

A
RELUCTANT
QUEEN

THE LOVE STORY *of* ESTHER

JOAN WOLF



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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FOR MY DEAR FRIEND, EDITH LAYTON FELBER.

I MISS YOU.

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ABOUT LANGUAGE

The languages spoken by the characters in this book would have been Persian and Aramaic. What you are reading is a “translation” into modern English.

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CHAPTER ONE

485 BC

Esther rose early as usual. She dressed in her brown robe and overtunic, fitted her veil over her long black hair, and went out to the courtyard behind her uncle's house to begin making the day's bread—more than she and her uncle needed because she gave some to the old women in their community every day. By the time Mordecai came into the courtyard, she had kneaded the dough and set the loaves out to rise.

“Tired, Uncle?” Esther asked in a teasing tone as she saw

Mordecai yawn. “The Great King’s feast kept you up late last night.”

Mordecai smiled ruefully. “Far later than I care to be out, chicken. But I had no choice. All of the palace staff was invited and the Head Treasurer would have noticed if I did not appear for the king’s birthday.”

He took a seat on the bench at the small table in the courtyard and Esther began to assemble their breakfast. The plates contained dates and figs and slices of yesterday’s bread, which Esther had warmed in the outdoor oven. She fetched cups of water from inside the house, Mordecai said the blessing over the food, and silence fell as they ate.

Esther waited until her uncle had finished before she spoke again. She and her friends were all curious about the new king, Ahasuerus, who had only recently arrived in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. It had been a huge surprise two years ago when the old king, Darius, had chosen him over his other son, Xerxes, and it made him an intriguing figure. But the real reason for the girls’ interest was the gossip they had heard in the marketplace that the king was the most handsome man who ever lived.

Unfortunately, the Jewish girls who made up Esther’s circle would probably never have an opportunity to see this paragon for themselves, but they hoped that Esther’s uncle might have seen him at the feast.

“Did you get to see the king, Uncle?”

Mordecai pushed his plate a little away from him. “No, Esther, I did not. We menials were crowded into the Apanada, while the king and the Royal Kin dined inside in splendor. But I must say that we were treated well. There were huge quantities of meat and fowl: horses, camels, oxen, donkeys, deer, ostriches, geese; the countryside must have been decimated to provide so much food. The wine served was from Damascus, I was told, and everyone assured me it was excellent.”

“Did you at least take a cup of water?” Esther asked.

Mordecai gave her a stern look and did not reply.

Esther wasn’t surprised. The Jewish community to which they belonged held strictly to the Mosaic dietary laws. Even a cup from a Persian kitchen would be unclean for Mordecai.

Esther thought about how thirsty her uncle must have been and sighed. His look grew sterner. “The Law is the Law, Esther. Except if you’re that weasel Ezra and his friends. They were eating and drinking without a thought for what it means to be Jewish.” His lip curled in disgust. “They were as drunk as the Persians by the end of the evening.”

This was one topic that Mordecai could hold forth about for a long time. The Susa Jews were broken into two sects. The smaller one, to which Mordecai belonged, held strictly to Mosaic Law. The other sect, comprised of most of the wealthy Jewish merchants in the city, had assumed many of the ways of the Persians among whom they lived.

Esther nodded impatiently.

Mordecai continued, "It's a disgrace. That the descendants of Abraham and Moses should turn their backs on the Torah and seek to become like these pleasure-loving Persians! It was Nebuchadnezzar who forced us out of our homeland of Judah and dragged us into years of subjugation in Babylon. Now these traitor Jews seek to imitate the very people who enslaved us? Bah! It is disgusting."

Esther tried her best to cheer him. "You taught me the scriptures, so I know that such a thing has happened many times before, and we always survived. We are God's chosen people, Uncle. No matter how many may turn away from the Covenant, we will always triumph in the end."

He grunted, looking only slightly mollified.

Esther attempted to steer the conversation back to their original topic. "Even if you didn't get to see the king last night, I'm sure you will see him soon. After all, you work right there in the palace. And he is going to reside in Susa now, isn't he?"

"Yes, it appears he has decided it is time he took up the reins of government here in the capital. He's been Great King for almost two years, but first there was that rebellion in Egypt that he had to put down, and next he decided to go to his summer palace in Ecbatana to escape the summer heat. But I understand that he has come to Susa for good."

Esther reached across the table for her uncle's empty plate and put it on top of her own. "There is still a chance that

Rachel got to go with her brother to the procession through the city yesterday. Ahasuerus was riding in his golden chariot and she might have gotten a good look at him. I know that Sarah and Rebecca weren't allowed to go. Nor was I." This last statement was accompanied by a faintly reproachful look at her uncle.

