

Lady

A Novel

Macbeth

#1 New York Times bestselling author

AVA REID

BY AVA REID

*The Wolf and the Woodsman*

*Juniper & Thorn*

*A Study in Drowning*

*Lady Macbeth*



LADY  
MACBETH

A NOVEL

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*For Sarah, Tricia, and Sam*

*She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
“Well now that’s done: and I’m glad it’s over.”*

—“The Waste Land,” T. S. ELIOT

*She, like a faerie for her beauty;  
By the cloak he now seized her,  
And to his castle swiftly led her  
Delighted to have found a lady  
So immeasurably lovely.*

...

*Now I must tell you further of,  
That one lady he could so love:  
The lord took counsel of a baron  
And thus the lady did imprison,  
In a grey marble tower, perverse  
Her fate; days ill, the nights worse.*

...

*No man or woman comes there,  
None beyond the wall doth dare.  
An old priest with white hair  
Holds the key to door and stair.*

...

*A woman light in her manner  
Will long resist every prayer  
For she wishes none might see  
Her wield her art too openly.*



—“Guigemar,” MARIE DE FRANCE

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

ROSCILLE, ROSELE, ROSALIE, ROSCILLA, the Lady  
HAWISE, a handmaiden  
ALAN VARVEK, WRYBEARD, Duke of Breizh  
GEOFFREY I, GREYMANTLE, Count of Anjou  
THEOBALD I, LE TRICHEUR, Count of Blois, Chartres, and Chasteaudun  
HASTEIN, a Norse chieftain  
MACBETH, MACBETHAD, MACBHEATHA, the Lord, Thane of Glamis  
BANQUHO, Thane of Lochquhaber  
FLÉANCE, Banquho's son  
DUNCANE, king of Scotland  
LES LAVANDIÈRES, witches  
CHANCELLOR, the high priest of Scotland, a Druide  
LISANDER, LANDEVALE, LAUNFALE, LANVAL, the elder son of King  
Duncane, prince of Cumberland  
EVANDER, IOMHAR, IVOR, the younger son of King Duncane  
ÆTHELSTAN, *rex Anglorum*, king of the English  
SENGA, a handmaiden  
Attendants, Messengers, Servants, Soldiers

## GLOSSARY

ALBA, Scotland  
ANJOU, a county of France (adj.—Angevin)  
BLOIS, a county of France  
BREIZH, Brittany (adj.—Brezhon)  
BRETAIGNE, Britain

BREZHONEG, the Breton language

CAWDER, a territory in Scotland

CHARTRES, a county of France, ruled by the House of Blois

CHASTEAUDUN, a county of France, ruled by the House of Blois

GLAMMIS, a territory in Scotland

LOIRE, a river in Brittany

MORAY, the seat of King Duncane

NAONED, Nantes, the capital of Brittany

## A NOTE ON NAMES

In the murky setting of eleventh-century Scotland, language was complex, evolving, and malleable. The world of medieval Britain does not have the sort of rigidity that modern-day convention often impresses upon it. Everything could change at the drop of a hat (or the thrust of a knife). Institutions were precarious; titles and rights were contested. The various names for each character reflect the different languages that would have been spoken at the time, even though many of them are dead or moribund today. As much as it might make for more straightforward literature, I chose to jettison the idea that one culture or one language had a totalizing grip on the world.

ACT I  
THANE  
OF  
GLAMMIS



## ONE

“L<sub>ADY?</sub>”

She looks up and out the window of the carriage; night has fallen with a swift and total blackness. She waits to see how she will be addressed.

For the first days of their journey, through the damp, twisting, dark-green trees of Breizh, she was Lady Roscille, the name pinned to her so long as she was in her homeland, all the way to the choky gray sea. They crossed safely, her father, Wrybeard, having beaten back the Northmen who once menaced the channel. The waves that brushed the ship's hull were small and tight, like rolled parchment.

Then, to the shores of Bretagne—a barbarian little place, this craggy island which looks, on maps, like a rotted piece of meat with bites taken out of it. Their carriage gained a new driver, who speaks in bizarre Saxon. Her name, then, vaguely Saxon: *Lady Rosele?*

Bretaigne. First there had been trees, and then the trees had thinned to scruff and bramble, and the sky was sickishly vast, as gray as the sea, angry clouds scrawled across it like smoke from distant fires. Now the horses are having trouble with the incline of the road. She hears, but cannot see, rocks coming loose under their hooves. She hears the wind's long, smooth *shushing*, and that is how she knows it is only grass, grass and stone, no trees for the wind to get caught in, no branches or leaves to break the sound apart.

