



LITTLE THIEVES

MARGARET OWEN

Margaret Owen was born and raised at the end of the Oregon Trail, and now lives and writes in Seattle while negotiating a long-term hostage situation with her two monstrous cats. In her free time, she enjoys exploring ill-advised travel destinations, drawing a lot of nonsense, and raising money for social justice nonprofits.

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Margaret Owen



www.hodder.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Hodder & Stoughton

An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

eBook ISBN 978 1 529 38171 9

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd

Carmelite House

50 Victoria Embankment

London EC4Y 0DZ

www.hodder.co.uk

*To the gremlin girls,
I would like to tell you something inspiring,
but the truth is, when life closes a door for us,
it doesn't always open a window.*

*The good news is:
That's what bricks are for.*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a story about many things, beautiful and ugly, painful and true. There are discussions of child abuse and neglect, navigating abusive environments, and trauma from a past attempted assault. For many of us, these are wounds, and I have tried to give them air here without tearing at the hard-won stitches. Still, I trust you to know your scars.

*The little thief steals gold, but the
great one steals kingdoms;
and only one goes to the gallows.*

—Almanic proverb

PART ONE:
The Curse of Gold

THE FIRST TALE

God-mothers

Once upon a time, on the coldest night of midwinter, in the darkest heart of the forest, Death and Fortune came to a crossroads.

They stood tall and unfathomable in the glass-smooth snow, Death in her shroud of pyre smoke and shadows, and Fortune in her gown of gold and bones. More than that cannot be said, for no two souls see Death and Fortune the same way; yet we all know when we meet them.

On this night, a woman had come to do just that: meet them. Her dull carrot-colored curls twisted from under a woolen cap, her wind-burnt red face as worn as the threadbare cloak over her shoulders. One hand clutched a dimming iron lantern, which smoldered just bright enough to catch the snowflakes flitting by like fireflies before they melted back into the dark.

Her other hand was locked around the ragged mitt of a little girl beside her.

“Please,” the woman said, shivering in snow up to her shins. “We’re stretched thin to feed the twelve other mouths already, and this one— she’s ill luck. Wherever she goes, the milk spoils, the wool tangles, the grain spills. Whatever she touches falls to ruin.”

The little girl said nothing.

“She’s only . . .” Fortune tilted her head, and the wreath of coins about her brow shimmered and flipped, changing from copper to coal to silver to gold. “Three? Ten? Forgive me, I never know with you humans.”

“Four,” Death said in her soft, dark voice, for Death always knew.

Fortune wrinkled her nose. “Young. The proper age to be spilling grain and breaking things.” “She’s the thirteenth,” the woman insisted, shoving the lantern higher as if to drive her point home like a stubborn cow. Weak firelight

caught on Fortune’s coin wreath, on the wispy hem of Death’s hood. “Like me. That makes her the thirteenth daughter of a thirteenth daughter. Her luck’s rotten to the core.”

“You told your other children you’d take her into the woods to seek her fortune.” The Low God plucked a coin from her wreath and let it dance about her fingers, flashing copper and silver, gold and black.

“In truth, you were seeking me,” Death finished in her dark-velvet voice, and the woman’s features crumpled with shame. “Yet here you have found us both. You have come far, through the dark and through the frost, to ask our favor.”

“Asking a blessing of the Lady of Luck. Risky. No way to know what that would be.” Fortune’s face slipped between cruelty and sympathy as her coin slipped through quick fingers, flashing day and night, red and white.

Death, on the other hand, did not stir. “You know my gifts, and so you know though there is plenty I can take, little can I give. But I will tell you: Only one of you will go home.”

The woman drew a sharp breath.

Fortune smiled, and her coin flashed like the sun and the snow, like shadow and like blood. “You sought Death in the woods. Did you think the way back would be easy?”

The woman said nothing. The flame in the lantern burned lower.

“Ask,” Death commanded. “What will you have of us?”

The lantern shook in the woman’s hand, her knuckles cracked with callus and cold. “I want what’s best for—for everyone.”

“Choose,” Death commanded again. “Which of you will return?”

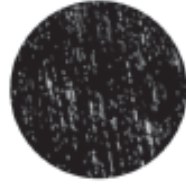
The woman let go of her daughter.

Fortune lifted the girl’s chin. She found two eyes of sharpest black in a pale, freckled face, two braids the color of the lantern’s flame tied off in bits of rag.

“What is your name?” Death asked as the woman turned and fled the crossroads, stealing away the last scrap of firelight.

“Vanja” was the first thing I said to my godmothers, “my name is Vanja.”

