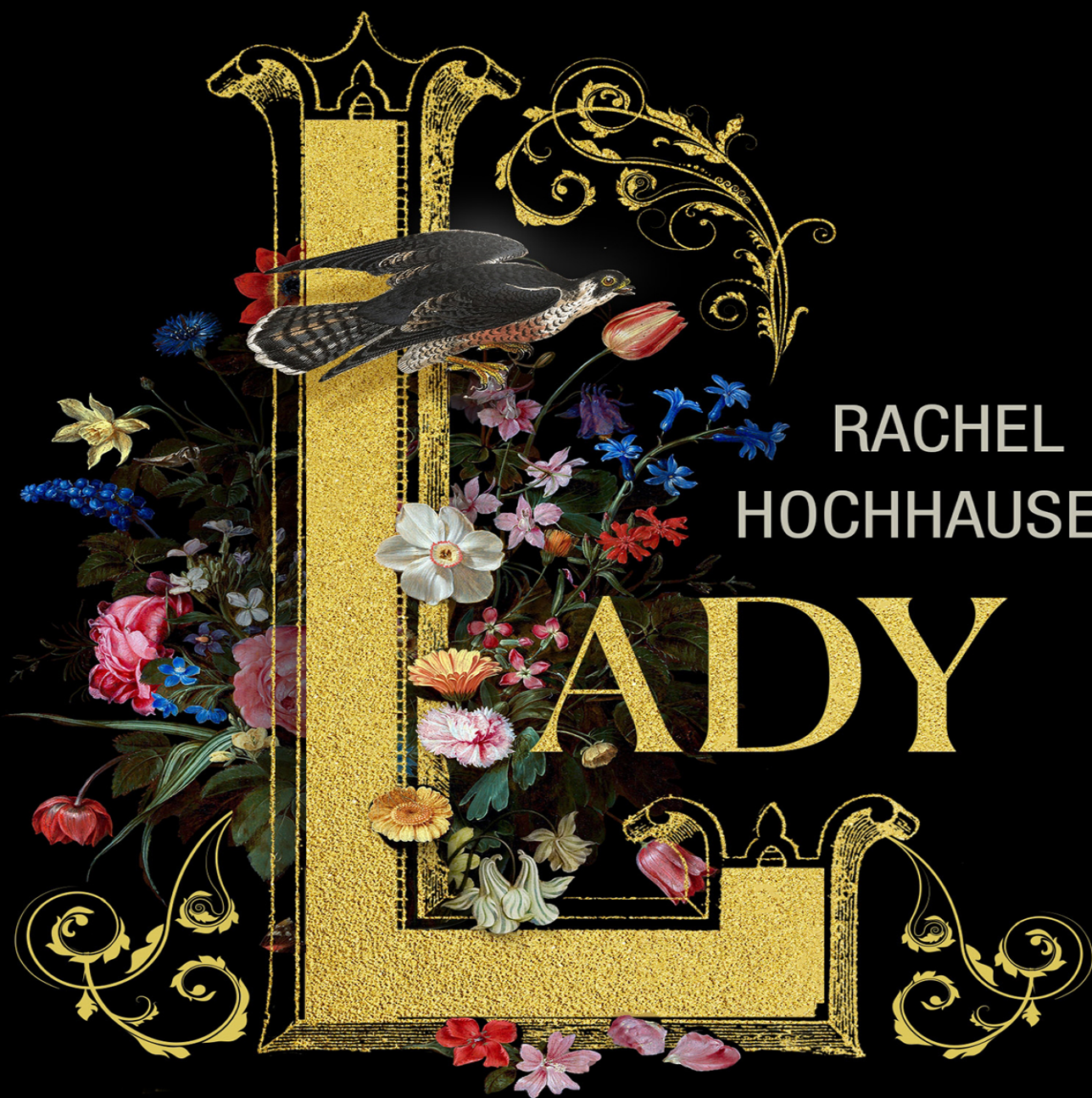


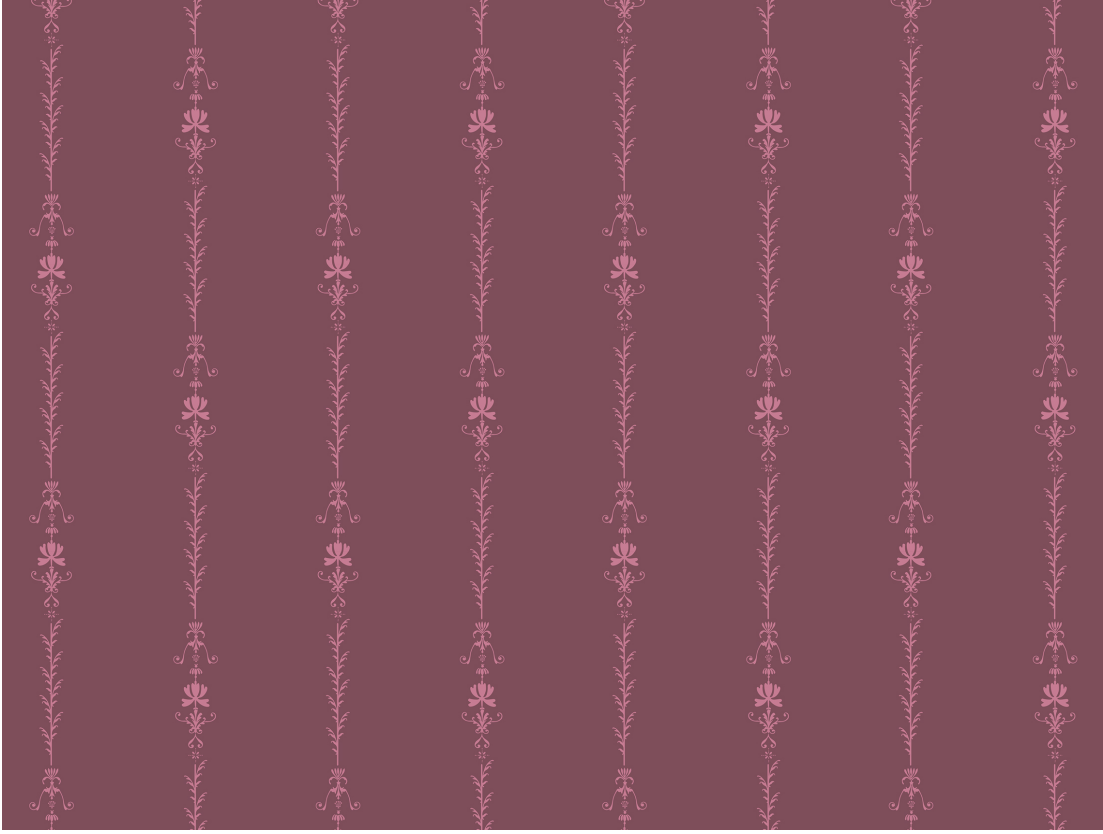


RACHEL
HOCHHAUSER

LADY

TREMAINE

A NOVEL



LADY TREMAINE



A Novel

Rachel Hochhauser



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

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For Bea. And for Isabel.

CHAPTER ONE

I've been warned to be wary of strangers in the woods since I was a little girl. A person, alone, unfamiliar, hidden in the dappled darkness, is not to be trusted. And, certainly, the woods can hide the sorts of people you'd rather not encounter. Outlaws and outcasts. Gruesomely mutilated pariahs—those with fingers taken for thieving, lips and tongues cut out for lying, flesh rotting for submission to disease. But just as shadows serve to hide and disguise, they also provide privacy and solitude, and, if you look carefully, beauty. The darkness of the woods offers a break from watchful eyes and rules to follow and stiffened skirts and the never-ending etiquette of being a woman in the world. For a few short hours of the day, I've always considered it a fair trade: darkness for freedom.