This is how she knows they have reached Glammiss.

“Lady Roscilla?” her handmaiden prods her again, softly.

There it is, the Skos. No, Scots. She will have to speak the language of her husband's people. Her people, now. "Yes?"

Even under Hawise's veil, Roscille recognizes her quavering frown. "You haven't said a word in hours."

"I have nothing to say."

But that isn't entirely true; Roscille's silence is purposeful. The night makes it impossible to see anything out the window, but she can still listen, though she mostly hears the absence of sounds. No birds singing or insects trilling, no animals scuffling in the underbrush or scampering among the roots, no woodcutters felling oaks, no streams trickling over rock-beds, none of last night's rain dripping off leaves.

No sounds of life, and certainly no sounds of Breizh, which is all she has ever known. Hawise and her frown are the only familiar things here.

"The Duke will expect a letter from you when we arrive. When the proceedings are done," Hawise says vaguely. Half a dozen names she has for the Lady, in as many tongues, but she has somehow not found the word for "wedding."

Roscille finds it funny that Hawise cannot speak the word when, at the moment, she is pretending to be a bride. Roscille thought it was a silly plan, when she first heard it, and it feels even sillier now: to disguise herself as handmaiden and Hawise as bride. Roscille is dressed in dull colors and stiff, blocky wool, her hair tucked under a coif. On the other side of the carriage, pearls circle Hawise's wrists and throat. Her sleeves are yawning mouths, drooping to the floor. The train is so white and thick it looks like a snowdrift has blown in. A veil, nearly opaque, covers Hawise's hair, which is the wrong shade of pale.

She and Hawise are of age, but Hawise has a husky Norsewoman's build, all shoulders. These disguises will fool no one; even the sight of their shadows would reveal the ruse. It is an arbitrary exercise of power by her future husband, to see if the Duke will play along with his whimsical demands. She has considered, though, that perhaps his motive is more sinister: that the Thane of Glamis fears treachery in his own lands.

Just as Roscille is a gift to the Thane for his alliance, Hawise was a gift to Roscille's father the Duke, for not having sent ships when he could have sent ships. For letting the Northmen retreat from the channel in peace, Hastein, the Norse chieftain, offered the Duke one of his many useless daughters.

Roscille's father is so much more beneficent than Hawise's boorish pirate-people. In Wrybeard's court, even bastard daughters like Roscille get to be ladies, if the Duke thinks they can be put to some use.

But as Roscille has newly learned, she is not useful to her father because she can speak her native Brezhoneg, and fluent Angevin, and very good Norse, thanks to Hawise, and now Skos, out of necessity, even though the words scrape the back of her throat. She is not useful because she can remember the face of every noble who passes through Wrybeard's court, and the name of every midwife, every servant, every supplicant, every bastard child, every soldier, and a morsel about them as well, the hard, sharp bits of desire that flash out from them like quartz in a cave mouth, so when the Duke says, *I have heard whispers of espionage in Naoned, how shall I discover its source?* Roscille can reply, *There is a stable boy whose Angevin is suspiciously unaccented. He sneaks away with one kitchen girl behind the barn every feast day.* And then the Duke can send men to wait behind the barn, and catch the kitchen girl, and flog her naked thighs to red ribbons until the Angevin spy / stable boy confesses.

No. Roscille understands now. She is useful for the same reason that the Duke's effort at disguising her is doomed: She is beautiful. It is not an ordinary beauty—whores and serving girls are sometimes beautiful but no one is rushing around to name them lady or robe them in bridal lace. It is an unearthly beauty that some in Wrybeard's court call death-touched. Poison-eyed. Witch-kissed. *Are you sure, Lord Varvek, my noble Duke, Wry of beard, that she is not Angevin? They say the House of Anjou are all born from the blood of the serpent-woman Melusina.*

Grey mantle, lord of Anjou, has a dozen children and twice as many bastards and they always seem to slip into Wrybeard's court with their pale

hair, sleek as wet-furred foxes. Her father would not have been shy in admitting to have had an Angevin mistress, though perhaps Greymantle would have chafed at the accusation that his line could have produced such an aberrant creature as Roscille. But the Duke said nothing, and so the whispers began.

