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Esther

By Rebecca Kanner



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From the award-winning author of *Sinners and the Sea* comes a breathtaking new look into the timeless tale of Queen Esther, “a riveting tale of courage” (*New York Times* bestselling author Tosca Lee).

A glittering Persian king has a vast empire that reaches farther than where the sun meets the horizon. He is bathed in riches and commands a frightening military force. He possesses power beyond any other mortal man and rules his kingdom as a god. Anything he desires, he has. Any woman he wants, he possesses. Thousands of them. Young virgins from all across his many lands.

A Jewish girl is ripped from her hut by the king’s brutish warriors and forced to march across blistering, scorched earth to the capital city. Trapped for months in the splendid cage of the king’s palace, she must avoid the ire of the king’s concubines and eunuchs all while preparing for her one night with the king. Soon the fated night arrives, and she does everything in her power to captivate the king and become his queen.

But wearing the crown brings with it a new set of dangers. When a ruthless man plies the king’s ear with whispers of genocide, it is up to the young queen to prevent the extermination of the Jews. She must find the strength within to violate the king’s law, risk her life, and save her people.

This is a story of finding hidden depths of courage within one’s self. Of risking it all to stand up for what is right.

This is the story of Queen Esther.



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Esther By Rebecca Kanner Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #361887 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-11-03
- Released on: 2015-11-03
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

"The book of Esther comes to life in this vivid novel based on the Old Testament tale....Kanner's descriptions are convincing and rich." (Kirkus Reviews)

"The brutality of Esther's experience makes her bravery that much more impressive, while her understandable struggle with fear makes her believable." (RT Book Reviews)

"The author retells a familiar story, interweaving the intrigues and conspiracies with the heartbreak of a young girl who rises to the heights of history." (CBA Retailers & Resources)

"Distinctively powerful and creative..." (Booklist)

"Fans of biblical fiction will love this fresh retelling. Kanner's characters crackle to life as Esther's tale is related in glorious detail. Razor-sharp dialog set against the backdrop of a court rife with treachery and political intrigue keep the pages turning." (Library Journal)

"Vivid...enchanted." (St. Paul Pioneer Press)

"Fascinating to read." (Minneapolis Star Tribune)

"A compelling piece of historical fiction." (Historical Novel Society)

"Kanner's *Esther* is the best of the bunch." (The Baffler)

"Skillful, empathetic characterizations; elegant writing, and seamless, edge-of-the-seat plotting make *Esther* a novel you won't want to put down, and that you'll wish would never end." (Sherry Jones, author of *The Jewel of Medina* and *The Sharp Hook of Love*)

"In her compelling novel of this well-known biblical heroine, Rebecca Kanner reveals the story of Esther as it's never been told. With evocative prose and vivid historical detail, Kanner's riveting story brings to life an imperfect, conflicted woman gifted with both beauty and intelligence. With strength and courage, Esther navigates the dangers of Xerxes court and her own desires to become the heroine of her story and save a nation." (Stephanie Landsem, author of *The Tomb*)

"Like a shimmering mirage, the peasant girl Hadassah rises from humble roots to become the beguiling Queen Esther. Let this tale of exotic lands and palace intrigues weave its spell on you. You will be rattled, enthralled, and ultimately won over as Rebecca Kanner brings another woman of the Bible to radiant life." (Duncan W. Alderson, author of the *Harper's Bazaar* must-read *Magnolia City*)

"Kanner has done it again. A beautiful story spun with the gilt and grit of historical detail and biblical tradition. Esther the way it really could have happened, a riveting tale of courage." (Tosca Lee, New York Times bestselling author)

About the Author

Rebecca Kanner's writing has won an Associated Writing Programs Award and a Loft Mentorship Award. Her stories have been published in numerous journals, including *The Kenyon Review* and *The Cincinnati Review*. She is a freelance writer and teaches writing at The Loft in Minneapolis.

