

TESSA
AFSHAR

THE
QUEEN'S
COOK

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BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group

Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2024 by Tessa Afshar

Published by Bethany House Publishers
Minneapolis, Minnesota
BethanyHouse.com

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

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Afshar, Tessa, author.

Title: *The Queen's Cook* / Tessa Afshar.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2024. | Series: Queen Esther's Court

Identifiers: LCCN 2024026437 | ISBN 9780764243691 (paper) | ISBN

9780764243974 (cloth) | ISBN 9781493448074 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3601.F47 Q44 2024 | DDC 813.6—dc23/eng/20240617
LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024026437>

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Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, BooksAndSuch.com.

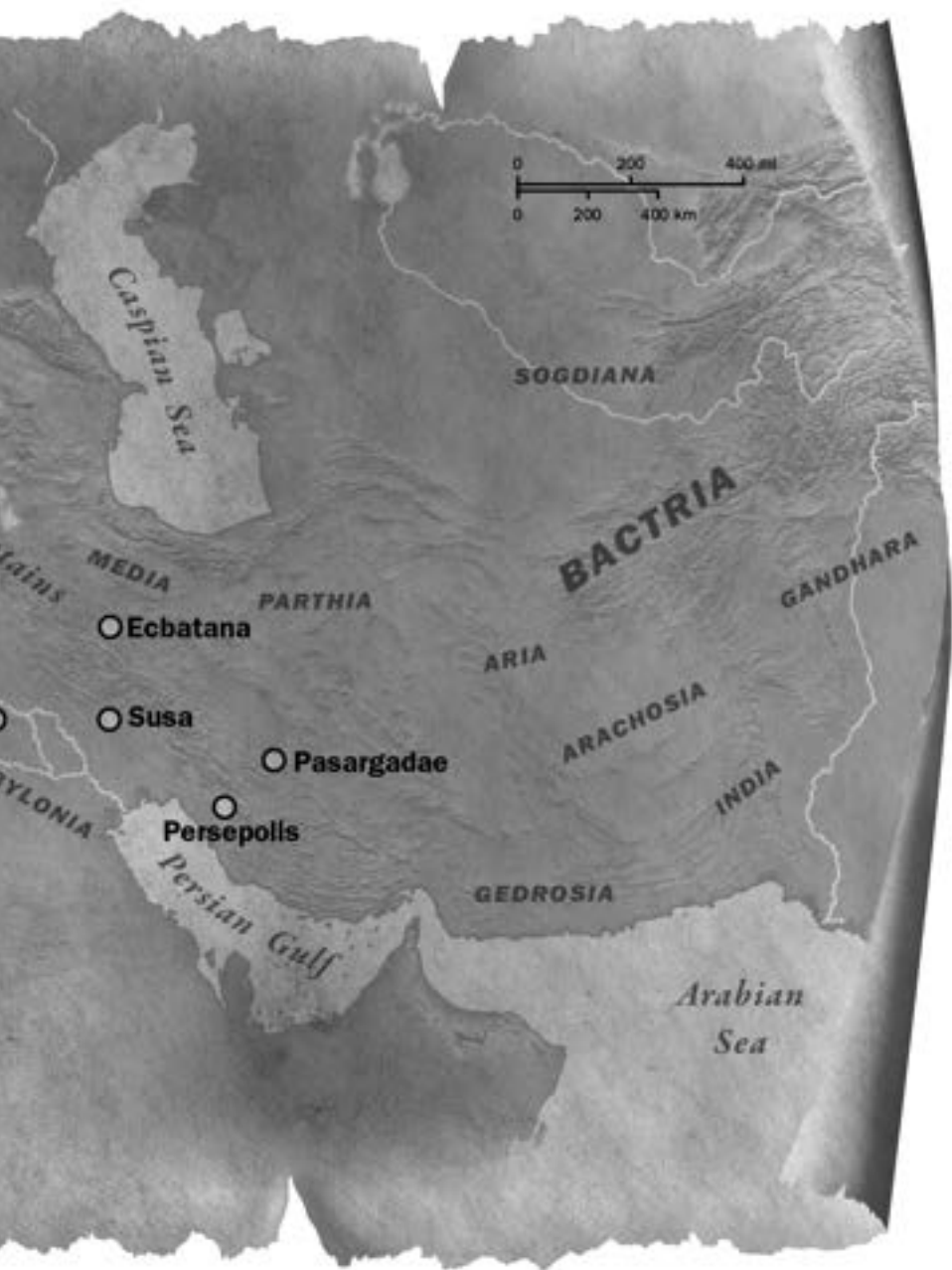
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*To my mother,
The most elegant, generous-hearted woman I know.
Thank you for always believing in me.*









*From the Secret Scrolls
of Esther*

She who was once great among the nations
Now sits alone like a widow.
Once the queen of all the earth,
She is now a slave.

