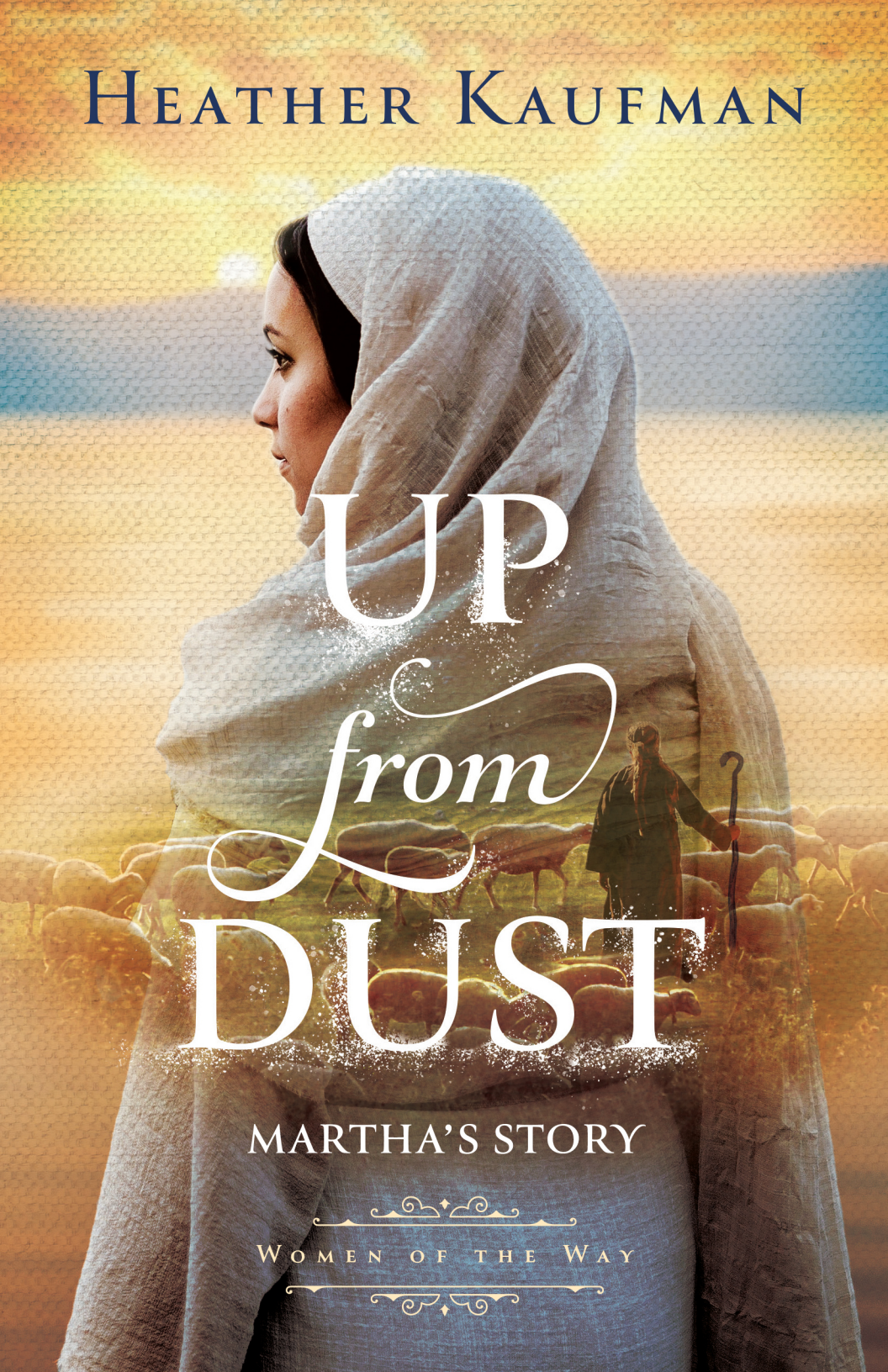


HEATHER KAUFMAN

A woman wearing a white headscarf is shown in profile, looking towards the left. The background is a warm, golden sunset over a field of sheep. A shepherd with a staff is visible in the distance among the sheep. The title text is overlaid on the image.