CHAPTER ONE



Card Games

It has been nearly thirteen years since Death and Fortune claimed me for their own, and I have come far enough through winter and cold that almost no one calls me Vanja now.

Thump- thump. Two raps of gloved knuckles against the carriage roof. The driver's muffled voice carries down to me inside. "Almost there, *Prinzessin.*"

I don't reply. I don't have to; I learned long ago that princesses don't owe their servants answers.

And for most of the last year, that's the face I've worn: the princess.

Or to be precise: Gisele-Berthilde Ludwila von Falbirg of the Sovabin Principality, *Prinzessin-Wahl* of the Blessed Empire of Almandy. Soon to be *Markgräfin* Gisele you-get-the-idea von Reigenbach of the empire's largest territory, the border march of Bóern, once its mar

grave gets around to a wedding.

Though not if I can help it.

(We'll come back to that.)

I squint out the gilt-trimmed carriage window, studying the timber-and-plaster blocks of Eisendorf Manor as the horses draw us closer. Shadows pass behind the first-floor windows, turning them to rosy eyes winking into the frosty twilight gloom. It looks crowded already, even for a Sunday-night party. Good—a princess ought to be the last of the von Eisendorfs' guests to arrive. There was a reason I dawdled in my bedroom at Castle Reigenbach: to make sure we hit peak Minkja traffic when we left an hour ago.

But I have more motive to survey the manor's scenery than just making sure the *Prinzessin* arrives fashionably late. Lit windows are fewer on the third floor, but I still spot two bracketing the double doors where the master bedroom lets out onto its telltale grand balcony.

The real question tonight is whether it's the *only* balcony.

It is not. Balconettes frame it on either side. Lamplight gilds only one of the balconettes, spilling from an adjacent room that looks to share the fat main chimney with the master bedroom.

That chimney is currently chugging smoke into the dimming sky. One might wonder *why* the von Eisendorfs would keep a fire going up in their bedroom when they'll be busy entertaining guests downstairs all evening.

I'd bet three solid *gilden* that they're heating the guest chambers next door instead, in case I—well, in case the *prinzessin* needs a respite. An opportunity to suck up to the margrave's bride-to-be can't be missed.

One also might wonder why I care about chimneys, balconettes, and suck-ups. It's because tonight, the von Eisendorfs are handing me an entirely different sort of opportunity.

And I would *loathe* for either of those opportunities to go to waste.

The faint reflection of my grin cuts across the glass. A moment later it vanishes as my breath clouds the pane in the late-November chill.

I should play it safe, settle back into my seat, resume the serene, graceful façade of the *prinzessin*.

Instead I size up the remaining distance between us and the first guard we'll pass, and quickly draw a simple, distinct set of curves in the fogged glass. *Then* I sit back and smooth my grin down to a placid smile.

When we pass the first guard, I see him do a double take. He elbows the guard beside him, pointing to the carriage window, and I'm pretty sure I hear: "... *an arse!*"

"And no one will ever believe you," I hum under my breath as the fog melts from the glass.

The jingle-stamp of the horses stops when we draw even with the manor's stout oaken front door. I sneak a look under the opposite seat and confirm my satchel, an unassuming toilette bag, is still stowed away. For now, it will stay there.

Then I close my eyes, swaying with the carriage as the footman jumps off, and think of three playing cards dancing facedown across a table. It's time to begin my oldest game, Find the Lady.

There are many tricks to running the game, but the absolutely ironclad one is this: Only one person should know where the Lady is at all times. That person is me.

I run my fingertips over the string of heavy, perfect pearls around my neck. It's habit more than anything; I would know if they were unclasped. I would *know*.

The carriage door opens. In my mind, I flip the first card faceup.

The *Prinzessin*. Silver eyes, pale-golden curls, pristine pearls under glacier-blue velvet and burgundy brocade, a gentle smile with a hint of mystery. Even the name *Gisele* is an intrigue, shunning sturdy Almanic for

the Bourgienne pronunciation, with its honeyed vowels and a butter-soft *G*. It's just the sort of pretentious affectation Dame von Falbirg loved to dish out, knowing people like the von Eisendorfs would eat it up.

This is how the game begins, you see. Step one: Show them the card they're looking for.

The *prinzessin* descends from the carriage like a vision. Ezbeta and Gustav von Eisendorf are hovering in the entrance hall, faces lighting up when they see me finally gliding toward their open door. It's not just about arriving on my own schedule, of course. It's about making sure the *other* guests see Ezbeta and Gustav waiting for me.