But when I first heard the twig snap and saw the man ahead of me, I was scared. I saw beard and sword and steel. Year after year of warnings—to stay in the light, to travel in pairs, to avoid complicity in your fate—surfaced with one shallow breath.

That morning, it was early, and I had been somewhere I was not supposed to be. No matter if the stranger intended no harm. Fear makes people dangerous. And you see: To him, I, too, was a stranger in the woods.



I had started my day as usual. Feet out of the bedcovers before dawn, searching for slippers on the cold floor. The hurried application of smock and kirtle, frost riming the obsidian windowpanes. I shoved my hand into a leather glove and gently roused Lucy, who slept beneath the velvet folds of her own wing.

Keeping a peregrine in my bedchambers was unusual, but it was my only means of indulging her. All else with a falcon was measured, calculated, managed, tied down. She was trussed to her perch. Flew only when allowed. Weighed near daily on a brass scale. I could not help but offer a small bit of nocturnal warmth.

She sat on my gauntlet, bound by her jesses to my very body, and we went out into the dark hallway. I held the bird aloft ahead of me, arm extended as if she were a lantern, feeling my way along the wall. Past Rosamund's door. Past Mathilde's. Past the steps that led up to Elin. Feet soft on the worn tread of the carpet.

A sound emerged from the shadows behind me. I turned back to see my eldest framed by the slender crack of her doorway, face lit by the stub of a flickering candle. "Do not say *not today*," Mathilde whispered.

I frowned. "I will meet you at breakfast."

"No one will see us," she protested. "I can help you."

Lucy's talons tightened on the glove and I pulled her closer. "Back to bed." The candle was not so dim that I missed the shadow of dissatisfaction on Mathilde's face. She shut her door without speaking, leaving me near blind in the semidarkness. It made no difference, I told myself. Soon the world and its sleeping daughters would turn their faces toward the light.



In the kitchen, Wenthelen, sturdy and red-faced, stood over a pot gurgling on the hearth. Small piles of ash collected beneath rushlights. The room

smelled of cooking vegetables.

“Taste this.” She plucked her spoon from the pot.

“I’m sure it’s—” The wooden instrument was inserted into my mouth. Wenthelen, a good cook who required the compliments of a great chef, rummaged with the utensil for several long moments.

“Satisfactory,” I said, when I was able to. In truth, the broth needed salt and the savory flavor of meat, but I couldn’t say so—I’d insisted that we buy a pound of sugar instead of a flank of beef.

Wenthelen took a step closer. The spoon twitched in her hand.

“It is nothing short of delectable!” I cried, stepping backward, into Alice, our only other household staff, who had just entered behind me. “Did I detect a hint of spice? You’ve elevated the humble parsnip to a veritable triumph!”

“Leak’s worse,” Alice announced placidly.

I turned to our housekeeper—gray eyes and gray hair, pulled into a bun so tight it left her forehead expressionless—and frowned at her. “You always say so on the day after rain.”

“And it rains a lot.” Alice frowned back, as unflustered as Wenthelen was perturbed. “We made a tidy sum on Rosie’s embroidery bits.”

“Those pennies are to go to the haberdasher.”

She crossed her arms. “Write the thatcher.”

“The girls need lace sleeves.”

“Lace sleeves.” Wenthelen tutted from the edge of the hearth. Seeing the look on my face, she added: “Ma’am.”

“Everyone is wearing blond flounces this year.” I’d seen the fine needle and bobbin meshwork peeking out of necklines and gathered in diaphanous ruffles at elbows. “And the world is unkind to those who don’t follow its rules.”

Alice lifted my old cloak from the peg and shook it out, tucking a twist of cloth into one of the pockets. “And yet, you go out each morning dressed like a swineherd.”

I snatched at the cloak. “I can hardly hunt in silk.”

Alice glanced at the dark windows. “You might have better luck in the afternoon.”

“Better luck would be if I were hunting for sport.”