UP
from
DUST

MARTHA'S STORY

WOMEN OF THE WAY

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1

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MARTHA'S STORY

HEATHER KAUFMAN



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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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24 25 26 27 28 29 30 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Tristan, Seth, and Caira.

*May your sibling bond remain strong
all throughout your years.*

We are brought down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up and help us; rescue us because of your unfailing love.

Psalm 44:25-26 NIV

prologue

65 AD

JERUSALEM, ISRAEL

Firelight illuminates their faces—these beautiful, inquisitive children with wide-open hearts. Several lean heavy against my knee and beg for stories of Yeshua. They aren't the only ones who come to me for the stories. Many come with longing. Some come with doubt. All come with questions.

The children's questions are different, for they ask with refreshing honesty, devoid of agenda. With worn arms, I scoop a wriggling little body into my lap. Most of them have heard the stories before, but gladly I will tell them again, of the man with fire for eyes and kindness for hands, the man who upset and exceeded our expectations—the Christ, Son of the living God, who came into the world.

Tonight, however, my voice trembles in the telling, and my eyes unexpectedly drip with tears. For a moment, I cannot continue. How can I convey to these dear ones the depth and breadth of all I have seen and come to cherish? I am old now and gray, and my heart is full of found things. I have found the nettling

burn of sorrow. I have found the relief of joy and the gift of love. I have found the goodness of God, and it is sweet on the lips like honeycomb.

How can I begin to tell of the many things I have found? Or of the One who found me? I see His hand in my story like a weaver's shuttle through the warp, steady and sure, pulling here, loosening there, doing the work necessary for beauty. How do I tell of His capable hands, the ones that rescued me?

Before I can share the many ways I was found, I would have to begin with the day I was lost.



PART
ONE



ONE



20 TISHRI

11 AD

BETHANY, ISRAEL

Beginnings and endings often collide, one with the other. The day my sister entered the world was no different. She came reluctantly, screaming and clawing her way into our home. The midwife shook her head in confusion, for my sister was born under an auspicious moon.

Abba had taken my brother and me next door, to Abdul's home. We had been in his home before, but never in the dead of night.

"Such things are not for young girls, *Talitha*." Abba used his tender name for me—little lamb. He hadn't called me by that name in a long time.

"God be with you." Abdul clasped Abba's shoulder and drew him close.

My brother gripped my hand tightly. "I'm scared." He wasn't much younger than I was but could already look me in the eye. "Where's Machla?" he asked, speaking of Abdul's wife.

"Remember, she came earlier. To help with Ima." I swallowed hard and tried not to think of what was happening back home.

There were three dead babies after my brother. Boy, girl, then boy—all arriving before their time, all impossibly small, gone before they could take their first breath. How would this be any different? It couldn't be.

I had watched as my mother grew large, her belly swollen, her prayers expectant that now, this time, it would turn out right and she would birth a live babe. I had watched the distrust and fear leave my parents' faces as the time drew closer. And then the day came when my mother had exhaled three words: "*The final month!*" She and my father had held each other and wept with happiness.

But I knew. I always knew. This one would arrive dead too, and I would have to watch as the joy and hope died on their faces.

"I need to go," my brother whispered, releasing my hand to clutch himself. He bounced from one foot to the other.

"What? *Now?*" I hissed, glancing up at the adults, who were deep in conversation.

"Yes, now." My brother groaned, his face pained.

I sighed deeply. Six years old and yet he still waited until the last possible moment, until he was wiggling with desperation.

"Follow me." I wasn't about to interrupt the adults, so I dragged him to the side of the courtyard. Small oil lamps in hewn holes along the plastered walls offered enough light to find the animal stalls. The full moon, bulbous and loud, mocked our need for privacy.

"Here. Go here." I motioned to the nearest stall, which housed an ox.

"Here?"

