

HEATHER KAUFMAN

BEFORE
the
KING

JOANNA'S STORY

WOMEN OF THE WAY

BEFORE
the
KING

JOANNA'S STORY

HEATHER KAUFMAN



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 2025 by Heather Kaufman

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

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kaufman, Heather (Heather M.), author.

Title: Before the King: Joanna's Story / Heather Kaufman.

Description: Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2025. | Series: Women of the Way

Identifiers: LCCN 2024026653 | ISBN 9781540903570 (paperback) | ISBN 9780764244551 (casebound) | ISBN 9781493448937 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Bible fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3611.A8277 B44 2025 | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20240624

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2024026653>

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2016.

Scripture quotations labeled NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations labeled NLT are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

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.

Cover design by Jennifer Parker

Cover image of Herod's Palace Interior © Israel Museum, Jerusalem / Holyland Tourism 1992, Ltd. / Bridgeman Images

Cover image of fortress (Monzón Castle) by PRISMA ARCHIVO / Alamy

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

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and postconsumer waste whenever possible.

25 26 27 28 29 30 31 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This one is for my sisters,
Laura and Anna,
with love.

Do not hide your face from me in the day of
my distress! Incline your ear to me; answer
me speedily in the day when I call!

Psalm 102:2

prologue

60 AD

ROME

He's sitting in the center of the room when I enter, his parchments and pots of ink scattered across a scarred table. He wants my stories. He wants to write them down. But first he asks after our friend, the one who brought us together, and I smile. Our friend is well, I tell him. More than well, for she recently became a *savta*. Like Naomi dandling Obed on her knee, the woman whose life seemed barren has been given a legacy.

I settle across from him, this beloved physician, and watch his stained fingers carefully dip the tip of his stylus, tapping once, twice, then bringing nib to parchment, face expectant as it lifts to mine. What was it like, he wonders, and uses the word to describe me that so many do.

Brave.

My eyes mist, for I am not brave, and I tell him so. I am an ordinary woman whom God chose to put in extraordinary places. Any strength to be found in my story is His alone. I only

did what I could with what I had, and this, I now know, is how His Kingdom advances.

Each of us doing what we can with what we have by His power.

So no, I am not brave. I am needy—desperate for Adonai to meet me with His strength. My story is how He did just that.

Through years of sorrow and fear, when the face of God seemed a distant star, whose brilliance was meant for others but never me . . . He was there. And now I will never tire of sharing the story of His faithfulness, for it is a living flame, meant to spread.

My story, however, begins in a place of fear, hiding, and uncertainty, for my heart had yet to learn its greatest lesson—that God is as near as our own breath.



PART
ONE



ONE



SPRING 13 AD
BEIT NETOFA VALLEY, ISRAEL

The sun kissed the fragrant earth with fervor, promising a full day of excitement and importance. I blinked into that bright light, smiling until my cheeks ached. Abba normally didn't bring Dalia and me along when he traveled, but today was different. Today we would all go to see our family's new country villa.

"Things are about to change for us, my little swifts," Ima declared, clapping her hands as she used her affectionate name for us. Dalia and I were restless—roosting in high places like the small bird that made its home in the clefts of rocks, never settling down, eager to move. We jumped now, giddy with this new adventure.

"How, Ima? How will they change?" Dalia hopped from foot to foot, her honey-colored hair gleaming beneath the sun. I pranced by her side, my black curls bouncing off my back.

"We are moving to a city even bigger and grander than Cana. Buildings taller than you can imagine! So many things to see and do."

We were young enough that the thought of change brought

only curiosity, so we absorbed this news without understanding all that it entailed.

“Will we live in the city? What about the villa?” I squealed, unable to contain my delight.

“We’ll live in Sepphoris, but the villa is not far away in the country. Some farmers will tend it for us, and we will visit it whenever we like. Today you will see it with your own eyes.”

“And you, Ima? You will come too?” Dalia questioned, spinning on her toes.

