

# THE WAY



A NOVEL

KRISTEN WOLF

HAILED BY O, THE OPRAH MAGAZINE  
AS "A TITLE TO PICK UP NOW!"

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**KRISTEN WOLF** is an author, filmmaker and wondernaut who lives in the Rocky Mountains. Her debut novel, *The Way*, was hailed by *O, The Oprah Magazine* as “A Title to Pick Up Now!” As a graduate of Georgetown University she was nominated to the Phi Beta Kappa honor society and holds an M.A. in creative writing from Hollins University. She is currently working on an innovative venture in storytelling. Follow her creative passions here: [www.kristenwolf.com](http://www.kristenwolf.com).

## Praise for Kristen Wolf's novel, *The Way*

"This imaginative novel may make you a believer."

—O, *The Oprah Magazine*

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"The Way is a daring and passionate debut from an author to watch in the future."

—Historical Novel Society

.....

"Wow, is all I can say. This novel blew me away!"

—Book Pleasures

.....

"I don't think I could rave anymore about this book ... truly one of a kind."

—Chick Lit Plus

.....

"THE WAY is a magical, evocative first novel that I plan to buy a carton of to give to my family and friends. This message of compassion, healing, and respect for women could indeed transform our world."

—Joan Borysenko, Ph.D., author of *A Woman's Journey to God*

.....

"Are you looking for a book that will stay with you long after you've closed its pages, a book that will transport you into an exotic world filled with intrigue, faith, and courage? You're looking for Kristen Wolf's THE WAY, a remarkable story, beautifully told."

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.....

"THE WAY is an intriguing coming of age... Fascinating..."

(★★★★★)

—AMAZON #1 Reviewer

.....

"...sure to be a book-club darling."

—Booklist

“A young girl in ancient Palestine struggles with her calling as a spiritual leader in Wolf’s audacious, deftly woven debut.”

—Publishers Weekly

.....

“This book took me on a journey... I was surprised in more ways than I ever could have imagined. THE WAY is one of those rare novels that makes you think.”

—Javier Sierra, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Secret Supper*

.....

“THE WAY will invoke some deep thinking and soul searching... pick it up.”

—*Rhodes Review*

.....

“The Way is a unique and ambitious debut novel, certain to provoke passionate discussions.”

—John Shors, bestselling author of *Beneath a Marble Sky*

.....

“...page turning and utterly creative.”

—Maria’s Space

.....

“Wolf’s voice, vision, and verve combine to make THE WAY an emotional and action-packed debut.”

—Alice Peck, author of *Bread, Body, Spirit: Finding the Sacred in Food*

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## Praise for Kristen Wolf’s novel, *ESCAPEMENT*

“Wolf is a masterful storyteller who has created an enchanting novel. ESCAPEMENT is a symphony of words, marked by lyrical phrases and exquisite rhythm. It will resonate with anyone who has ever felt passion.”

—*IndieReader*

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# THE WAY

*a novel*

*Kristen Wolf*





*For the miracle I live  
into—my son—born  
on Christmas Day.*



*I am androgynous. I am  
Mother (and) I am Father ...*

*I am the Womb that gives shape to the All ...*

*And I am inviting you into  
the exalted, perfect Light.*

*—The Gnostic Gospels*



PART ONE

ANNA

# CHAPTER 1

*A village on the outskirts of ancient Palestine—7 A.D.*



“Be a good girl and cover your face,” her mother counseled.

Anna draped a shawl over her head and bound it halfway up her cheeks. She watched her mother arrange bowls of dates, cheese, and olives on a tray. She then placed a pitcher of milk among the bowls and capped it with a square of linen. As her mother did these things, her hands came to rest on her swollen belly then flew off, repeatedly, like frightened doves.

“Hurry to Grandfather and be home before morning meal,” she said. She lowered the tray into her seven-year-old’s waiting hands. She pulled back the camelskin hide that hung across the front door. Anna’s head brushed the underside of her mother’s belly as she slipped around her and stepped, blinking, into the light.

Early morning had bathed the village in its usual peach wash. Thirty or so dwellings huddled together as a liquid glow dripped down straw

roofs and reddened clay walls.

Anna walked past the manger her father had built. Its thatched roof balanced sturdily on hand-carved wooden beams. Beneath, two cows and a small flock of goats sprawled about crunching mouthfuls of hay. When the smaller animals caught sight of the young girl, they nickered and trotted in pursuit. Anna clucked gently as they nibbled her elbows. Her father said goats were the most foolish creatures the Lord had created. But Anna found their antics and stubborn friendliness amusing. And she laughed at how their upper lips curled in pleasure whenever she scratched their chins.

In a few more steps, she came to her father's workshop. Its door was closed. The glow of an oil lamp shone through its crooked window. Anna heard the familiar *brush-brush* of the pumice stone used to polish wood. Whatever her father was making, he was close to finishing. For the past month, he had been rising earlier than usual to work on a special project. He had said it was a secret, and would not tell anyone what it was, but the mere mention of it brought a glimmer to his eye.

Curious to know what could be making her father so happy, Anna felt tempted to peek inside his shop. But she knew he would not welcome her visit and did not wish to anger him.

As she went along, the goats kept at her. A few guinea hens soon joined. Anna gripped the tray and kept her eyes on the shifting surface of milk. She did not need to watch where she was going. She could navigate by smell. When the scent of goats and hay gave way to the heavier odor of

wood smoke, it meant she was near the farmers' houses where the women had stoked fires to bake bread. She heard the grunts of men loading their mules with supplies to take into the olive groves. The time of the harvest had come. Anna lowered her face deeper into her shawl and hurried past. Despite the familiarity of the routine, of lifting fabric to face, she hated the act of hiding herself. The tradition felt stifling—as though someone were standing on her chest.