"Yes. Just go. It stinks already. What's a bit more stench?" I turned as my brother lifted his tunic. Inadvertently I locked gazes with the ox, who blinked at me slowly, once, twice.

My brother tugged my hand when he was done, his young face a clear picture of relief.

“Come, children.”

We both jumped, my brother ducking his head as if he'd been caught urinating in the synagogue.

Gilah, Abdul's daughter, stood at the entrance to the sleeping chamber, her face highlighted in moonlight, looking eerily beautiful. “Come this way.”

I turned toward Abba, reluctant to go inside. He hadn't made us leave our home when the others had been born. Why now? I blinked back tears, thinking of the wrenching screams that had filled our courtyard as we'd been ushered out. I didn't usually turn toward Abba for comfort, seeking it instead from Ima. But now my bravado fled, and I longed to climb into his lap. He responded to the plea in my eyes by taking my free hand, then my brother's.

“I'm returning to your mother.” We stood solemnly in a small circle. “You'll stay here for tonight, and in the morning, I'll send Samu for you.”

“Will we need to stay that long?” I hated how small my voice sounded. I didn't want to wait for our steward to come fetch us.

“Look at the skies, child. It's nearly day already.” Abba released my hand to pinch a cheek, and I ducked, not wanting Gilah to see. “It's best this way. You can rest and be out of the midwife's way.”

“Will Ima be all right?” my brother piped up, but Abba had already turned from us, signaling the end of the conversation.

As he strode away, Gilah put her arm around my brother and me, shepherding us inside. We stepped timidly around the sleeping forms of family members. I counted two others—Gilah's younger brothers. “You must be so scared, so tired.” Her eyes were as black and small as ripe olives, her hair falling in a thick, luxurious wave down her back. “Here, lie down and rest yourselves.”

I sat next to my brother on a mat and continued to hold his hand. I was half Gilah's age and a bit cowed by her presence.

“Your mother will be all right, children.” She offered us the comfort Abba had failed to give. Gilah knelt by the bedroll with a small bowl of water. My brother took a long drink before handing the bowl to me.

“Slow down, or we’ll be taking another trip to the ox,” I teased. My banter elicited a nervous laugh from my brother. I sipped at the water, keeping a wary eye above the rim.

“Rest yourselves. I am certain good news will arrive shortly.” Gilah placed a warm hand on my knee and then lay down on her own mat across the room.

As I observed her dark form grow still, my face flushed with the knowledge I’d gleaned at the village well. Gossip was common while the girls drew water each day, and Gilah had often been the topic of such chatter. I had recently listened with fascination as three girls discussed how Abdul’s daughter had yet to bloom into womanhood and how the carpenter’s son had finally been betrothed to the scribe’s daughter instead.

“I can’t sleep.” My brother was on his back, eyes wide open. I lay down next to him. “Will Ima be all right?” he asked again, voice thinned out with weariness.

I tilted my head so it touched his. “I don’t know,” I answered truthfully.

We were partners, he and I. Some of the boys teased my brother for how close we were, saying he’d rather be at home doing women’s work with me than out playing with them. Secretly, I was pleased by our closeness. Even though he would one day outpace me in height and stature, he would never outgrow his love for me. I didn’t know what was happening back home, but I would be strong for my brother no matter what.

“Do you think it’s a boy or a girl?” His black curls brushed my cheek. I turned my face into their soft folds. He had the mane of a lion, just like our mother. I, on the other hand, had our father’s serious dark brown locks, long and straight.

“I don’t know,” I murmured again. And then, sensing he wanted more, I added, “A boy, most likely, don’t you think? Another little brother would be nice.”

“Nice, yes.” He was already drifting toward sleep.

“Or a sister to share in the household chores.” The words continued to pour out as I speculated about the new child, speaking aloud the names that had already been chosen.

As sleep claimed my brother, his hand finally loosened from mine. Quiet then, I stared at the wooden beams above me, listening to the strange breathing all around me and trying to still my mind.