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Esther

CHAPTER ONE

KIDNAPPED

Outside the Persian capital city of Shushan, 480 BCE

They were the night itself. First the darkness and then the blinding light of torches that hid the stars. The whinnying of horses, the crying of a hundred girls, the clashing of swords. The smell of flesh that has traveled a long way through the desert, bringing with it dust and sweat from far-off lands.

I was lying on my straw mattress when I heard the hooves pounding in the distance. It was much too long past the day's end for a merchant's caravan to be traveling upon the road, and the sound was not the slow plodding of oxen, elephants, or camels. It was the hard and fast approach of horses.

My hands started to shake. They did not want to obey me, but mostly they did, clumsily tying my head scarf behind my neck. My feet too were clumsy as I slid them into sandals and wound the straps around my ankles, all the way up to my calves. I pulled them tight. Because I knew. I knew why the hooves came.

Yet I did not run.

I no longer knew what would save me and what would lead to my death. I did not even know if the pounding in my ears was hooves striking the ground or the beating of my own heart. The horses were upon the village—I could smell dust rising from the road.

The door was yanked open and a shadow blocked the light of the stars. It would haunt me until I learned who had cast it. As it approached I heard not only heavy footsteps but also the clanking of armor. The king's soldiers had fallen upon the village. And not just ordinary soldiers, of whom the king had hundreds of thousands, but the king's most elite, highly trained force: Immortals.

A month before, the king had issued a decree that virgins from every province of his empire were to be gathered and brought to the palace at Shushan to serve in his harem. At the news, my cousin, Mordecai, had said, Soldiers are lazy, they save themselves for great battles. They will take only the girls nearest the palace. So he had sent me only a day's journey from the heart of Shushan, to a village where a friend of his was willing to let me stay in the tiny servants' quarters behind his hut.

As the Immortal came to hover over me, the rest of my cousin's words rang in my ears: Though Xerxes is the richest man in the world, he will not feel rich until there is nothing, anywhere, that is not his. It seemed the shadow was Xerxes himself emerging from my cousin's tales, hungry to add me to his possessions.

"Forgive me," the Immortal said. No two words had ever terrified me so greatly. Forgive me. He spoke loudly, as though he spoke not to me but to someone else who was not so near. Perhaps to his god. He pulled

me from my straw mattress, threw me over his shoulder, and began walking. My head fell against his armor.

His shoulder pressed up into my belly, making it hard to speak, but still I tried. "Please—" I did not finish—I didn't want the words do not make me spend the rest of my life as a harem concubine to exist in the world.

He did not hesitate at the doorway of the hut. He had already asked forgiveness for all he would do.

As we approached the road I could hear girls crying, and I did not want to join my voice to theirs. I did not want to be one of them. I had cried while Xerxes' soldiers quashed the last revolt of Babylon so brutally that for days the city smelled of blood. My tears had not saved my parents.

Instead I felt for the soldier's dagger. My fingers wrapped around it and slid it from his belt. Lord, let it be me who will need to ask for forgiveness. I plunged it up the inside of the soldier's tunic sleeve with all my strength.

The dagger was no match for his flesh. It slipped from my hand as if he had knocked it away. I tried again with the most ready weapon I had, one I did not have to grip. I sunk my teeth into his upper left arm. He grunted and threw me to the ground. He was only flesh after all, flesh I could run from. Though first I hastily searched the ground for the dagger. I had grasped it only briefly, yet without it my hands felt unbearably empty. Perhaps, knowing I was about to lose all I had, I could not bear to lose anything more. And for this I will never forgive myself.

What good did I think it would do me? What excuse can I offer?

I was only fourteen. I had made one mistake after another: I should not have put on my head scarf, I should simply have grabbed—not fastened and tied—my sandals. And most of all, I should not have been near Shushan.

The only thing I may have done right, though I did it too late, was run. I ran in the opposite direction of the road and the terrible sound of girls crying.