Farther along, a light breeze cleared the scent of wood smoke and ushered in the spicier scent of olive leaves and earth. She had come to the clearing just before her grandfather's house. If she were to look to the west, she would see the olive groves stitched across the hills like embroidery. Beyond those, stark in its isolation, stood the great old sycamore.

Anna steadied the tray on her knee and knocked.

"Come in!" a voice croaked.

The door gave with a moan. Anna's sight faltered as it adjusted to the darkness. She smelled her grandfather. His scent was sharp and biting, like old metal.

"Where have you been?" he barked. He was seized by a torrent of wet coughs.

Anna knelt before the leathery man. She kept her gaze downward and arranged the bowls of food on the floor.

"Hurry up," he wheezed.

She poured milk from the pitcher. She handed him the cup and watched

his brown-spotted hand curl around it.

“Is that goat cheese again?” he asked, pointing a knotty finger.

“Yes, Grandfather,” she said, wincing at her mother’s mistake.

He knocked the bowl with the back of his hand, spraying bits across the floor. “How many times must I tell you?” he roared. “Do not bring goat cheese. It upsets my stomach!” He popped olives into his toothless mouth. He gummed the oily fruits as he watched his granddaughter crawl about cleaning up the mess. When he had finished eating, Anna stacked the empty bowls on the tray. She bowed and left without looking back.

Outside, she yanked down her shawl and sucked in a breath of fresh air. She had barely begun to exhale when a clod of camel dung pelted the door beside her head. Startled, she looked up and saw a pack of boys. They scampered to duck behind an empty cart. She heard their giggles and knew the attack would escalate. Frightened, she lifted the shawl about her face, gripped the tray, and dashed for the village.

The boys leapt at their fleeing target. Ben, the stub-nosed ringleader, and Daniel, Anna’s neighbor, hurled their usual insults. “Freak! Fool! Funny goat! Better keep running!”

Anna’s grandfather rushed outside and began yelling about the dung on his door. Terrified of the old man, the boys scattered, abandoning their prey.

Anna’s legs pumped with fury beneath her. She knew she could run faster than the boys, but there were more of them, and she did not want to risk being caught. When the roof of her house came into view, she slowed

and let the shawl drop again from her face. She glanced over her shoulder but did not see her pursuers. She bent to catch her breath.

It was not the first time they had taunted her. Nor, she knew, would it be the last. Her mother told her the teasing arose from her unusual appearance.

“It is because you are a mixture,” she had said. “Of boy and girl.”

Anna had wondered at the strange classification. She did not *feel* like a mixture. She knew she was not a boy. Yet she did not feel entirely like a girl either. At least not like the ones in her village who kept silent and shadowed their mothers.

“Anna!” a voice cried from behind.

Anna spun and saw Zahra sitting in front of the well. She was leaning her humped back against the ring of stones and bracing her crooked leg along the ground. In truth, she looked more like a pile of plum-colored rags than an old woman.

When Anna drew near, Zahra’s hand shot from between the folds of her robe. She grabbed the girl and pulled her close. “What would he not eat today?” she cackled, her voice dry and graveled, like the grit left in windowsills after a sandstorm.

“Goat cheese,” Anna answered. She held up the bowl.

Zahra’s eyes focused intently on the food.

“But it is unclean,” Anna said. “It fell on the floor.”

Zahra smiled. Her pale gray eyes gleamed with a wolfish light. “Given

where goat cheese comes from, your grandfather's floor is the cleanest place it has been!" She chuckled and lifted the bowl to her lips.

Anna giggled at the old woman's foolishness.

A farmer approached, hurrying toward the groves. As he passed, he spat into the folds of Zahra's robe. She continued to eat, accustomed to the insult. Many of the villagers disliked the old woman. They said she was a heathen who spoke to animals and disparaged the Lord.

*But if Zahra were so evil, Anna wondered, why did everyone call on her whenever someone was ill?*

She remembered the day her neighbor, Daniel, had laid on his mat unable to breathe. When the priest who often visited their village could not restore the boy, Daniel's father had called for Zahra. The old woman had shown up immediately, as if she had smelled illness on the wind. With strong, wrinkled hands, she had spread a minty balm across the boy's chest and pressed her fingers into the narrow canals between his ribs. As she worked, she had spoken to him in a soft voice, asking questions and letting him speak.

Within hours Daniel was back outside playing with his friends.

Daniel's father had run through the streets shouting thanks to the Lord for the miracle. He later slaughtered a goat in gratitude. But to Zahra he offered no recompense, as if her efforts had played no role in the resuscitation of his son.

Unlike most of the other villagers, Anna was fond of the old woman.

She especially admired the way Zahra could imitate birdsongs—so true were her calls that the creatures would flock around her! Whenever they could find a secret moment, away from the villagers' prying eyes, Zahra would help Anna learn to emulate the songs of wheatears, bee-eaters, tree creepers, ravens, and doves. Still, no matter how much she practiced, Anna could not lure the birds into responding as Zahra could.

The old woman swallowed the last of the cheese and lifted her face toward the sun. "Thank you, Great Mother," she whispered.

Anna often heard Zahra speaking to her mother, which she thought odd since her mother could certainly no longer be living. But when Anna asked her about it, the old woman would only shake her head and say, "Knowledge given too early can be more deadly than poison."

Fearing that she had been away too long, Anna looked back toward her house to see if her mother had come outside. When she turned, the sun's rays glinted across her face.

The old woman gasped, then marveled, as she always did, at how Anna's green eyes glimmered like rare jewels. How the masculine line of her jaw, set wide and solid, stood like bedrock beneath coppery cheeks. How the cascade of black curls spilled to her shoulders. How her lips swelled with the curves and fullness of fruit.