Ima laid a tender hand on both our heads. “Of course,” she chuckled. “We’ll have Vidette pack us food. How does a picnic sound?”

We cheered at the thought of supping outdoors with Ima.

A litter bore our family from Cana to the city, and as the strong walls of finely chiseled ashlar rose tall and grand before us, my breath caught. Herod Antipas’ palace towered above the walls, its gold-plated roof slyly winking beneath the sun, bearing secrets we would soon discover.

“That’s Sepphoris?” I squeaked, cowed beneath such brilliance.

Ima bent so our faces were cheek to cheek as we beheld the city together. “Yes, and our new home will be close to the acropolis. That’s the very center of the city.”

“When? When will we go live there, Ima?” Dalia wondered, sticking her head out of the litter.

“Soon,” Abba answered as he pulled her back inside, his thin lips quirking upward. “Uncle Leshem is gifting the estates to us soon, and then we will move.”

I’d never met Abba’s uncle, who was a chief priest and member of the Grand Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. It was Uncle Leshem who was appointing Abba as a member of the Sepphoris Sanhedrin. Abba had been talking nonstop about our family’s “change of fortune.”

Our litter descended into the sprawling and lush Beit Netofa Valley just north of Sepphoris. I gaped as we approached the grand estate. As soon as the litter stopped, Dalia and I tumbled out into the clear air and ran into the gardens. The trees seemed to beckon us with wide-open arms, and the air was sharp with the scent of ripening fruit.

For once, Ima did not chide or call us back. Instead, she sat on a cushioned seat as a servant held a fan to shield her from the sun. With crinkling eyes, she watched us tussle in the long grass.

“Let’s play hide-and-peek,” Dalia suggested, her brown eyes sparking with fun.

I nodded my agreement, and we both ran to Ima’s side, tugging her hands, imploring her to join us in the game.

With a groan and a grumble, she rose to her feet, but her eyes were soft as she began counting out loud. We shrieked and ran like spilled oil from a jug, spreading out and away, looking for the best hiding place.

My gaze snagged on a pear tree. I threw myself at it, small hands grabbing at the lowest branch as my sandaled feet clawed at the rough trunk. Finally, I managed to heave myself up onto the branch and lay there for a moment, panting and exultant, before I continued my climb.

I was only seven, and small for my age. The climb proved to be a difficult one as I strained my tiny stature as far as it would go, reaching toward one branch and then another. The tree was in full bloom, and easily hid me. I sat contentedly, swinging my legs.

“Let me up, Jojo!” Dalia’s breathless voice drifted through the leaves. I peeked down to find her at the base of the tree, hands clasping the first branch, face red with exertion as she tried to follow me.

“Go find your own spot.”

“But yours is so good,” she whined.

I rolled my eyes as I watched her struggle to pull herself up. “We don’t want to be in the *same* spot, Dalia. Go find your own.”

“If you . . . would just . . . *help* me!” she spluttered, straining at the branch. With a yelp, her grip broke, and she fell back, lying for a moment, still on the ground.

“Dalia?” I slid lower on my branch.

She sat up, regaining her breath and sobbing as she examined her hands. “Ouch! My hands are cut.” She glared up at me, and I ducked.

“Fine!” she spat, voice full of tears. “Since you’re being so *mean*, I’ll go find my own spot.” She scampered away.

It was too bad that she’d scraped her hands, but I was too irritated to entertain guilt for long. Dalia was always following me around, even though she was older by a whole year. We were often mistaken for twins, for we were equal in height and, apart from our hair color, looked similar. We had the same round face and large brown eyes, the same full lips and pert nose.

“Oh, girls, where are you?” Ima’s voice rose like a song, her tone light as she approached. “My little swifts, I’m going to find you!”

I held my breath as Ima drew near, searching this way and that. I’d been right to send Dalia off. I’d still be hauling her into this tree if I’d let her stay.

One heartbeat and then two. Ima sighed and left, heading in the direction of the villa.

