

JEFFREY A MAN



HUNTER: REBORN



• One October night, a full moon outlined the figure of a tall young man walking near the silvery surf on the Santa Monica beach. Oddly enough, Jeffrey Hunter was walking barefooted through the sand, and still had on his formal dinner suit, which was getting wet from the spray.

But Jeff was so deep in thought, he didn't seem to notice the spray as he strode along.

Only one person knew what was going on in his mind—his wife Dusty. She shared his thoughts, his past disappointments, and the glorious victory he encountered tonight. She sat in the glass-enclosed den of their home which faced

the ocean, and watched him. Dusty was always by his side, as she had been only a few hours earlier during the premiere of *King of Kings*; but at this moment, she knew that Jeff had to be by himself. She knew that a man must be alone when he wanted to review his life—just as Jeff was now doing.

The audience had cheered Jeff tonight. His portrayal of Jesus of Nazarene had been an inspiring one.

There'd been a celebration party after the opening, but Jeff couldn't wait to get home. He'd been moved by the congratulations and the praise, but this was not the time for a gay Hollywood celebration. He needed to be alone, to reflect and to thank God for the direction in which his life had moved.

Only a few years ago, he'd practically been a forgotten man in Hollywood. Everything—his marriage, his health, his work—had appeared to be lost.

The studio didn't have much for Jeff to do at that time. He was just one of the many good-looking actors in town, and no one seemed to need him.

At the same time, his marriage to Barbara Rush went to pot. She had asked him for a divorce. It was a double blow to Jeff, a family man who loved his wife and his child; for Barbara went out of his life and took his son with her.

His luck had run low. Then, to brighten the dark spot, along came Dusty. She was a vibrant, dark-haired girl with a ready smile, whose love for athletics had

taken her on a movie set to do some stunt horseback riding. Jeff met her on the set that day; they became good friends and were eventually married.

Just as life seemed good again, a shattering thing happened. On the evening before he was to start a new picture, Jeff collapsed with a rocketing fever. He had come down with a serious case of hepatitis. He remained in bed for months, and for a time the doctors didn't know if he'd pull through.

Although a bride of only three months, Dusty stuck by him like a veteran life partner. She nursed him, hand-fed him, and cared for him as though he were a baby.

When he got well, he had to face reality all over again. He'd been canceled out of a picture because of the long illness; what was there for him to do now? In Hollywood, what could be deader than an actor who'd been out of circulation for a year?

No one dreamed that Jeff was being considered for one of the most challenging roles—that of Jesus Christ in *King of Kings*. Director Nicholas Ray, who wanted Jeff for the role, seemed to stand alone in his choice. Studio experts argued: "How can you entrust the role of Jesus to an actor who's never played anything but cowboys and lovers? And he's a divorced man besides."

But Ray saw something in Jeff. "His eyes have the luminous quality needed to convey the spirit of Christ," Ray insisted.

"He's a much finer actor than anyone gives him credit for being."

Under this rain of fire, Jeff knew he was on trial when he undertook the role. He prayed that he could fulfill the responsibility. Dusty and their baby Todd traveled with him to Spain, where the picture was being made. When not working, Jeff retreated to a quiet life and concentrated on his role.

It had taken two years, and tonight everything had culminated at the Hollywood premiere. People had come to see if he could live up to this most demanding of roles. When the picture was over, Jeff Hunter had been acclaimed.

The thrill of the opening night was hours old; the adulation was behind him. As Jeff walked along the sand, only the roar of the surf broke the silence. He was alone with his thoughts. There had been a time when his future had looked as black as this night, and he had been near death.

He looked up, and the stars seemed close. Drawing a deep breath, he felt strong and confident, like a man reborn.

As he approached his house, he saw Dusty waiting for him by the broad glass door.

He laughed and walked quickly toward her. "Come on," he said, taking her by the hand. "Let's not go to sleep tonight. There's so much to talk about. You're as much a part of this as I am."

THE END