But I did not go far before learning the terrible strength of men. He yanked me by my tunic and I flew into him so hard the wind was knocked from my lungs. His weight fixed him to the earth as mine did not; the impact did not move him even a hair's width. I knew suddenly that there had never been any use in stealing his dagger and stabbing him, nor in biting him. It was as though I had flown backward into a giant rock face.

As he dragged me toward the road and the pleas of the girls gathered there, I fought to gather enough air to speak. I wanted to tell him my cousin would reward him with gold darics if he would let me go, but my body would give up only enough breath to say, "Please."

He did not respond with words. He tightened his arms—one around my ribs and elbows, the other around my neck. If I had not been choking from the soldier's arm I would have choked on the musky earthen smell of men and horses. Sweat old and new, dust, dirt, the frothing around the horses' saddles and bits. As the soldier brought me to stand in the road I could smell all of this but see little—the light of the torches was blinding. Yet for a moment I tried not to close my eyes. I wanted to see the soldiers' faces, hoping to find kindness in one of them.

The arms released me and I stumbled backward, as if the light itself pushed me away. A new shadow came to stand before me. I quickly practiced my lie, practiced not allowing the voice in my head to falter. Sir, I

must humbly tell you that I am already betrothed. My wedding is in two days.

“Sir,” I said. He tied a rope around my wrists so tightly I knew we had passed the point at which we could have pretended I did not want to run away. “I must humbly tell you—”

“You must humbly keep your mouth shut or I will close it for you.”

“I am already promised to—”

“Gag her,” the soldier ordered. Though he had already tied the rope around my wrists, he did not let go of it.

My eyes were adjusting to the light. The soldier had eyes whose centers were like perfect round drops of honey that have just begun to melt in the sun. Huge, beautiful eyes. He possessed no other remarkable features. Perhaps his eyes had used up all the beauty that one face is allowed. He had a long nose from which the rest of his features receded, as though he had thrust his face too often against the wind. Not even his beard of tight curls could disguise that he had little in the way of a chin.

“My cousin will give you gold coins if you will let me stay here.”

He leaned close. I tried to step back, but he yanked me forward by the rope around my wrists. “We will take you,” he said, his stale breath hitting my face like something solid, “and your cousin’s coins.”

From behind me a soldier said, “Enough, Parsha.” I was relieved to hear someone speaking on my behalf, but I did not like knowing that the soldier who had tied my wrists had a name. It made it harder to hold on to my last hope—that I was having a nightmare, the contents of which would empty back into the night when I awoke. Where would I have come up with the name Parsha? The soldier was not my invention. I leaned away from him.

“You follow orders, Erez,” Parsha replied. “My brother’s orders.” Yet he let go of the rope and turned away as I stumbled backward.

The soldier called Erez caught me. My back fell against his chest and his hands steadied me. Perhaps meaning to reassure me, he said, “We only want a hundred of you. When we put you in lines and walk through with torches it will be decided who is plain enough to stay here and who we will bring to the king.” He moved on and I had to bear my own weight again, a terrible burden I could not set down.

As the huts were ransacked, the girls on either side of me pressed closer. Whatever stood between the soldiers and the things they wanted was thrown upon the ground. It seemed that the lives we had lived up to that moment were trash to be gotten rid of. Yet the soldiers did us this one kindness. A shower of sandals rained over us like a gift from a Greek god—one who does not halt the terror but sends something to help you through it.

Beside me two girls struggled for the same sandal. The strap broke when neither would let go. Everyone knew that without sandals you could not walk upon the Royal Road once the sun has risen to the top of the sky. Not for long.

When the struggling was over, many girls were left with sandals of different sizes, straps stretched taut over one foot, the other swallowed by leather.

The soldiers had been watching, laughing, but now a few began to argue amongst themselves. I was glad for this, because their shouts drowned out the moans of the men who had been brave enough to fight for their sisters and daughters.

“This is not Athens,” Erez said. “You are stealing from the king’s own subjects.”