"Blessings be, you are a *handsome* child!" she said.

Anna's chest puffed at the compliment. "That is what Mother says."

"Your mother ..." Zahra whispered, thoughtfully. "How is she?"

"She is weighed down like a camel with too big a load," Anna replied.

The old woman chuckled. "You are as clever as you are handsome." She gave Anna a gentle tap under her chin. Lowered her voice. "But we must pray that the child in your mother's belly is even more handsome than *you*," she said. "Otherwise, there will be much trouble in your house." She winced at the thought. Then waved her hand as if to shoo a goat. "Go home," she advised. "Your mother needs you."

Anna pecked a kiss on each of the old woman's cheeks and darted for home, kicking up a cloud behind her. Zahra remained still, thinking as the dust settled. She knew the child was special. She had read it across the stars at the hour of her birth. She had also foreseen that the girl's destiny would somehow entwine with that of The Way, though she could not yet perceive how.

Zahra had therefore not been surprised when Anna's mother had approached her, secretly, behind the great sycamore, to request that her daughter be taken to study the old ways.

"It is in her blood," Anna's mother had said. "Just as it was in my sister's." She gazed into the distant fields. Her eyes reddening. "But if you do not take her, Anna's life will unfold without purpose or honor. And she will wind up as miserable as—" She choked on her last words, unable to say more.

Having known Anna's mother since she was a child, Zahra had understood and agreed to fulfill the request—but only after Anna had matured

enough to endure the hazardous journey. The delay, she had said, would enable her to arrange for the girl's transport, which, given the tragic losses they had recently suffered, required extraordinary care.

Until then, Zahra promised she would watch over the child and do all she could to protect her. Just as she had once promised to safeguard the child's mother.

As she remembered these things, the old woman closed her eyes. Knowing that her efforts would involve great risk, she asked for strength to fulfill her duty and, even more urgently, for time.



Anna peered around the hide hanging in the doorway of her house. Finding the front room empty, she snuck inside and busied herself tending the fire. Moments later, her mother slipped through the partition of goatskins that walled off her private living area. She had changed into a fresh blue robe.

Anna kept her eyes low, staring at the hem of her garment.

"Where have you been?" her mother asked.

"At Grandfather's," Anna said. "He threw cheese at me."

Her mother tossed her a skeptical look. "And did you let the cheese go to waste?"

Anna shook her head. "Zahra ate it."

Before she could hide it, a smile of approval swept across her mother's face. Then, just as quickly, it disappeared. "Your father will be here soon," she said. "See if the bread is ready."

Anna went to the flat rock nestled in the coals. A thin disk of bread was baking, curling brown at the edges. She lifted it from the heat and set it on a linen cloth.

Her mother knelt slowly, negotiating her considerable weight.

Anna marveled at how big her belly had grown. “Mother,” she asked, “how will the baby get out?”

“He will find a secret passageway. Just like you did, my little dove.”

Anna nestled close to her mother, bending until she could lay her head in her lap. Gazing up, she relished her beauty—her dark eyes flecked with hints of olive, her long onyx curls framing cinnamon-dusted cheeks, her neck curving gently as a wheat stalk, her lean limbs rippling with the strength of sycamore branches.

Anna’s father called her Mari, though the women who gathered at the well once a week to wash sleeping mats had said that was not her real name. Hiding in the bushes behind the gossiping women, as she often did, Anna had also heard them whisper that her mother came from a distant land, far to the south. Which explained, they said, why her face bore the fuller features of the desert dwellers and why her words sometimes rose on a musical curl.

Mari began to hum as she smoothed her daughter’s hair. Anna loved to listen to her mother’s songs. The melodies were simple yet uplifting. And though Mari was careful not to enunciate the words, sometimes a phrase or two would slip from her lips and Anna would hear, “Queen of Heaven

around us,” or “Bless the earth that is to be blessed.” She noticed, too, that her mother would never hum such songs when her father was near. Since she had never heard anyone else singing the particular melodies, Anna came to believe that the songs were special, and something her mother shared only with her.



“Hurry, both of you!” her father shouted from the doorway.

“What is it, Yoseph?” Mari asked.

“A surprise. Come look!” he answered.

“Can it not wait until after our meal?”

“No, no! Come now! I want to show you.”

Anna helped her mother to her feet.

“In here,” Yoseph told them, running ahead.

Inside her father’s workshop, Anna smelled the familiar scents of cedar and lamp oil. A soft layer of woodchips cushioned their steps.

“Can you guess?” he asked, placing his hand on top of a large object covered with goatskins.

Mari smiled broadly. “What is it, Yoseph? Show us!” she begged.

“Behold!” he shouted, lifting the skins with a flourish. He revealed a small but ornate cradle. It hovered above two curved runners. On its sides, elaborate designs had been inlaid with different colored woods. Her father touched the cradle lightly and it began to rock. “For our son,” he said. “Our future blessing from God.”

Anna's mouth fell open. Awash in disbelief, her eyes traveled back and forth from her father to the cradle.

*What was this?* she wondered. *Her father had never made a special gift for her. And her brother was not even born yet!*

"It is beautiful, Yoseph," Mari said.

Yoseph turned. Studied her swollen belly. "Not nearly as beautiful as you," he said. He took his wife into his arms. Leaned to kiss her on the mouth.

Smiling, Mari turned so that his lips found her soft cheek instead.



Yoseph sat cross-legged on the mat to prepare for his meal. He seemed taller than Mari remembered, as she watched him out of the corner of her eye. His face was beaming and even the gray in his beard and the stoop in his shoulders seemed suddenly youthful. She felt relief for the joy she would soon bring him. After long years of waiting, finally, he would have a son.