Mordecai regarded her with a trace of amusement. "I am asking myself, why would a group of nice Jewish girls be so interested in the Great King of Persia?"

Esther grinned. "Because he's supposed to be so magnificently handsome. We want to know if it's true or not."

Mordecai's thin, intelligent face became instantly grave. "I hope you have enough sense not to be swayed by a good-looking face, Esther." His voice was as severe as his expression. "That's what happened to your mother, and look what it brought her."

"It's just a game we're playing, Uncle Mordecai. We're not really interested in the king." Her voice softened. "I will never run away from you, dear Uncle. You have always been so good to me. And I love you."

Mordecai looked away, both embarrassed and touched by her statement. She waited for him to resume the conversation and finally he said, "I may not have seen the king, chicken, but I do have some exciting news to tell you about the feast."

Esther's interest sparked. "You do?"

"Yes, indeed. It was quite an extraordinary thing. None of

us in the Apanada saw it, but we heard about it as we were leaving. Soon all of Susa will hear about it, but here is a chance for you to be first with the news to your friends.”

Esther’s eyes widened and she leaned forward. “What happened?” she breathed.

“The king sent for his wife, Vashti, to show herself at the banquet.”

Esther’s mouth opened in amazement. Persian women were kept sequestered, allowed to see no males but their husbands or blood kin. Such a summons would be unthinkable in Persian society.

“Before all those men?” she asked.

“Yes.” Mordecai raised his graying eyebrows. “*And* unveiled, because he said he wanted them to see how beautiful she was.”

Esther gasped. “A Persian woman would never do that!”

“Exactly. She refused, and apparently that made the king angry. I’m sure he was drunk. All of the Persians had been drinking for days.”

“What happened next?”

“The king issued a royal decree, right there in the banquet room. He was angry, but I’ve heard his anger runs cold, not hot. So he issued this decree, with perfect clarity, stating that Vashti’s refusal to obey her husband’s request was a violation of her marriage vow and a dangerous example to the women of Persia. Therefore she was no longer his wife.”

“But he put her in an impossible situation! It would have

been wrong of her to show herself, and it was wrong of her to disobey him. How could she choose correctly?"

"It was a diabolically clever move," Mordecai said with a tinge of admiration in his voice. "Everyone knows he never wanted to marry Vashti. Now he is rid of her."

"I think it was a horrible thing to do." Esther glared at her uncle. "Poor Vashti. How she must feel!"

Mordecai shrugged. "I think Ahasuerus means to rule. Vashti was pushed on him by his father, and now that Darius is dead, Ahasuerus wants a fresh start, unencumbered by a politically connected wife."

"How terrible it must be to be a Persian woman. To be unable to walk to the market or visit friends, to have to cover up your face and hide inside a harem and never get to see the men of your community." She shivered. "I thank God, Uncle Mordecai, that you brought me up to be a Jew."

"You always were a Jew, Esther," Mordecai assured her. "Your father might have been Persian, but a Jew is defined as the child of a Jewish mother. Among our people, the father's blood does not count."

Mordecai rose from his bench. "Now I must wash and go to the palace." He gave a grim little smile. "The place will be buzzing with speculation and gossip. Everyone will want to know what is going to happen next."

Esther watched her uncle depart, but instead of removing the breakfast plates, she leaned her elbows on the table and

rested her chin in her hands. The morning sun was warm, not hot, and it felt comforting on her shoulders and head.

Poor Vashti. Her mind turned to what she had said to her uncle about being glad she had been raised as a Jew.

Her life might have been very different had that not happened. When her mother had been only a little older than Esther was now, she had eloped with a Persian cavalry lieutenant. After her father had been killed in battle, her mother's brother, Mordecai, had taken her mother and Esther home to Susa; Esther had been two years old at the time. Her mother had died when Esther was only six. Since Mordecai had not remarried after the death of his wife, for many years it had been just the two of them in the tidy, mudbrick house in the Jewish quarter of Susa.

Esther knew nothing about her father except that her mother had loved him enough to turn her back on her own family and community to follow him. When Esther was small she had once asked Mordecai to tell her about him, and her uncle had shown that stern face she always obeyed and commanded her never to mention her father to him again. She had never done so.

But sometimes she thought about this Persian father of hers, who had stolen her mother's heart and then died tragically at a young age. Her mother must have been brave. Esther knew she could never do such a mad thing. She was comfortable in her familiar surroundings: her small, tight community;

her friends; her beloved Uncle Mordecai. She was fifteen and knew that one day she would get married. She liked her best friend's brother, Abraham, and she thought he liked her. But she was in no hurry to leave home. No hurry at all.