Lamentations 1:1 NLT

The Twenty-Fifth Year of King Artaxerxes's Rule

Let me tell you a secret: Being queen will break your heart.

Young women weave sweet fantasies of bejeweled crowns and magnificent honors when they dream of a title. How little they understand the weight of that crown or the cost of true honor.

They look upon me now and see an old woman whose ordinary life holds little to recommend it to the young. They have no notion that once I sat upon the throne they long for. The king's scepter lifted to welcome me, and a hundred backs bent low when I walked past.

They do not know who I am. And that is as I like it.

I have not survived this long without learning a trick or two.

The palace goes on as ever, its courtiers blustering, servants scurrying, scribes administering, wives and concubines scheming, armies marching. The empire grinds slowly forward as if the blood of the king I loved was never spilled by covetous hands. Kings are replaced as easily as dribbled ink, it seems.

His son sits on the throne now. *Her* son. She gave me my king what I never could: a lineage to follow after him. She raised the boy well, I'll give her that. He has been a good monarch, with the steel-hard strength that won his forefathers an empire tempered with grace enough to make everyone love him.

I hope that makes her rest easy in her aristocratic grave.

She died clutching the crown she always longed for, while I sit in my simple house, my head bare save for a modest veil. Esther is gone. I am Hadassah again.

There is a peace that comes when you lose everything. Once, I wielded the power of an empire to save my people. That knowledge is my crown, the throne I sit upon when my losses haunt me.

I survived the sharp edge of palace intrigue long enough to complete the hard tasks that God laid before me. And somehow, on that arduous journey, I made a handful of true friends. You might even say I changed a few lives.



1



Roxannah

You are a hiding place for me;
you preserve me from trouble.

Psalm 32:7

THIRTY-THREE YEARS EARLIER

THE TWELFTH YEAR OF KING XERXES'S RULE

THE TENTH DAY OF SPRING

Sunsets had a lot in common with cats if you lived in Lord Fravartish's house; Roxannah never knew what they might drag in. This one had wrenched in the mangled corpse of her hopes for the evening.

She threw a hasty look at the door before scrambling inside the half-empty linen chest, her legs folding at an awkward angle in the cramped space. For once, her petite frame proved an advantage as she wedged her body inside the musty confines and pulled the lid closed over her head. At twenty-three, she had

long since passed the age of playing hide-and-seek. But finding a place of concealment tonight was no childish game.

The sound of heavy footsteps penetrated the smothering darkness of her hiding place. Her mouth turned dry as the steps reverberated inside the chamber, followed closely by softer footfalls.

A booted foot kicked the chest hard, jostling Roxannah. She pressed her face into the rough folds of a woolen blanket to muffle the sound of her gasp.

“Where is she?” The harsh timbre of her father’s voice came slurred.

Wine was a thief.

It had carried off everything Roxannah cherished in her father and left behind a cruel husk. She had the bruises to prove it.

“Perhaps she is in the kitchen, cleaning up from your dinner.” Her mother’s voice trembled with strain.

Her father kicked the chest again. “Dinner, you call it? That bowl of peasant soup? I told her to cook me lamb.”

He had. But lamb cost silver—silver that he had neglected to provide. The butcher refused to extend credit to their family anymore. Years ago, her father’s noble name had meant something in Susa. But his unsteady temper and foolish spending had wiped most of that ancient honor from their neighbors’ memories.

These days, they had no income other than the coin provided from a modest parcel of land her grandfather had long ago mortgaged to a farmer. It was the last of what remained of their family’s once rich pasturelands and orchards. The paltry revenue stretched only far enough to fill her father’s cup with cheap wine. He had long since sold off every other valuable inheritance he could. Her grandfather’s precious herds had disappeared over the years, bartered off in exchange for her father’s mounting debts.

Save for their house, with its leaking roof and creaky floors, a

handful of dented furniture, and a few scrawny chickens, nothing remained of her parents' formerly ample heritage.

Hence, no lamb for supper.

The lid of the chest groaned alarmingly as someone leaned their weight against it. "Where has that useless girl gone? I have a thing or two I want—" The staccato sound of distant pounding brought her father's rant to an abrupt halt. Someone at the door seemed determined to gain entry.