I alone see the surest sign that this night is going to go off without a hitch, for when Fortune is your godmother, you can always see her hand at work. Faint, dull clouds like coal dust are coalescing around the von Eisendorfs as they flutter in the hall. It's an omen of the ill luck I'm about to bring upon their house.

The Count and Countess von Eisendorf are celebrating their twentieth anniversary tonight—well, commemorating, at least. “Celebrating” may be too strong a term. All I'm saying is that there's a reason *Komtessin* Ezbeta is already ruddy-cheeked and stashing a goblet behind an urn on the entrance hall's credenza.

Something about her always puts me in mind of a stork, though I've never put my finger on why. She's pale-skinned like much of the Blessed Empire, with middling brown hair and angular features—*aha*. That's it. Ezbeta has a habit of pointing with her chin, and with her long neck and a tendency to cock her head, it gives the impression that she's scouring the area for a frog to snap up.

She's dressed to impress, at least, her wrists and throat gleaming with a small fortune in gold and emeralds. It's almost certainly the most expensive jewelry she owns. My fingers fairly itch: It's another opportunity, perhaps.

“Oh, *Markgräfin* Gisele, how good it is of you to come!” Her voice carries like a trumpet, and I hear a fleeting hush of anticipation dart through the crowd inside as the countess sweeps her forest-green samite gown into a curtsy.

“It was ever so kind of you to invite me,” I reply, extending a hand to Gustav.

He mashes his lips to my doeskin-gloved knuckles. “We’re absolutely delighted.”

Komte Gustav is a withered ghoul of a man in a tunic pricey enough to feed Eisendorf Village through Winterfast, and yet *incredibly* it does nothing to help the piss-puddle where his personality should be. Nor does the wet smudge he leaves on my glove.

I pull free and bounce a teasing finger against the tip of Ezbeta’s nose. “I’m not the *markgräfin* yet, you know. Not until my darling Adalbrecht returns and makes me the happiest woman in the Blessed Empire.”

My *darling* betrothed, Adalbrecht von Reigenbach, margrave of the sprawling march of Bóern, has spent the entirety of our year-long betrothal at his share of the southern and eastern borders of the Blessed Empire of Almandy. He’s been instigating skirmishes like your garden-variety *invade-a-kingdom-because-Papi-didn’t-love-me-best* nobleman, all while I wait in his castle. And for all I care, he can stay there.

“Well, you’re already the most generous,” *Komtessin* Ezbeta simpers as a servant takes my cloak and gloves. “The cushions you sent are positively divine!”

“I could hardly let such an occasion go by without gifts. I’m just glad they arrived safely.” It isn’t even a lie, I *am* glad. Just not for the reason they expect. “Was the spiced mead also to your liking?”

Gustav clears his throat. “Indeed,” he says with a faintly strained air. “I thought to serve it tonight, but my wife took a . . . significant liking to it, in

fact.”

“I can’t help it if Princess Gisele has impeccable taste.” Ezbeta winks. Saints and martyrs, if she’s already soused enough to be winking at me, she might just hand me that absurd necklace herself before the party’s over. “Come, come! Everyone’s waiting for you!”

I let her lead me into the manor’s main parlor, which is overflowing with minor nobility. Much of the crowd are knights and landed gentry who serve the counts, but the von Eisendorfs have also managed to attract a handful of Adalbrecht’s vassals equal to their own rank. I see *Komte* Erhard von Kirchstadtler and his husband, and Lady Anna von Morz in a plum satin atrocity that could charitably be called a gown. Even Minister Philippa Holbein has traveled into Boérn from the nearby Free Imperial State of Okzberg.

I scan for one particular face and find it thankfully missing. Godmother Fortune may have tilted the odds in my favor, or maybe Irmgard von Hirsching thinks she’s too good to get drunk with the von Eisendorfs. Either way, that’s one less problem to deal with tonight.

“I hope the guards didn’t give you too much trouble, *Prinzessin*,” Lady von Morz cackles, sauntering up to me with a goblet of *glohwein* in each hand. She tries to pass one off to me and fumbles a bit until I steady her grip. “Really, Gustav, even the margrave doesn’t post this many soldiers at his front door.”

Gustav gives a disgruntled wheeze. “No such thing as too cautious these days. They say the von Holtzburgs lost nearly fifty *gilden* to the Penny Phantom.”

We all gasp. That’s no trifling sum; a skilled tradesman would be lucky to amass fifty *gilden* over one season. “I’d no idea the *Pfennigeist* struck them too,” I say, wide-eyed.