*The white of her hair is not natural; it is like draining moonlight. Her skin—have you seen it?—it will not hold a color. She is as bloodless as a trout. And her eyes—one look into them will drive mortal men to madness.*

One visiting noble heard such rumors and refused to meet her gaze. Roscille's presence at the feast table was so unnerving that it scuttled a trade alliance, and then that same noble (le Tricheur, he is called) carried the story back with him to Chasteaudun and made all of Blois and Chartres shrink from having future dealings with Wrybeard and his court of tricky fairy-maidens. So Roscille was fitted with a gossamer veil, mesh and lace, to protect the world's men from her maddening eyes.

That was when her father realized it was in fact good to have a story of his own, one that could neatén all these unruly and far-flung fears. "Perhaps you were cursed by a witch." He said it in the same tone he used to proclaim the division of war spoils.

This is the Duke's telling of it, which is now the truth, since no one is any the wiser. His poor, innocent mistress bleeding out on her birthing bed, the oddly silent child in her arms, the witch sweeping through the window and out again, all shadows and smoke and the crackle of lightning. *Her laughter echoed through every hall of the castle—for weeks afterward it all reeked of ash!*

The Duke recounts this to a gathered audience of France's nobles, all who may have heard the rumors and been spooked out of arrangements and exchanges. As he speaks, some of Naoned's courtiers begin nodding grimly along, *Yes, yes, I remember it now, too.*

It is only when all the nobles and courtiers are gone and she is alone with her father that Roscille, not quite thirteen, risks a question.

*Why did the witch curse me?*



Wrybeard has his favorite draughts board before him, its latticework of black and white made dull with use. He arranges the tiles as he speaks. Dames, the pieces are called, women.

*A witch needs no invitation, he says, only a way of slipping through the lock.*

No one knows exactly what a witch looks like (so in fact everyone knows what a witch looks like), yet they can all agree, it sounds like the sort of curse a witch would give: the shiny apple with the rotted core. *Your daughter will be the most beautiful maiden, Lord Varvek, but one look into her eyes will drive mortal men to madness.* Roscille understands that this explanation offers her better prospects than the alternative. Better to be witch-cursed than witch; better hagseed than hag.

*But—*

“What, are you Roscille of the Thousand Questions?” Wrybeard waves his hand. “Go now, and count yourself lucky it was only le Tricheur who shook like a dog’s leg at the sight of you, and not that Parisian imbecile with all his warmongering vassals whom he cannot keep to heel.”

The Parisian imbecile goes on to start wars with half the other duchies and is then excommunicated twice over. This is how Roscille learns that any man may style himself *the Great* even if the only achievement of his life is spilling a dramatic ordeal of blood.

Her father teaches her to abandon the habit of asking questions, because a question may be answered dishonestly. Even the dullest stable hand can tell a convincing lie if it is the difference between the end of a whip and not. The truth is found in whispers, in sidelong glances, in twitching jaws and clenching fists. What is the need for a lie when no one is listening? And no one in Wrybeard’s court suspects that Roscille is capable of listening, of noticing, especially with the veil that hides her eyes.

Roscille of the Veiled Eyes. They call her this in Breizh and beyond. It is a far kinder epithet than she has any right to expect, being a witch-marked girl. Yet she does not wear the thin veil now, not with Hawise. It has been

pronounced that women are not afflicted by the madness that her stare induces in men.

Thus the marriage has been arranged on the condition that Roscille arrive by single carriage, with only her handmaiden as company. The carriage driver is a woman who handles the reins clumsily, as she has been taught to drive only for this specific purpose. Even the horses are mares, silver-white.

Roscille realizes it has been a long time since Hawise spoke and that the handmaiden is still waiting for a reply. She says, "You may write and tell the Duke whatever will be most pleasing for him to hear."