A soldier who looked like Parsha replied: “A few of these men tried to stand against us, and for this, they all will pay.” His voice was crueler than Parsha’s and it overflowed with confidence. He was in charge.

As we were pushed and prodded into lines, I kept my chin down to hide the necklace my mother had given me, a flower of gold foil petals hanging from a plaited gold wire. Crying girls fell against me on either side. When the soldiers began slowly moving through us, girls shrank from the light of their torches. At least, some of them shrank away—those without obvious imperfections. A girl beside me stepped boldly toward an approaching torch. Her cheek was deeply gouged, so deeply that with just a little more force behind the knife her tongue might have been visible. Had she pressed the knife to her face herself?

She began to sway upon her feet as though the ground undulated beneath her. I feared she would fall. The torches continued to move through us—illuminating and blinding and then receding to leave us in darkness until the next one came. I saw that the girl with the gash in her cheek was not the only one who was disfigured. Would these girls go free, or would they be punished with a fate worse than living out the rest of their days in a harem?

The soldier who looked like Parsha spoke quietly to some of his men while gesturing at us. Then the soldiers untied the girls with gashes in their cheeks, burns on their necks, missing fingers, and any other obvious injury. The soldiers pushed them away, back toward their huts. Though their wounds hurt my eyes, and surely some would return home to discover a father or brother wounded worse than they were, I wished I were one of them. Why had I not thought to use the soldier’s dagger to cut myself? I would have to use my teeth again. I will bite the side of my lower lip so hard I am too marred to bring to the king’s harem, I decided and brought my teeth down with all my strength.

My cry was so strange it did not seem that it could have come from me. It was loud enough to bring a torch so close that I felt as though the flame licked my cheek. I closed my eyes and watched the spots of blue that floated before me, wondering why the soldier holding the torch was silent. Was he considering whether to keep me for the king or let me go? I had nothing left to offer but what little pride remained to me. “Please let me go.”

He hesitated, then so quietly I almost did not hear, said, “I cannot. If any soldier who has seen the beauty of your face catches you going back to your home he will do far worse than bring you to the king’s harem.”

The voice belonged to Erez. If he would not help me, who would? As the torchlight moved on, all hope drained out of me.

Spots of blue continued to float before my eyes. I watched them as I was pulled forward by the rope around my wrists, away from the sounds of the villagers’ wailing. Soldiers were yelling at people to stay back. A man ran up beside us, calling to one of the girls, “I will not leave you. I will be beside y—” I heard the crack of a whip and looked back. In the torchlight, I could see the man bent over upon the ground. Farther back I could see the villagers gathered behind us, and soldiers taking water from the village well. Farther still, I could see the outlines of the huts in which we had been sleeping not long before.

Tears began to form in my eyes. I quickly turned back to the march. None of what was happening seemed like it could possibly be real.

When the sun finally came up though, I could clearly see the rope around my wrists. I started to cry. I hated myself for it but I could not stop. I was one of a hundred girls being driven like oxen east across the scorching desert plain by Xerxes' soldiers, straight into the rising sun.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Michael Durkin:

Information is provisions for individuals to get better life, information currently can get by anyone in everywhere. The information can be a know-how or any news even a huge concern. What people must be consider any time those information which is within the former life are hard to be find than now could be taking seriously which one is suitable to believe or which one typically the resource are convinced. If you get the unstable resource then you obtain it as your main information we will see huge disadvantage for you. All of those possibilities will not happen with you if you take Esther as the daily resource information.

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Victor Hubbard:

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Marie Miles:

Playing with family in a very park, coming to see the coastal world or hanging out with buddies is thing that usually you may have done when you have spare time, and then why you don't try matter that really opposite from that. 1 activity that make you not sense tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you have been ride on and with addition info. Even you love Esther, you could enjoy both. It is excellent combination right, you still would like to miss it? What kind of hang-out type is it? Oh come on its mind hangout folks. What? Still don't get it, oh come on its identified as reading friends.

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