"Who can that be at this hour? People have no manners." He belched loudly.

Speaking of manners . . . Roxannah's lips twitched with wry amusement. This was her best weapon against the despair that sometimes tried to wriggle inside. Laughter. She spent too much time hiding in chests, taking cover under stairs, finding shelter on the rooftop, trying to survive the wine-soaked hours. How else could she endure it if not for laughter?

The knock came again, loud and imposing.

"Where is that good-for-nothing boy? Why does he not answer?"

Her mother cleared her throat. "He ran away."

The last of their long-suffering servants, the boy had sneaked away during the night, tired of waiting for rations that came less frequently than his master's blows.

"That ingrate! After all I did for him."

He had, indeed, done a lot for the boy. He had taught him to run very very fast in the opposite direction.

Her mother coughed but held her tongue, as she always did.

Her father cursed. "Must I always tend to everything myself?"

Roxannah listened to the sound of unsteady footsteps retreating from the chamber. When they disappeared in the direction of the courtyard, she lifted the lid a fraction.

"Mother?" she whispered.

The slim woman leaning against the wall straightened quickly,

pasting a smile on her tired face. "I wondered if you might be hiding in that chest."

"I could tell it wasn't going to be a good night when he screamed at the wall for being in the wrong spot. His temper is sure to cool by morning. A few more hours out of his sight, and I might be safe."

Her mother shook her head. "Don't take his words to heart, daughter. That dinner was delectable. What you do with food is—"

The sound of shouting cut off her mother's words. Roxannah slid behind the half-closed door and watched the scene unfolding below. A hand lifted to her mouth. "Another bailiff?"

It would be a while before her father returned, then. Roxannah crawled out of the chest and joined her mother. From where they stood, they had a clear view of the courtyard where her father stood screaming at a short, bald-headed man. The bailiff spoke in soft tones they could not make out.

Without warning, her father grabbed the wooden stool leaning against the corner of the gate, left there from the days when the family had enjoyed the services of a doorman. Before Roxannah could cry a warning, he swung the heavy stool sideways at the bailiff's head. The man had the nimble reactions of someone who found himself in the path of swinging furniture on a regular basis. The stool missed his head by a wide arc, but the momentum of her father's violent motion carried him forward, throwing off his already unsteady balance.

He swayed as he tried to regain his equilibrium and failed, crashing roughly into the stone wall. Even all the way inside the house they could hear the sickening crack as his head slammed into the masonry. Bouncing, he pitched backward, arms flailing as he fell and landed on the limestone path bordering the herb garden.

The bailiff took one look at the trail of scarlet that flowed from the still man's temple and beat a hasty retreat. Her mother

screamed. Roxannah flew past her rigid form into the hallway and down the three uneven steps that led to the courtyard.

Her father stirred when she knelt by his side. With a moan, he opened bleary eyes. "My head!"

Roxannah swallowed as blood pooled on the worn stone. She laid a tentative hand on his shoulder. "You crashed into the wall. Can you sit up?"

He slapped her hand away. "You imbecile! Of course I can't sit up. Can't you see I am half dead?"

"Shall I fetch you a physician?"

Staring at the scarlet coating the fingers he had raised to his temple, he gasped. "Yes! Hurry!"

Roxannah sprang to her feet. By now, her mother had made her way to the courtyard and stood frozen, her face bone white. Roxannah gave her a quick embrace. "I am going for the physician. Perhaps you should cover him with a blanket? He is shivering."

She slapped her forehead. "Why did I not think of it? I don't know what I would do without you." She raced back inside the house.

Her father raised a hand as Roxannah turned to leave. "Girl! Not that idiot who tended me last time. He has the brains of a chicken."

"Who shall I fetch, Father?"

"That Jew from Elephantine."

Roxannah tried to remember who he meant. "The one who serves at the palace?"

He huffed an impatient breath. "His reputation is adequate."

Roxannah swallowed a groan. How were they to afford a court physician? They had barely managed to pay the fees of the neighborhood healer who had seen to her father's last illness.

She had no idea where this physician resided. Which way should she go? Their house was located in the old royal town, the

prosperous neighborhood that spread southeast of the palace. A half-hour's walk to the west lay a warren of five or six streets where many Jewish residents lived in proximity to one another. But another cluster of Jews had settled to the east, in the Artisans' Village, preferring to intermingle with the cosmopolitan people of Susa. Gathering her scarf more closely around her head, Roxannah ran west toward the Jewish quarter. Even if the physician did not live there, someone should be able to tell her where to find him.