I released my breath in a long sigh and giggled with delight. Long moments passed, and I spent them kicking my legs and staring through the branches into the bright blue sky. The fruit grove spread like a bountiful blanket at the foot of a hill, and on the top of that hill stood the impressive villa with its stucco walls and tiled roof. Terraced gardens and paved pathways led up to it.

This day, with all four of us together, was special.

Our parents had borne children later in life, when hope of a family was all but gone. Because they had stopped expecting children, Dalia was the biggest of surprises, and when I had arrived soon after, they'd been consumed with shock and joy. We were prized and important.

Even so, Abba was often too busy for us. As a priest and a member of the Sadducees, his time was valuable and rarely spent with his daughters. Now he would have a more prominent role in this new city, so I was certain we would see even less of him. Both my time and Dalia's would also change. I'd overheard our parents talking about all the new things that would become available to us in Sepphoris.

"We will be able to employ a tutor for the girls," Abba had said. "With two daughters and no sons, I'm determined that they become educated and marry well. And with this appointment, we will have the means and opportunity to see that happen."

Soon Dalia and I would become knowledgeable in Greek and Latin, for we would marry important men one day.

"Why shouldn't we aspire to Herod Antipas' court?" Abba had gloated, eyes alight with ambition.

But today we were together. I kicked my feet harder, setting myself slightly off-balance, grabbing the trunk for support with a laugh. Today we were a family, the four of us, even if Abba would spend most of his time inside with the tenants.

Wobbling to my feet, I clung to the trunk and strained to catch a glimpse of the villa. Had Ima found Dalia yet? Too much time had passed. Impatiently, I slid back down the tree, scraping my hands in my haste. What a fuss Dalia had made earlier! A little scrape wasn't so bad. With a sharp huff, I ran in the direction I'd last seen Ima go.

I'd made it halfway up the hillside when the shrill sound of Ima's scream pierced the air, causing me to jerk to a stop. Never had I heard her scream like this. The sound came to rest in the

bottom of my stomach, where it simmered and leapt like one of Vidette's boiling concoctions.

Trembling entered my limbs as Ima continued to scream. I managed to pull my legs free from the earth and ran and ran. Up the hillside and along the front of the villa to an enclosed courtyard on the side. The gate was open and swinging on its hinge. I stopped at the gate, but my heart continued to race, pounding ahead of me, leaping to the middle of the courtyard where Ima stood screaming for Abba.

Dalia lay stiffly on the ground, her head cocked at an awkward angle, eyes wide and unseeing.

She's dead.

I placed both my hands over my gaping mouth to stifle the scream that tore at my throat. But no, she wasn't dead, for as I stared at her face, she jerked once and then twice as if someone grasped her with two strong hands, trying to shake her awake.

"Itamar, come!" Ima screamed as she sank to her knees by Dalia's side. "No, no, no," she moaned, rocking rhythmically on her knees. "Not like Sarah. No, God, please."

Ima continued to moan her own sister's name while voices rose from inside. Soon Abba had joined Ima in the courtyard, his face crumpling in disbelief as he beheld Dalia, who was still jerking. "What happened?"

"I found her this way! I found her this way, Itamar! What can we do? I can't go through this again!" Ima was babbling and crying all at once, her words barely recognizable.

"How long has this been going on?" Abba cried.

"I don't know," Ima sobbed. "I found her like this."

"We were playing," I whispered, but no one heard me, no one saw me. "We were playing, and I wouldn't let her up and she fell." I sank to my knees. Had Dalia become injured because I wouldn't help her into the tree?

Abruptly, Dalia's jerking stopped, and she lay motionless at

our parents' feet. Hot tears burned my face as Ima gathered Dalia into her arms, crooning to her in a raw voice.

She's dead.

I sat miserably at the gate, watching Ima grieve. Dalia's small round face was pressed into the crook of Ima's neck.

I killed her.

I stared at my sister's face. I wanted to scream and claw at the earth. I wanted to run down the hill and throw myself back into the tree and wait for this horrifying day to be over. I wanted to fly far, far away, like a true little swift, and never return.

But then Dalia opened her eyes.