Truth be told, I had not let myself think on this child much. What was the point when he or she would arrive dead and disappoint us? Best to accept him or her that way from the start rather than face it surprised and broken, the way we had the other three. I rolled to my side and willed my heart to slow. Closing my eyes, I focused again on my breathing.

Loud keening startled me upright. I must have fallen asleep, for the jolt was great, and the chamber was lighter than I remembered. Heart beating quickly, my wide-eyed gaze landed on the door as another high, distant wail threaded the air.

Shivering, I lay back down and squeezed my eyes shut to ignore the creeping sense of dread. Another wail sounded, then another. I pried an eye open to stare at the other four forms in the room, all silent and slumbering. My nervous shifting jostled my brother, who moaned and mouthed something in his sleep. Now more voices joined the first. Male and female, they rose in a high pitch.

Gooseflesh spread across my arms as I sat up slowly. I touched my brother’s hair, let my fingers slide into the curls briefly, and then stood. When I reached the door, I opened it as quietly as I could, but it let out a groan. Leaving it open a crack, I slipped through, silent as a spirit.

The full moon was visible, but so was the sun, peeking over the horizon, casting orange over the packed earthen floor. I crossed the empty courtyard to the double wooden doors that led to the street, expecting at any moment a hand on my shoulder and a stern reprimand. But the only one who noticed me was the ox, his large brown eyes regarding me with no judgment as I let myself out.

Several women rushed past, and I pressed myself against the wall, hoping to remain unseen. The keening sounded again, louder and more persistent. My feet moved of their own accord, taking me down the dusty road to our own front entrance. It was unbarred, one of the doors standing ajar. Several more women arrived, ducking inside. I could not force myself to enter. Motionless, I stared at the beams Abba had built with his two strong hands.

Curiosity won out. I opened the door wider and stepped inside.

The courtyard was busier than ever at this time of the morning. Women rushed back and forth, chickens clucked loudly in the coop, and animals in the side stall were restless and worried. Feet rooted to the earth like a sapling, I watched my home dissolve into uproar.

Samu raced down the stairs that led to the roof. I stretched a feeble hand to him, but he didn't see me as he rushed across the courtyard and flung open the door that led to the sleeping chamber.

That's when I heard it.

A babe crying, its voice shredding the air, searching for life. It was crying so loudly and for so long, I wondered how it could manage to draw breath. Just when I thought it could cry no longer, it stopped, emitting shuddering, deep gasps—hiccups of air entering before another series of prolonged wails. And with the wails of the babe, the cries of my father.

I'd only heard him cry once before, when we had buried the third baby. I associated that distinctive cry with death. The fresh sounds of newborn life mixed with the throbbing presence of death and my father's agony.

The door opened again, and Samu's wife, Abigail, exited, carrying a blanket so full of blood that it dripped from her hands to the ground, staining the earth red. Breath lodging in my throat, I blinked rapidly at the sight. Samu left the room as well and shut the door behind him as Abigail leaned into him for support. "A baby girl, and now with no mother," Abigail moaned. "God be praised, we did not lose them both."

"What's happening?" I turned at the sound of my brother's voice to find him standing behind me, staring at the bloody blanket.

My eyes pinched closed against the sharp pain of his presence. My sweet brother had followed me. I stood and faced him. He was nearly my height but not quite, so I could still block his view. I stood between him and the blood, the screaming, the tears. I stood between him and death with a hand on each of his shoulders. "Let's go back."

"No. What happened?" My brother, usually so docile and obedient, shrugged my hands from his shoulders and tried to duck past me.

I lunged in front of him again and gripped his shoulders more firmly this time. "Let's leave. We don't need to see any more."

"No, I want to stay!" My brother crumpled into tears. "I want Ima! I want to stay and see Ima and the baby!"

I shook my head, and then recoiled as he screamed at me. "Let me go! Let me go!"

He twisted against my grip. With all my strength, I backed him out of our home and into the dusty street. He screamed and pushed against me all the way, his young face red from exertion. I pushed him out and then down, onto the ground in the middle