



ESTHER

ROYAL BEAUTY

A DANGEROUS BEAUTY
NOVEL

ANGELA
HUNT

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Angela Hunt, Esther

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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

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 loved 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.