Anna knelt to remove her father's sandals. When his feet were bare, she poured a bowl of water and held it before him. Yoseph scooped his hands into the bowl then held them aloft, allowing the water to run to his elbows. He dunked a second time, keeping his hands down, sending the water to drip off his fingertips. Anna lifted a towel from her forearm. He took it and dried his hands. He then tossed the damp and crumpled cloth into her lap.

Mari came and sat.

Glancing over at her parents, Anna thought the two made a strange pair. Her mother stood tall, lean, and exotic, a lush sweep cupping her dark eyelashes. Her father, by contrast, was light-skinned, short, and broad. Her mother, Anna thought, rose toward the sky like a vine, while her father clung to the earth like a shrub. The women at the well said that her father had married with luck on his side because, though older, and not altogether handsome, he had taken a striking young woman as his wife. As for her mother, Anna did not know if she had married with luck on her side or not.

Leaning forward, Yoseph began to chant. His voice took on a mournful hue as he recited his morning prayers. "Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of All, who rules over us with a mighty hand," he intoned, his voice torn with ache. "May we, your sinful children, learn to serve your glory. Amen."

Anna and her mother kept their heads bowed until Yoseph was finished. They then waited patiently for him to take the first bite before helping themselves.

Yoseph lifted a disk of flatbread and tore off a ragged piece.

No one spoke.

After several minutes, Yoseph's eyes cut to his daughter. He noticed that she was not eating. "Daughter," he said, "what do you think of the cradle I have made for your brother?"

Both Anna and her mother started at his words. It was rare for Yoseph

to speak to his daughter. Thrilled by his unexpected attentions, Anna wriggled with excitement. "You are the best carpenter in the village, Father!" she spouted. "No one could make a more beautiful cradle than you!" She glanced up, hoping her bold statement had pleased him. Her heart swelled when he chuckled lightly.

"But, Father?" she said, emboldened by his response. "Now that you have finished the cradle, what will you make for me?"

Mari froze at her daughter's insolence.

Yoseph reached over and patted Anna on the head. Three rough taps. "I have made a brother for you," he said. "For what more could you possibly wish?"

Anna's eyebrows crinkled.

*She did not want a brother. What good would that do her? He would just be another person she would have to share her parents with. And her meals!*

"But—" she tried.

Yoseph tossed a hand into the air. "Be patient, daughter," he said. "And someday soon, God willing, you will be a wife. Then your husband can make cradles for your sons."

Mari smiled at Yoseph's words but threw a sideways glance at her daughter. Seeing her about to ask another question, Mari snapped, "Anna! Go to the fire and bake more flatbread. Your father's joy has clearly increased his appetite."

Though Anna always obeyed her mother's orders, this time she delayed.

Feeling reluctant to step away from her father's notice.

Seeing Anna hesitate, Mari swatted her knee. "Go *now*," she urged.

A few minutes passed before Yoseph spoke again. His words were suddenly serious in tone. "Have you thought about what I said last night?" he asked.

"About what, dear husband?"

"About the choice of midwife."

Mari sat back and put a hand on her belly. "Yes," she said, "I have."

"And what have you thought?" He dipped his bread into the salted oil.

Mari drew a deep breath as if knowing her words would not be welcome. "I want Zahra to deliver our son," she said.

Yoseph interlaced his fingers beneath his chin. "I see."

Mari said nothing further, reasoning that silence would be more acceptable than words.

Yoseph drew a hand down his beard. Tugging at its length. "You say this knowing that she is a pagan who curses the Lord."

Mari nodded. "She is most knowledgeable in the ways of childbirth. That is all that concerns me."

Anna returned and set down the flatbread. She could tell by the way her parents were leaning back that they were going to have a difficult conversation. Retaking her seat, she used the opportunity to pour herself an extra cup of milk.

Yoseph's eyes narrowed. Several months ago, he had spoken in private

with the priest who visited their village. The youthful holy man thought it unwise for Zahra to play a role in the birth of Yoseph's child. He had said he suspected, though could not prove, that Zahra was involved in a wicked and dangerous sect. One that adhered to the old ways—the ancient and barbaric practices followed by those who did not embrace the one true God.

“Unholy and vulgar factions such as these continue to sprout up across the land,” the priest had told Yoseph. “Some are led by women. Some by madmen. Some worship false gods, while others refuse to accept the Lord's existence entirely! Thus refuting Him and distorting His plan for us, they stand among His enemies.” He then added with a whisper, “I shudder to think of such evil hands upon your child.”

Recalling the priest's warning, Yoseph glared toward the ceiling. “Women such as Zahra wish only to desecrate the Lord and pervert His plan! If she could, she would teach our son to slander the name of God and bow before his wife!” he said, stabbing a finger skyward, his cheeks reddening.

Yoseph's resistance to Zahra and her wisdom infuriated Mari. But she could not show this. Instead, in a desperate attempt to calm him, she leaned forward and rested a hand on his arm. “But it is *we* who will raise our child, not the midwife,” she said. She then took his hands into her own, knowing how that pleased him. “And I should think you would want the most experienced one to attend the birth of our son. Just as she successfully attended the birth of our daughter.”

Yoseph's shoulders shuddered with emotion. He took several breaths. Then, with effort, surrendered to his wife's touch. He did not think it wise to upset her with the hour of birth drawing near.

"You trusted Zahra when she told you that the child I carry is a son," Mari continued. "So why will you not trust her with—?"