Wenthelen stuck the spoon back into the pot and gave its contents a hearty stir. “We could buy meat if you did not insist on buying sugar.”

“We could not have guests if I could not serve confections.”

Wenthelen only sighed and clucked at my falcon—“Go on, then, Lucy, get us something for supper”—before turning to face Alice: “Try the stew.”

“Needs salt—” Alice started to say.

I hurried away.

★ ★ ★

According to a map, I own a piece of land. But a map is a symbol. It has no real connection to the soil—it serves as an artifact or an echo. A map is made and then the land changes and the map does not change with it. And yet we respect maps as if they are the law, treating their boundaries as finite, allowing them to determine *yours, mine, ours, theirs, his*. Rarely *hers*.

But the map says: I do own some land. An aberration in the system: A man—my husband—died with no male heirs. *His* became *hers*. The map now draws a line around what is mine: a property that sits next to, but does not touch, a stream. On paper, it is a snaking blue line, thin and nearly invisible.

Because that snaking blue line does not cross my property, it is not good hunting land. The quail and the grouse and the pheasants stay closer to the streams and rivers that branch and fracture the landscape. So, for the purposes of my morning routine, I often choose to be liberal with the boundaries of the map.

Technically, this is illegal.

★ ★ ★

The hunt did not start well. By the time the sun hovered on the horizon, we'd still had no luck. No movement or missed chances. Lucy sat, high on a branch above me, waiting, and I moved slowly beneath her, poking at the brambles with a stick, hoping to flush a pheasant. The ground was soft and sucking. I watched the brambles and Lucy watched it all: the curls of water in the stream, the leaves quivering on the branches, the fog moving like breath along the forest floor.

Peregrines need room to hunt; they start high and dive low. Sky and space and speed are their best tools. Across the stream, the growth thinned, and the forest's canopy gave way to large pockets of sky; the land had the open air that would yield us game. But the crossing of the water was as symbolic as water itself. On one side: dubiously legal hunting. On the other: punishable poaching on royal land.

As if sensing my intentions, Lucy pulled her feathers in tight, her body going slick.

"It's fine," I assured her.

She blinked slowly, hiding her eyes from me for half a moment.

"Quail and grouse do not abide by the rules of a map. Three hops and we'll be back on the right side."

I bent over, gathered my skirts in my hands, and tied a practiced knot between my legs. There were no logs or rocks to use, so, after a running start, I leapt across the water and landed in the soft mud on the other side. The jump soaked my hem and splattered my shins with black slurry. I looked around. The forest has eyes but cannot speak. It had no way of telling on me.

I did not believe in magic, nor did I think members of royalty were divine, but there was something to be said for their land. Working my way through the underbrush, I used the stick to poke and prod the growth. Blackthorn and ferns and holly. Tangled thickets of vine and clusters of orange-red hawthorn haws and the young green of early rose hips. The air was quiet, and I went still, inhaling. Here, with a little bit more space and a little bit of sun, the odor of damp—of decay and of turning leaves—had a life

of its own, a quiet, dark fertility that calmed me. I squinted up at a patch of white sky as Lucy took flight and rose above.

A falcon is a murderous creature. There is destruction in its bones. Its body hums, faster than the fastest clock, priming itself for that quick moment. *Tick*. The click of an eyelid. *Tick*. The silent swivel of a head. *Tick*. A stoop so fast it is but a gray streak in your eye. Time runs out. The bird gives over all that is regal and becomes what it was meant to be, what it was born to be, and the hum becomes a roar. The sound of Lucy's bell told me she had moved before I saw, and then she was in front of me, closed wings, head down, legs back, diving faster than I could watch her. A vicious entry into the brush, twigs breaking, wings flapping: The rabbit was dead before I'd known it was alive, the unpleasantness done in less than two heartbeats.

"A rabbit, Lucy!" I cried. Peregrines hunt other birds—pigeons and partridges and teal. A coney was a coup for a falcon of her size. "See?" I said to her, gesturing at the stream. "You only needed a bit more space."