Once she would have written the letter in her own hand, and paced the room considering how best to relay all the details of the Thane's desires, the treasures that he left unguarded, ripe for Roscille's senses to plunder. *Here is how he speaks when he believes no one is listening. Here is where his gaze cuts when he thinks no one is watching.*

But that letter is to a man who no longer exists. The Wrybeard who sent her away is a man Roscille does not know. Still, she knows the things that will please this other man, as they are the same things that will please any man. The Duke will want to know that his strange cursed bastard daughter is an obedient broodmare and a docile pleasure slave. She understands that these are the two fundamental aspects of wifedom: Open your legs to your lord husband and bear a child that will mingle the blood of Alba with the blood of Breizh. A marriage alliance is only a temporary bond, thinly woven, but if Roscille is good enough it will hold until a son comes along and yokes the unicorn to the ermine.

The unicorn is the proud emblem of Skos, all its brutish clans finally and grudgingly united beneath one banner. And it is said that Lord Varvek is as canny as a weasel, so, not one to let an advantageous epithet go unremarked, the Duke put the barb-toothed creature on his coat of arms.

Before, Roscille would have claimed her father's epithet for herself, too, a trait seeped from his blood into hers (is the daughter of an ermine not an

ermine, too?). Now she wonders—is the weasel truly clever, or are its teeth merely sharp?

The carriage clatters and strains around a series of narrow turns, up the cliffside, the horses panting hard. The wind is flat and smooth and uninterrupted, as if it is being piped in through a pair of bellows. And then, shocking and sudden, Roscille hears the dragging pulse of the sea.

Naoned, the city of her birth, sits inland on the Loire; until traveling to Bretagne, she had never seen the ocean. But this is not like that snarling gray channel. The water is black and muscular, and where the moonlight catches the small crests of the waves, it shows a pattern like a serpent's belly. And the water has a steadiness that the wind does not: The surf crashes the rock over and over and over again with the rhythm of a beating heart.

The graces of civilization spiral outward from the papal seat in Rome, that bright jewel in the center of everything. But the light of the Holy See dims with distance: Far from Rome, here is the world's naked, primitive darkness. The castle of Glamis hulks over the cliffside, vulgar and bleak. There is a single long parapet, running parallel to the edge of the cliff, so that the whole wall is a straight, sheer drop to the water below. What Roscille at first thinks are crosses are only arrow slits. There are no carvings along the barbican or the battlements, no etchings to protect against pale Ankou, the spirit of Death, who drives his creaking wagon of corpses—every parish and house in Breizh must have such ornaments, or he will come—but perhaps something else keeps Death at bay in Glamis.

*Stop*, Roscille thinks. The word falls in her mind like a stone. *Please, no farther. Turn around and let me be gone.*

The carriage rattles on.



THE BARBICAN GRINDS OPEN TO the courtyard. There is a man standing within it, just one. He wears a gray square cloak and a short tunic, tall leather boots,

and a kilt. Roscille has never seen a man wear a skirt before. Wool stockings keep his knees from the cold.

At first she thinks it is her lord husband come to greet her, but as the carriage draws closer and then halts, she sees immediately that it is not. One thing she knows about the Thane of Glamis is that he is large, as large as a mortal man can reasonably be. This man in the courtyard is by no means small, but he does not have the mountainous stature reported of the Thane: He is ordinary. He has hair the color of a roof's thatching, sun-stripped yellow.

Hawise dismounts the carriage first, then Roscille. The man does not offer his hand to help her, which is terribly impolite by the standards of Wrybeard's court, and Greymantle's, and every duchy or county ruled by the House of Capet. Roscille stumbles a little bit, and she hasn't even donned her bridal gown.

"Lady Roscilla," says the man. "You are warmly received."

The walls of the courtyard might as well be made of paper, for how well they prohibit the wind. She has never been so cold in her life. Even Hawise, with her hardy Norse blood, shivers beneath the veil.

"Thank you," she says, in Scots. "This is my handmaiden, Hawise."

The man frowns. At least, she thinks he does. There are so many furrows on his face—the marks of battle or the marks of age, Roscille cannot tell—that she can barely read his expression. His eyes dart to Hawise for a moment, and then back to Roscille, though he does not meet her gaze. He knows the stories.

"I am Lord Banquho, Thane of Lochquhaber and your husband's right hand," he says. "Come. I will show you to your chamber."

He directs the driver to the stables and then directs Roscille and Hawise to the castle. They go up through twisting, half-lit halls. Many of the torches are gone, and there are only black scorch-marks to indicate where they had once been. The abrupt absences of light make their shadows warp and judder against the walls. Now the wind's howling is hushed, yet from the