Yoseph waved his hand. "So be it," he said. He no longer wished to speak of the matter. It was true that he had deferred to the old woman in this one respect. Though despising her beliefs and her ways, he and the other villagers relied on Zahra's expertise in childbirth—and her uncanny ability to predict the sex of their children—just as they relied on her healing abilities.

But their dependence on the healer—and the heresy of it—only made Yoseph's hatred burn hotter.

He lifted the milk pitcher and found it empty. Mari spotted the white mustache above Anna's lip and motioned to her. Anna turned from her father and brushed a sleeve across her face.

"I will bring more," Mari told her husband, taking the pitcher from his hands. "But know that you have pleased me." She allowed a radiant smile that no man could refuse to blossom across her face.

When she returned, Yoseph held his wife's gaze and felt the pounding in his chest. "Have Anna put the milk in a goatskin," he told her. "I will travel to Sepphoris today."

Anna sat up at the mention of her favorite village. Sepphoris lay an

hour's walk to the north and was a place of spice traders, musicians, and exotic foods.

"May I come with you, Father? May I?" she blurted.

Yoseph frowned. "Daughter, do not disappoint me," he said, standing.

"Please!" Anna begged. "I will carry your tools for you. Both ways!"

Mari cringed. Over the years, she had come to dread her daughter's yearning for her father's attention, knowing how battered it would become.

All the more reason, Mari thought, for Anna to leave home.

Yoseph scowled down at his daughter. "Your place is to stay and help your mother," he said, an edge coming into his voice. "Do not make me tell you again."

## CHAPTER 2

*A village on the outskirts of ancient Palestine—7 A.D.*



Anna sat in the shade outside her house grinding barley into meal for the evening's bread. Between her knees sat a long, boatlike vessel. Inside its hollow, she dragged a stone back and forth over the grain. Though she performed this task almost every day, it was her least favorite. Sometimes, when she grew bored of the repetition, she felt the urge to roam, to see what she might discover.

Fortunately, a thunderous rain the night before had brought out clouds of orange and blue butterflies. Hurrying about, they painted crooked and colorful trails in the sky. Watching them with delight, Anna soon found her morning chore less wearisome.

With steady hands, she poured the ground meal into a clay bowl. She had just tossed another fistful of grain into the grinding vessel when the sound of shouting made her freeze. Out of nowhere, a pack of boys ap-

peared. They were stomping and swatting at the butterflies with long sticks.

"I got it!" one of them said, laughing while a broken creature beat frantic circles on the ground.

When they came closer, Anna grabbed a goatskin pouch and leapt to her feet. She dashed about collecting as many of the stunning creatures as she could, hoping to spare them from attack.

Before she knew it, the boys were upon her.

"Hey, funny goat! What do you have in that pouch?" Ben called out.

Anna took a step back. "Nothing," she said.

"Oh no? Then show me," he demanded.

The rest of the boys trotted over to their ringleader.

"No," Anna said, clutching the pouch. "It is not for you." She glanced behind her. Knowing she would have to run.

Anticipating her flight, a few boys broke from the group and circled behind her.

Ben waved his stick threateningly. Daniel glared with menace.

"Give me that," Ben said. "Or I will swat you like an insect."

Anna's eyes darted around the circle. But she could find no opening. Her mouth went dry.

Ben raised the stick above his head. "I said—"

"Greetings, children!" a voice rang out.

Anna turned around to see Zahra hobbling toward them.

Lifting her walking stick, the old woman parted the boys' circle.

“What have you got there?” she asked.

Anna lifted her pouch.

The boys snickered but drew back. Though they had little respect for the old woman, they feared her ability to cast spells, as some villagers insisted she could.

Zahra stepped forward and glanced inside the pouch. “Ah, the shape shifters!” she cried.

Anna kept still as the sound of fluttering rose from the goatskin.

The old woman turned to the boys. “Tell me, have any of you learned yet how to grow wings?” she asked, referring to the butterflies’ recent transformation.

Not wanting to engage the strange woman, the boys kept silent. One swept the dust with his sandals.

“Of course not!” Zahra said. “But these little creatures *have*. That is what makes them so magical.” She leaned toward the children. “Such miracles as these must be worthy of our respect, would you not agree?”

The boys mumbled.

Zahra smiled. “Perhaps, then, you would like to help us find them some food?” she asked.

The boys shook their heads and drifted back, uncertain where to go.

Thinking quickly, Ben rallied his comrades. “Come! My mother will make us stuffed dates!” he told them.

Cheered by this idea, the boys trotted off, their sticks waving limply at their sides.

When they were gone, Anna sagged with relief. Zahra sighed and laid a hand on her shoulder. "I was coming to look in on your mother. How is she this morning?"

Anna shrugged. "She seems well."

Zahra frowned. "We shall see," she said, as though she had expected a different answer.

Flutters sounded again from within the goatskin.

Zahra glanced down. "You can release your little friends now," she said. "They will be safe."

Anna smiled and opened the mouth of her pouch, releasing a spray of color.

At that same moment, having heard the commotion, Yoseph stepped out of his workshop. He spotted the old woman standing next to his daughter.

"Anna! This is no time for idle chatter. Go help your mother with the milking!" As his daughter departed, Yoseph cast an angry glare upon Zahra.



Anna held the cow's head steady. Below, her mother balanced awkwardly on a stool, bending over her swollen belly to knead the animal's teats. Mari worked in silence and Anna could sense her mind wandering. Hoping to capture her attention, she asked, "Mother? Who puts milk in the cow?"

Mari's fists pumped up and down in absent rhythm. "God does," she droned.

Anna eyed her mother. She then stroked the cow's side and searched under its belly. "But where does He put it in?" she asked.

Mari leaned back and wiped her brow with the back of a hand. She swooned slightly to one side as if dizzied. "Only the Mother knows," she said.