I went to her side. Plenty has been said about the dignity of a hunt, but it's what comes after the kill that you must make peace with. Lucy had her talons buried in the bloody bowels of the mammal. It was not feminine. It was not pristine. But we needed the animal for supper—the very world in its essence.

A hungry raptor cannot resist blood, but there is a trick that will part a bird from its quarry. I removed a gizzard from the twist of cloth in my pocket and, kneeling, offered it to Lucy. Her eyes followed my fingers, distracted by the giblets. With my other hand, I gathered great fistfuls of wet leaves and piled them over the dead coney. When Lucy glanced back down to her kill, she saw only mulch from the forest floor. Up again, and there was the gizzard. She willingly went to my glove to eat it. And, after tying her jesses, I fastened the rabbit to my belt where she would not see it.

★ ★ ★

Back on the right side of the stream, I found the uneven path once more. “I’d wager the girls are still asleep,” I told Lucy, who ignored me, per her custom. As we moved forward, the trees began to thin, and the rutted road was visible in the distance. “Snug in their warm beds.” And I could see it: Rosamund’s and Mathilde’s dark hair fanned around their heads, in separate side-by-side rooms. Elin, upstairs. Wenthelen and Alice in the kitchens down below. Our small collection of bodies a last stand against nature’s takeover of the house. Sleeping or awake made no difference: Time was marching us forward, every day a new mishap, a brick that loosened or a wall that cracked. Slender wrists trying to uphold a falling roof.

Wrists that would have lace.

Alice might fuss and Wenthelen might stamp, but lace and sugar—and the maintenance of a proper carriage and a good set of gloves and so many other details—were necessities. One had to have a shell, or at least the projection of one, for protection. For the sake of presentability, all our lives were a performance. Our dresses as pleated and heavy as the curtains on a grand stage. Respectability was a lifeboat that would float the girls along the gentle tides of stability, straight onto the secure banks of marriage. A leaking roof would not be a bother if they lived beneath a new one.

Lucy blinked and then rapidly straightened, swiveling her head, leaning forward, the quick movement a warning to me. Her weight shifted on my fist. She knew just before it would happen and then it did: A crack—the sound you look out for, unmistakable, the snap of a twig, a boot in the brittle brush—came from ahead.

I stilled, hoping for cover in the shadows. In front of us on the path, alongside the stream, a dark-haired man stood, facing the road.

There was a reason I hunted at dawn. The hour was typically one of solitude. While the road ahead was used by many, few had any purpose to come down to the stream when the sky had not yet rid itself of night. There were never witnesses to connect the bedraggled huntress to the lady of the nearby estate. I was less alarmed by the bodily threat of a strange man than I was by his capability to identify me. My circumstances—mud-spattered with

a petulant bird on my arm and a dead rabbit tied to my belt—were not only ill fitting for a woman of my station; it would reflect poorly on everyone in my household.

He had not yet seen me. To my side, there was the stream, which, surely, I could no longer cross. To the other, a steep rise covered in thick vegetation. I could go forward along the path, or backward in the opposite direction, trapped between the imaginary dividing line of royal land and a briar-covered embankment. Real thorns, royal thorns, a stranger, or the wrong direction. But Lucy destroyed any chance of stealth. Attuned to my fear, she bated—leaping off the glove, a motion of fury and panic—molting into an explosion of feathers. The jesses kept her tethered and her bells rang.

Peregrine falcons are ruthless birds. Athletic and fast. Black heads and orange-ringed eyes and a body the color of armor. With Lucy on my arm, an unfamiliar person might have thought I had a weapon, or at least an ally. I had certainly encountered people who thought I could command her to attack, to dive for their throats, and the soft bits of their bodies. But, while Lucy was indeed designed to kill, her violence was only a steppingstone to her survival. If someone were to think she might have helped me when I was in danger, I would have to correct them: Lucy would eat my eyeballs if she needed to.