That afternoon Esther joined the other women from her street for their weekly visit to the local market. All of the Jews in her community patronized this particular market because it was the only place in Susa that offered meat and fowl that had been ritually killed and dressed by a trained Jewish butcher.

Esther's clothing was nicer than the clothes she wore to work around the house; today she wore a long white tunic encircled with a narrow leather belt, and over that a shorter robe in green that opened at the front. Her long black hair was braided, wound into a bun and covered by a light veil with a simple gold fillet. On her feet she wore soft leather sandals. It was a style of dress adapted to the hot climate of Persia, and most inhabitants of Susa, male and female, wore some variation of it.

Esther walked through the familiar narrow streets of her neighborhood chatting to her neighbor, Naomi. Naomi had always looked out for Esther, inviting her over to spend time with her own children so Esther would not be lonely. After the initial polite greetings, Esther related the tale she

had heard from Mordecai about what had happened at last night's feast. Some of the other women overheard what she was saying, and by the time they reached the market everyone had the news.

The Jewish women kept together as they made their way from stall to stall. The market was both noisy and colorful: the cries of the vendors, the chatter of Aramaic spoken with the accents of countries from all over the empire, the stalls heaped with colorful produce from the countryside, even live lambs and bullocks for slaughter. Esther and Naomi were examining a display of delicious-looking pomegranates when they heard someone call Esther's name. Both women turned their heads.

"Rachel!" Esther said in surprise. "What are you doing here?" Rachel was Esther's closest friend, a small, dark girl with the long-lashed eyes of a deer. Since her father was a rich merchant, the servants usually did all of their household shopping.

A young man stepped up to stand beside Rachel. "She has a nice piece of gossip that she can't wait to tell you, that's what she's doing here."

"Abraham." Esther smiled up at her friend's tall, well-built brother. "Did she make you bring her?"

"She did," he replied.

"We went to your house first and when you weren't there, I remembered this was your market day," Rachel explained.

Naomi commanded, "Come away from the stall, girls. We

are impeding people who wish to buy.” She shooed the young people out of the way, then turned to Rachel. “Now, what is this gossip that is so urgent you must seek Esther out at the market to tell it to her?”

“The king has put away Vashti!” Rachel said, looking around to see the effect her dramatic revelation had on the others.

Naomi’s face broke into a small, satisfied smile. “Oh, that. We already know all about that from Esther.”

Rachel’s face fell and she turned to Esther, her brown eyes bright with accusation. “Your uncle told you! Why didn’t you come right away to tell me?”

“I was going to come to your house after I finished the marketing,” Esther apologized.

“Isn’t it dreadful?” Rachel demanded. “He put her away for not obeying his command to show herself. How could she be expected to do that?”

“Uncle Mordecai thinks he wanted to get rid of Vashti for political purposes.”

Abraham nodded agreement. “It’s politics, all right. The court is divided into the party that wants to go to war against Greece and the party that doesn’t. Vashti’s family evidently belonged to the wrong party.”

Esther shivered at the thought of how terrible it must be to have your whole life ruled by the vagaries of politics. “I’m glad I’m not a Persian woman,” she said.

“Me too,” Rachel agreed.

Naomi looked from one girl to the other. "A Jewish woman can be divorced against her will, girls. You must know that."

"Yes, but that can only happen if the wife has committed adultery," Rachel replied.

"That's not true," Naomi said. "A Jewish man can put his wife away by simply giving her a bill of divorcement. The marriage is immediately dissolved, even if the wife doesn't agree."

Rachel frowned. "But doesn't he have to give a reason?"

Naomi patted her arm. "Believe me, Rachel, if a man wants to get rid of a woman, he will find a reason."

Rachel was horrified. "But . . . if the wife is forced to leave her husband, where does she go?"

"She goes home to her parents. Where else can she go?"

The autumn sun was warm, but Esther suddenly felt chilled. If her future husband should grow tired of her, could he divorce her because she was half-Persian? She pulled her robe closer to her body. It was as if the tightness and security of her little community had suddenly been breached and the world was a less kind and stable place than she had thought.



That evening, over supper in the courtyard, Esther asked Mordecai if what Naomi had said about Jewish divorce was true. He confirmed that it was.

She toyed with her bread, her eyes avoiding his. “What if that should happen to me?”

“It won’t happen to you, chicken. No man would ever want to put you away.”

“You say that because you love me, Uncle Mordecai.”

“Esther, look at me.” He waited until her eyes were looking directly into his. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you.”

“Then know that I would never give you into the keeping of a man whom I did not think would take care of you for the rest of your life. Do you trust me to do that?”

She smiled. “Yes, Uncle Mordecai, I do.”

“Then finish your dinner,” he said with mock sternness, and obediently she took a bite of her fish.