Anna's eyes widened. "Whose mother?" she asked.

Mari flinched. "What?"

"Do you mean *your* mother? Like Zahra sometimes thanks her—?"

"No," Mari said, interrupting. Her lips tightened. "I did not mean to say *Mother*," she said quickly.

"But you—"

"I made a *mistake*," she insisted, startled at having made such a potentially perilous slip. She glanced over her shoulder.

Anna kicked a toe into the ground, thinking.

"Mother?" she asked. "Why does Father not like Zahra?"

"Anna!" her mother gasped, exasperated. "Will you never run out of questions?"

Anna flinched. Her mother was never cross with her.

Mari sat back, wobbling slightly atop the stool. "Hand me the rag," she said.

Anna handed her a small cloth. Mari wiped each of the cow's teats. "That is enough for today," she said, a strange tremble coming into her forearms. She covered the mouth of the milk jar with a swatch of linen.

Anna noticed beads of sweat forming above her lip. "You are melting."

"I need air," Mari mumbled. She stepped outside and fell against a beam, squinting as if her vision had blurred.

“Greetings,” a voice called out. “Blessings on your house.”

A youthful shepherd approached from behind. Anna smelled the sharp stink of goat urine.

Mari steadied herself. “Greetings,” she said.

Anna had never seen so young a shepherd. He was not much older than she, maybe nine or ten years of age. And he looked remarkably like her. They both shared long, curly dark hair, high coppery cheeks, and succulent green eyes shaped like almonds. She noticed too that his teeth were so white they shimmered even when he was not smiling.

Mari looked back and forth between the shepherd and her daughter thinking they could easily have been mistaken for brother and sister.

“Do you have any spare milk for a poor band of shepherds?” he asked.

“We do,” Mari said. “Anna, bring a small jar from the house.”

Anna hesitated. She did not want to leave her mother alone with the bad-smelling shepherd.

“Anna!” her mother urged.

Anna ran to the house. When she returned with the jar, her mother filled it with milk.

“Double blessings on your house,” the shepherd said.

“And on yours,” her mother replied.

Anna was relieved when the boy finally left. His smell had made her eyes sting.

With a noticeable wobble, Mari lifted the jar and headed back to the

house. Anna tripped behind and was preparing to ask if she could have a sling like the one the shepherd boy carried when her mother yelped in pain. Mari staggered back and dropped the jar. A tongue of milk licked across the dirt. She groaned and clutched her belly as a flood of water splashed down between her legs.

“Anna,” Mari said, bracing herself in the doorway. “Get Zahra.” A dark stain bloomed across the front of her robe.

Anna tried to move, but her legs were frozen. She thought her mother was dying.

“Go!” her mother yelled, staggering through the puddle of milk and water.



Yoseph threw a cedar branch onto the fire. It spit sparks into the night. His father sat across the flames, reciting an endless prayer. Yoseph looked nervously toward his house and wrung his hands.

Mari's cries split the air.

Anna tried to gauge her father's concern by counting the lines denting his forehead. Her neighbor, Daniel, approached the fire with his father, Ishmael. They hardly reacted when Mari screamed again.

“The happy day has come,” Ishmael said.

“Yes, thanks to the Lord,” Yoseph replied. The men embraced.

Mari's cries came again, quick and urgent. Anna could not understand what was happy about her mother's agony.

Daniel turned to Anna and stuck out his tongue. She ignored him.

"Is Mother going to die?" she asked her father.

Yoseph held up a hand. "Hush," he told her.

Frustrated, Anna gazed back into the fire. While they waited, a breeze lifted from the west, carrying the scent of the olive trees. As if riding the breeze, a group of three men walked out of the darkness. One of them led a camel. A light dressing of sand salted their coffee cheeks. They were, Anna knew, desert dwellers.

"Blessings on your house," the man with the camel said to Yoseph. "May we sit by your fire?"

"Blessings to you. Please join us," Yoseph answered. The men laid down their staffs and circled the flames. Yoseph's father ignored them.

Mari screamed again. Anna flinched.

"Who is the fortunate man?" one of the dwellers asked.

"I am," Yoseph said. He looked to Anna. "Pour these men some tea. No one will go thirsty at the birth of my first son."

"Yes, Father."

The man with the camel pointed to Anna. "Is that not your first son?" he asked, mistaking her for a boy.

"Do not joke with me on this happiest of nights," Yoseph replied. He turned to see that his daughter's shawl had fallen, leaving her face fully exposed. "Anna, cover yourself!" he commanded. "And hurry with their tea!"

The three men traded looks of bewilderment.

Inside the house, Mari squatted on a short, three-legged stool. Zahra knelt before her, rubbing her belly with oil and wiping blood from her legs. Mari buckled under a new wave of pain that cramped her sides and pulled at her teeth. "Something is wrong," Mari hissed. "Something is *wrong*!"

"Shh, Yadira!" Zahra whispered, accidentally calling Mari by her childhood name. The two women locked eyes.

Startled by her slip, Zahra quickly gathered herself and wiped the sweaty hair from Mari's forehead. "He is more stubborn than your daughter, that is all," she said. "Keep pushing."

Mari held her breath and bore down with all her strength. When nothing moved inside her, she bellowed into the night.

Yoseph laid his hands on his father's shoulders. "Tonight you will have your grandson," he said.

Retreating to the shadows, Anna pouted, irritated by her father's joy.

"And what will you name him?" the man with the camel asked, peering through the steam rising from his tea.

Yoseph stood tall. He took considerable pride in his son's name. He had even carved the letters into the cradle. "He will be named after my father," he said. "And he will be called Jesus."

The three men nodded. It was, they thought, a good name.