By the time she arrived at her destination, she had a stitch in her side. A boy playing in the street pointed her to immaculate whitewashed walls encircling a sprawling property. Roxannah banged against the iron-studded cedar gate. She was about to bellow for the physician when a man of middle years opened the door softly. The pristine linen scarf wrapped about his head marked him a servant.

"My father . . . has been hurt!" She huffed the words in a winded gasp. "I need the physician."

Given her old, faded clothing, she half expected to be turned away at the door. But with a short bow, the servant invited her into a lush courtyard and indicated a stone bench. "Wait here, if you please. I will fetch my master." He spoke Persian in the cultured tones of an aristocrat, sounding like no ordinary servant she had ever met.

Roxannah pressed her palms together to keep them steady. "Hurry, please. My father hit his head and is bleeding badly."

The man nodded. "He will be with you in a moment." With a swish of his long tunic, he disappeared through the carved door leading into the house.

Roxannah knelt to rinse her hands in the clear waters of a shallow, rectangular pool. She grew aware of the perfume of hundreds of blooming roses and, turning, noticed for the first time the profusion of colors that surrounded her—soft pink, buttery yellow, rich cream, pearly white—dotting the

roomy courtyard and climbing from a half dozen arbors. The physician had turned his home into a tiny paradise of calm and color. Sitting at the edge of the stone bench, she turned her back on the heavenly view and glued her eyes to the closed door instead.

It opened shortly to reveal a broad-shouldered man with raven-black hair and a neat beard. He looked more like a soldier than a scholar who had spent his years in the shade of libraries and schoolhouses.

Roxannah snapped to her feet. She expected him to demand payment before accompanying her, but he simply waved at her to join him. "Head injury, my man tells me. Is he conscious?"

She blinked, surprised at this no-nonsense greeting. "Yes."

"That's a good sign." He had a deep voice that seemed at once commanding and oddly soothing, edged by a slight accent that lent his speech an air of mystery.

Walking briskly, he led her to a plain gate at the opposite end of the courtyard, beyond which lay a wide lane. "It will be faster if we ride. My horse is in the stable around the corner. There is a donkey for you." He gave her a sidelong glance. "You needn't worry. It's a biddable creature."

"I can ride."

He walked ahead into a mudbrick stable, whitewashed to match the outside walls. His steps were long and loping, and she found herself half running to keep up. His servant had followed in their wake, his movements so quiet she startled when he appeared at her side to help her mount the donkey. The beast waited placidly as she settled on its broad back.

She caught the servant's eye and whispered, "What's his name?"

He shrugged. "We just call him Donkey."

"Not the beast. I meant the physician."

The servant's white teeth flashed against his salt-and-pepper

beard. "Well, now. One might say that same name is not badly suited . . ."

The physician held up a warning finger. "Don't finish that thought, no matter how great the temptation." Eyes the color of obsidian sparked with humor.

Roxannah looked from one grinning face to the other, marveling at the ease with which the master had allowed his servant's teasing insult to slide. In her father's house, any retainer with half the cheek would have been bleeding by now.

The physician merely smiled. "My name is Adin ben Zerah. And this impudent fellow is Darab."

"I am Roxannah, daughter of Lord Fravartish."

Adin inclined his head. "Let's tend to your father. Darab, my medicine chest, please."

While the servant secured a bulky wooden box to Roxannah's donkey, Adin led a black stallion out of a stall at the rear of the stable. Even the dire circumstances of her visit could not completely dampen her enthusiasm at the sight of the horse. "A Nisaeen!"

Nisaeans were the most highly prized horses in the world, some costing more than what a man might earn in a lifetime. This one was a particularly fine specimen, his dark coat so glossy she could almost see her reflection in it. Long, powerful muscles flexed with each elegant stride.

Like most Persians, Roxannah had a deep affection for horses. "What a beauty!"

Adin cast her a short glance. "You know your horseflesh." Without waiting for Darab's help, he adjusted the straps on the stallion's felt saddlecloth and, holding lightly to the beast's withers, mounted with an agile leap.

Roxannah glimpsed a flash of tight trousers hugging muscular legs under his tunic. The practical garments of a military man rather than the finery of a palace healer.

He guided his mount toward the stable door. “Lead the way, Mistress Roxannah.”

Feeling torn between the relief of having secured the services of a royal physician for her father and the anxiety of the hefty debt they were sure to owe, Roxannah steered her beast into the narrow lane and set it to a trot as soon as the street widened.



