as striking as I'd hoped to be, but I would happily trade my daydream for this incredible reality.

"Are you sure your father's information can be trusted?" I pinched the plump flesh of her upper arm. "Because if you're teasing—"

She pulled away from me, laughing. "I'm not teasing, I promise. So ask your cousin Mordecai for a new gown because you're going to need one. Something regal, something silk and—" she winked "something expensive. With all of Susa present, you'll want to stand out."

I snorted softly. In the company of so many wealthy and noblewomen, a simple Jewish girl was far more likely to fade into the background.



Parysatis had spoken the truth. The next day a royal herald stood at the top of the great staircase and announced the banquet for the citizens of Susa, while mounted couriers carried the proclamation to distant points of the city. Women buzzed with the news as they filled their jars at the well, and patrons crowded the silk merchants' shops from the time they opened for trading until the time they blew out their lamps.

Miriam, however, insisted she did not want a new dress, and I didn't need one.

I couldn't have been more horrified if she'd said she planned to attend the royal banquet in sackcloth.

"But Miriam! Every woman in the city will be wearing her best on each of the seven days. You need several new dresses and so do I."

She shook her head. "We shall wear what we have and be happy. Women should be modest, Hadassah, and not overly concerned with outward beauty. Sarah was beautiful, yes, but her beauty was rooted in her kind and gentle spirit."

"But—" I wanted to argue that I was young, I wasn't yet married, and surely we should want to look our best for a king we respected. But for each of my points, Miriam would have an effective counterpoint. She would say the young should be protected, I would be betrothed soon enough, and I should live to please Adonai and not a pagan king.

I knew exactly what she'd say and didn't particularly want to hear any of her reasons.

So I decided to carry my request to Mordecai. Though the man had a will of iron, if I approached him with a note of pleading in my voice and a pitiable expression on my face, Mordecai's iron could be softened. I always felt a little guilty after manipulating him so obviously, but he was intelligent enough to see through my wiles. And as long as he was willing to grant me a favor . . .

Knowing that Mordecai would soon appear, I waited outside our courtyard as the sun began to set behind the royal fortress. His bushy brow rose when he saw me standing outside the gate.

"Hadassah." A note of rebuke underlined his voice. "A young woman should not stand idly in the street."

"I was waiting for you." I smiled and let him lead me into the courtyard. "I'm sure you've heard about the upcoming banquet."

"I have." He closed the gate behind us and turned, the suggestion of a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. "And I'm sure you'll agree that the three of us should stay home."

I gaped at him, momentarily bewildered by the absurd idea that he might not want to attend. "But but it's a gift! To thank us for housing those soldiers."

“I hardly think that allowing three men to sleep in our courtyard deserves such generosity.”

“But to refuse the invitation would be an insult to the king, would it not?”

His eyes sank into nets of wrinkles as his smile deepened. “Are you worried the king might be offended by the absence of an aging accountant and a thirteen-year-old girl? But that is not why you waited for me. Along with my assurance that we will attend the banquet, what do you need?”

I drew a deep breath, utterly relieved. “Parysatis says she’s wearing a new dress every night, and her father has commissioned special jewelry in honor of the occasion. I wouldn’t ask for so much, but a new gown would be nice. I want this banquet to be something I will never forget. Soon I will be married and then I will become a mother and have many little ones. Considering that I will spend my days chasing children and keeping house, this banquet might be the high point of my life.”

His heavy brows furrowed. “You think your life will amount to so little?”

I sighed, not understanding why he couldn’t see the obvious. What other fate could possibly await a girl like me?

“Never usurp the right of the Almighty to plan your future,” he said, his dark eyes intent on my face. “HaShem is always at work, even when you can’t see Him.”

I wanted to cry out in frustration, but a display of temper would never influence Mordecai to act in my favor. My cousin remained silent, his eyes probing mine as if he would discover the motivation for my request. Then he gave me a small smile. “I happen to know a man whose wife is a skilled dressmaker. Tomorrow I will ask if she has time to make another gown before the banquet.”

I clapped in victory. “Thank you, cousin! Thank you!”

He looked at me in patient amusement, then shook his head and went inside the house, leaving me to dance in the courtyard alone.

Chapter Four

Harbonah



BY THE TIME THE FIRST CITIZEN OF SUSA ARRIVED on the inaugural day of the king's banquet, fresh white cotton curtains canopied the garden, providing shade from the bright winter sun. Beneath the canopy, blue silk banners fluttered from silver rods, tied by purple cords of fine linen. The apadana's towering columns gleamed with a fresh coat of oil, and the marble tile shone beneath our sandals. The intricate mosaic flooring of malachite, marble, onyx, and mother-of-pearl moved more than one guest to stop in his tracks and gape at the heretofore unimagined majesty of the king's palace.

I mopped my damp forehead with a square of spotless linen and tucked it into a pocket of my tunic. We had worked through the night to make certain everything would be ready for the residents of Susa, and by some miracle we had finished our cleaning, baking, polishing, steaming, and roasting. If any element was missing—in truth, I clung to the hope that the king's guests could not miss what they had never seen.

Never before in the history of the Medes and the Persians—perhaps in the history of the world—had a king thrown open the doors of his palace and invited everyone outside his walls to partake of his hospitality. As slaves escorted the male citizens of Susa, both lowly and great, to dining couches in the garden, female servants led the guests' wives and daughters to similar accommodations in the queen's palace. Knowing that women were fascinated by the living quarters of other women, I had suggested the king ask Queen Vashti to give the women a tour of her rooms after the feast. She had balked—no surprise there—but when I reminded her that Hatakh, the queen's chamberlain, would handle all the details, she relented.

Still, the queen was not happy about the king's grand gesture. She had given birth to my master's third son only a few months before, and though she did not have to tend or nurse the infant, she often cited the birth as an excuse for not appearing at various royal functions. On this occasion, however, the king had insisted that she play her part.

I was standing near the western staircase and observing the guests' arrival when I spotted Mordecai with his wife and charming ward. The accountant wore his usual austere tunic, adorned only with a light fringe at the bottom, but both women wore beautiful gowns. The girl's, I noticed, had been cut in the latest fashion, close fitting through the body with long, flaring sleeves. Both Mordecai's wife and ward wore silk scarves over their hair, a modest and traditional accessory.

I lifted my hand and caught the accountant's gaze. "I am happy to see you, my friend. Welcome to the king's house."

Mordecai and his wife responded with the perfunctory nod I received from most people, but the gi

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