One of the men then gazed into the starry, indigo sky. He squinted as if he could read something within it. "It is a holy night," he said, pointing to a star that hovered above.

Mari's final cry pierced the air. Her scream rose until it stopped, abruptly, as if cut with a blade. No one moved. The crackling of the fire grew louder. Yoseph's father looked up. The silence remained.

"Why does my son not cry?" Yoseph whispered.

A bloody hand lifted back the camel hide. Zahra stepped into the night, dragging her crooked leg. Behind her, Mari began to wail.

Yoseph faced Zahra. "Is it a boy?"

Zahra nodded. She looked him straight in the eye. "But he does not live."

Yoseph went still as stone. Only his eyelids twitched.

The others kept silent, afraid to move.

"What did you say?" he asked, but did not wait for an answer. He shoved the old woman aside and strode through the door. Once inside, he froze. His wife lay weeping on her mat, shrunken and bloodstained. In her arms, she clutched a waxy, blue body. The glistening, vine-like cord of their connection twisted around his neck like a snake.

Yoseph's knees gave way and he crumpled to the ground.

"My God, my God!" he wailed. "Why have you forsaken me?!"



Three days later, Mari was still too weak to rise. Lying on her mat, her eyes stared wide and empty at the ceiling. Anna busied herself at the fire. Earlier that morning, Zahra had met her behind the sycamore and given her a handful of roots and leaves. She then outlined specific instructions for steeping a special tea.

“But you must be certain to prepare this only when your father is away,” the old woman had cautioned.

Anna poured the dark, foul-smelling liquid into a cup through a linen swatch, as Zahra had instructed. She then lifted the cup to her mother’s lips but Mari would not drink.

Outside, Anna could hear the bells ringing on the necks of the donkeys. The people of the village had gathered.

It was time to bury her brother.

“Go be with your father,” Mari mumbled.

“But, Mother, I want—”

“Go!”

Not wanting to upset her, Anna wrapped her mother in blankets and ran outside.

She found her father leading his donkey at the front of the caravan. Lashed to the animal’s back was her brother’s body. Barely the size of a bread loaf, it lay wrapped in cloth strips dusted with spices.

Anna watched the faceless bundle roll from side to side with the donkey’s lurching steps. For the first time, she was glad for the cover of her shawl. Glad that no one could see her glowering. Unlike the others, she felt no grief. She was too furious at her brother for having caused her mother so much pain. And she could not help but wonder if death was the price he had paid for hurting her.

After a short journey, the caravan arrived at the chosen cave. Anna

and the others remained outside as her father and a group of men passed the body inside. It was not long before the hollow of the cave reverberated with the sound of wailing.

There was, she had heard Ishmael say, no pain greater than that of a father who must bury his only son.



One day stretched into the next like sluggish strands of molasses. Mari still did not rise. Anna pressed a piece of damp flatbread against her mother's lips. She did not respond.

"Eat, Mother, please," Anna begged.

"Where is Yoseph?"

"I do not know. The men came to get him," Anna said.

Upon hearing this, Mari's eyes flew open. Wide. She braced her elbows and struggled to stand up. "Find him! *Now!*" she gasped. "I need him here. Tell him I need him *here!*"

Anna struggled to hold her mother down. "Lie back, Mother! I will find him. I will bring him," she said, alarmed by her mother's look of terror.

When she had gotten Mari resettled, Anna threw a log on the fire and dashed into the night.

The village street was empty. Everyone had gone inside. Thin edges of firelight seeped around doorways and windowsills.

Trotting toward the well, Anna spotted the silhouette of a lone, dark figure. The person was rocking back and forth, eyes glued to the sky.

“Zahra?”

“Oh!” the old woman cried, losing her balance and tumbling against the stones. Her breath came ragged and quick. Her pale gray eyes were wide with fear.

“What is wrong?” Anna asked, helping her up.

“Daughter, you must go from here. I am done.” She tore open the top of her robe and lifted a chain that hung around her neck. A solid copper medallion slipped along its links. Zahra turned to Anna and threw the chain over her head. She quickly tucked the medallion under Anna’s robe and pressed her hands along the girl’s shoulders. “Tell no one,” she urged. “Tell *no one* you have this.”

“What is it?” Anna asked, lifting the medallion.

“No! Keep it hidden!” Zahra hissed.

“But what is it?”

Zahra grew angry. “Go away! You must not be here! Go away and do not look back!”

Anna reached for the old woman, but Zahra slapped away her hand.

“Leave me! Leave *now*!”

Anna cradled her hand. It stung from the old woman’s slap. Not wanting Zahra to see her tears, she turned and fled into the night.



After an hour of searching for her father, Anna prepared to give up. It had been a long day and she was tired. On her way home, she passed

by a dwelling on the outskirts of the village. She heard men grumbling inside. Curious if her father might be among them, she hopped on a rock alongside the dwelling and peered through a crack in its wall. Through the narrow gap she saw her father, her grandfather, her neighbors Daniel and Ishmael, and many other men seated around a fire.

"She has great power over our women!" Anna heard her grandfather say. He was angry and the spit from his lips hissed in the flames.

"She is a keeper of the old ways and speaks against the Lord!" another man shouted.

The men mumbled among themselves.

Ishmael rose to his feet. "What say you, Yoseph?" he asked.

Yoseph wiped tears from his cheeks.

Anna gasped. She had never seen her father cry.

"I have asked ... why *me*?" Yoseph said with difficulty, his voice weak with grief. "I am a good man. I have remained clean. I have kept myself in the eyes of God."

The men nodded.

"Why then have I been left childless? Without the honor of a son?"

Anna started at his words. Baffled.