2



Adin

Be angry, and do not sin;
ponder in your own hearts on your beds,
and be silent.

Psalm 4:4

A din followed the girl to what must have once been an elegant building but was now little more than a ruin, with crumbling walls and an old roof that surely leaked. In such a wealthy neighborhood, surrounded by lush villas of baked and glazed brick, the house's decrepit condition stood out all the more.

He secured his mount to the post by the door and turned to help the young woman from the donkey. Before he could reach for her, she dismounted with a sprightly hop and hastened to push the gnarled door open. Adin unstrapped his medicine chest and followed in her wake.

He saw his patient immediately, lying sprawled on the court-

yard floor, tucked under the folds of a worn blanket. Adin's practiced eyes noted the blood spilled on the stone, the narrow wound at the hairline, and the pale, sweating skin. A woman sat by his side, her bearing still, her face white with exhaustion.

Adin sensed a new tension coil through Roxannah as she approached her father. She perched next to the woman. "Father, Mother, this is Master Adin ben Zerah, Royal Physician." It was the mother's hand she sought, he noticed, not the injured man who lay covered by the blanket.

Adin gave a short bow of his head. "Lord. Lady."

Fravartish gave him a sour look. "Another useless physician, no doubt. I am likely to get better service from the butcher."

Adin bit down a smile as he knelt in the dirt. "I can fetch one for you, if you prefer?"

"Very amusing. Get on with it."

Adin ignored the man's cutting manner and bent to conduct a thorough examination. However rude his patient might be, Adin would do his best to help him. Carefully, he cleansed the wound before sitting back on his haunches.

"This gash requires stitches. I suggest I first help you to your bed, my lord. You will be more comfortable there."

Fravartish grimaced. "I knew you would torture me."

By the smell of him, his patient had imbibed enough wine to feel little pain. Bending, Adin slipped an arm behind Fravartish's broad back and gently pulled him into a sitting position. Roxannah sprang to his other side to lend a hand. He gave her an appreciative nod, and together, they drew the heavy man to his feet.

Roxannah's head only reached her father's shoulder, her delicate frame straining under his considerable weight. Adin hefted his patient closer against him, taking most of the burden. Fravartish's shifting body snagged the girl's tunic, drawing back the fabric of the sleeve and revealing a slender arm. What Adin saw sent an unexpected shaft of white-hot rage through him,

making him want to drop the man back on the floor. Let him smash the other side of his head as well.

Black-and-blue marks littered the light skin of Roxannah's arm. Handprints left by some cruel beating. Noting his gaze, she flushed and pulled down her sleeve with a quick motion. As if *she* had anything to be ashamed of.

What kind of man would do that to so fragile a woman? His own daughter, no less. She appeared more than old enough to be married and mistress of her own home. Her dark blond hair, blue-grey eyes, and flawless skin surely drew many a suitor's eyes. He wondered what kept her bound to this dilapidated house and her cruel father.

It was no business of his.

Adin ground his teeth, tucking the man's arm more securely around his neck as he walked toward the house. He would do his best for his patient in spite of his rising dislike. It was all he could offer the young woman who had come to his door, eyes large with desperation.

He doubted he would ever see payment from Fravartish, who seemed more interested in the contents of his cup than in his responsibilities. But he had long since made a promise to himself and to God that he would not turn anyone away due to lack of funds.

Roxannah tripped under the weight of her father as they lowered him to his bed. Jostled, the man cursed. "Fool!" he hissed. "Can't ever do anything right, can you?"

Adin's jaw knotted. A surge of anger stopped him in his tracks. Instead of sewing up the man, he wanted to give him a bigger gash. He forced a few mouthfuls of air into his lungs until the fire of outrage calmed enough for him to keep a needle steady. At least the pain of its application would keep Fravartish's lips sealed, unable to serve anymore insults while the needle did its work.

Adin's practiced fingers made quick work of the stitches.

As he wiped his hands, he explained how the women should change the bandages and cleanse the wound to prevent suppuration. While the mother's lips trembled and she stepped away as if burned by his plain directions, the daughter stood her ground. Her irises had turned a dark grey, all the blue leached out of them. Clearly, she was no more comfortable with his medical direction than her mother. Still, she did not flinch. Not once.

Adin felt an unwanted flicker of warmth for her. An admiration he could not quite deny. He realized he was staring. Taking a hasty step back, he reached for his medicine chest. The daughter was turning out to be more dangerous than the father.

The sooner he left this house, the better.