*Father! You are not childless. You have me!* she wanted to yell. But something inside her told her to keep silent.

Yoseph continued to speak. "Tonight, my brothers, during prayers, I was given the answer. God, in His infinite mercy, has shown me the error

of my ways. Through His grace, I now understand why He is angry and has punished me.”

Astonished, the men lifted their faces into the flickering light and held their breath.

“I was *weak*!” Yoseph blurted in confession. “I allowed a heathen to influence my wife and touch my newborn son.” He pointed in the direction of the well. “The old woman tricked my mind. It was *she* who lowered my eyes from God and brought His wrath upon me!”

The men mumbled in assent.

“That woman is a demon,” Yoseph spat, his rage spinning around itself, tensing into a tight coil. “She practices the ways of those who think they are gods. Who deny the Lord. And hold themselves above His laws.” His head fell in remorse. He pressed a palm along his eyes. “But it is I who am to blame. For our priest gave me warning.”

The men gasped.

“Yes. He did. Many months ago,” he confessed. “But I did not heed his words. Much to my sorrow.”

Yoseph fell silent. No one dared move. After a moment, he spoke again.

“Today she broke my family. Tomorrow she will break yours,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “I tell you, my brothers, she must not be allowed to work her evil on our village again.”

The men nodded like a single beast, their eyes shining with tears.

When it seemed as if Yoseph was done speaking, Ishmael raised his

voice. "But what is to be done?" he asked.

Anna's grandfather looked up from the flames. He then rose to his feet. His face cleared of expression. "Kill her," he said.

Anna's bladder went cold as ice.

The men turned to one another, nodding. Their whispers grew louder and more animated. The solution of death, of ridding their community of the unwanted evil, spread among them quick as a plague until they were on their feet shouting. Anna cringed as they charged out the door. They moved en masse, dragging a single shadow behind them as they grunted and picked up stones. Other villagers, alerted by the shouting, leaked from their houses to join the mob, oblivious of its cause. Anna ran behind, keeping herself hidden.

She watched Daniel's mother, Rebecca, and three other women Anna often saw at the well rush out and push through the crowd. Finding Yoseph, they clung to his tunic and begged him to stop. To come to his senses.

"She is the only one who possesses the healing knowledge! What will we do when our children are sick?" they pleaded.

But they could see Yoseph was not in his right mind. That he stared without seeing. Grief and rage having taken his sight. Unable to keep their grip on his tunic, the women fell away, the crowd trampling around them.

Zahra heard the men approaching. She turned to face them, lowering her shawl so they could see her face. The mob stopped before it was upon her. The men writhed, unsure how to proceed, until someone, deep within

the crowd, shouted, "Old woman, you are accused of slandering the name of God and practicing evil on our women and children. How plead you?"

Zahra looked up. Her eyes were calm. "You have come to kill me," she said. No one answered. She leveled her stare. "You have come to kill an old woman. Where is the hope in that?"

A charge ran through the crowd. "Do not let her speak!" someone shouted.

"Stone her!" another cried.

Anna kept hidden behind a bush. Her mouth dry as dust.

Zahra thrust a trembling hand into the sky. The men recoiled. She lifted her voice. "I have done nothing to harm you, yet you wish to destroy me. Have you lost all respect for life?" She challenged them, "Let he who is without human blood cast the first stone!"

The crowd stood silent, muted by doubt and shame. Anna felt something drip down her chin. She wiped her mouth and drew away blood. She had bitten her lip.

The middle of the crowd began to shudder. A single man pushed his way to the front. Anna recognized her father. Yoseph strode out of the crowd and stood before the old woman. His eyes blind with rage. A large stone weighting his hand. "You have spurned the Lord," he said, "and brought evil into our homes. You are in no position to counsel *us*, old woman. For you have snuffed out new life with your own hands!"

"Yes! That is so!" the crowd shouted, its vigor renewed.

“With this,” Yoseph said, “I avenge the death of my only son.”

The stone struck its target, smashing into Zahra’s face, crushing her nose to a bloody pulp. Zahra did not cry out, but swayed, disoriented and broken.

“Stone her! Kill her!” the others shouted, unleashing an angry flock of stones into the air.

Anna felt urine curling around her legs.

A stone hit Zahra in the neck, cracking her windpipe. The sound of her wheezing infuriated the crowd. “Silence her!” they shouted. The more the old woman bled, the more bloodthirsty the crowd became. Stone by stone her cheeks were sliced, her eye sockets shattered, her jaw splintered, the ears torn from her head, her organs pounded. Slowly, she folded, boneless, to the ground.

Anna watched in horror as the man she called Father kicked through Zahra’s battered remains until satisfied she was dead.



Anna arrived home before Yoseph. She peeked around the goatskin curtain that walled off her mother’s private living space. She found her asleep. Thankfully, the yelling had not wakened her. Hurrying, Anna slipped back into the main room and dropped onto her mat. When she heard her father approaching, she feigned sleep, keeping one eye slit open, to watch him.

Yoseph swept into the house like an intruder. He smelled of sweat and

anger. He bent to remove his sandals and headed for his mat.

Mari stirred. "Yoseph?" she whimpered.

"Yes, I am here," he grunted. Without another word, he disappeared behind the partition.

Anna heard him lie down on the mat next to Mari.

*Mother!* she wanted to cry out. *He has killed Zahra!*

But her mother did not know. And let him lie next to her. Let his bloodstained hands touch her, and his lips press on hers. Anna's stomach rolled. She grabbed at her throat as if she might choke. It was then she felt the chain around her neck. And recalled Zahra's last words.

*Tell no one!*

Anna buried the medallion deep within her robe, fearful that her father might see it and kill her, too.

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