Carefully, I withdrew her hood from my pocket and slipped it over her head, touching, ever so briefly, her tiny skull. Unable to see, she quieted. When I looked up again, the stranger was watching us.

“Good morrow.” I nodded.

“Good morrow,” he replied, though his tone did not suggest it. My concern dissipated a little; he had an accent, which was not common in our small kingdom. He was unlikely to recognize me.

I looked at him: black hair, dark eyes. He wore the rough hand-spun cloth of a peasant and had a longsword—indistinct, with little markings—at his waist. The clothing of a commoner. Still, I steeled myself: His boots were fine enough that he might have stolen them and his undecorated sword, though not fashionable, looked to be well used and worn.

He took us in, in turn: the woman with the bird and the cottontail. “You caught a rabbit here.” He paused, extending a finger toward Lucy. “With that?”

“She caught the rabbit,” I corrected. On my arm, in her plumed hood, Lucy looked like a decorated warrior in miniature.

“You trained her?”

I nodded, but was suddenly wary that he might want the bird. “She answers only to me.”

“Rabbits are plentiful here?”

I said: “Rabbits are plentiful by their nature.” But game was *not* plentiful in these woods and certainly not on the wrong side of the stream.

He glanced down at my skirts, which were still tied in a knot. “You’re familiar with these woods.” A statement intended as a question.

I was not accustomed to being interrogated. “Nature is free for any to explore.”

“Not when it’s not your land.”

I lifted my chin to stare at him. His eyes were unreadable. “This isn’t anyone’s land. And I did not know that there was anyone appointed as guardian of the woods.”

The man scowled. “If you caught that rabbit on that side of the river”—he pointed—“it’s king’s land.”

“Well, quite fortunate for me the rabbit was on this side of the stream.”

“This side,” he repeated, looking down pointedly at my hem, which was wet.

But I didn’t respond because I had caught sight of what was happening on the road far behind him.

Ahead through the trees, a carriage was stuck in the mud. Four horses strained to pull the rig forward. My heart quickened and gut tightened, for though its body was small, the coach’s windows were glass, and the doors had a golden coat of arms. The equipage was unmistakably royal.

The byway that passes my home is well traveled. But I had heard the whispers in recent weeks and knew the carriage was not likely to move past

our gate. When it reached our iron arches, it would turn off the well-worn path and head up our overgrown drive, stopping in the gravel at the front entrance.

And I—Lady of the Dead Rabbit, Lady of the Mud—was meant to throw open the door and welcome its passengers. (Surely I was not a quarter of a mile away from my hall, covered in sludge, trading insults with a stranger.) But more than keeping up with expectations, it was, if the rumors were true, of the utmost importance that I be home to receive the carriage and welcome the message it bore. Our futures—the women of the slender wrists and the heavy roof—might depend on it.

“I must be going.” I tried to keep the urgency from my voice.

“You’re unaccompanied,” the man observed. “What are you doing out here alone?”

In the distance, a footman had gotten out of the carriage and was inspecting the wheel. I gathered myself, returning my gaze to the stranger’s. “I would think that’s self-evident.” I needed to hurry and if the man was going to rob me, or worse, he would have done it already. “I’ve been alone in the woods plenty of times without incident.”

“Arrogance is a dangerous companion.”

I ran out of patience. “Sir, the candidate for dangerous companion is yourself. If you’d step aside, I must be along.”

He cocked his head and stared at me. “Don’t let me get in your way.”

When I was a few paces along, he called out again: “You shouldn’t be alone in the woods.”

I couldn’t tell if the words were a threat or a warning. The world loved a woman alone in the woods. Whatever happened to these women—outcomes we lamented—there was also a sense of relief. They had ignored the warnings. The path they chose, neither well trodden nor well lit, allowed us to emotionally divest. These women broke the rules. Issued an invitation. Created an opening for unkindness. Our own daughters, sisters, mothers—studious rule-followers, virtuous listeners—would be fine.

Up ahead, the footman was sliding branches beneath the wheel. Despite the golden insignias on the side of the carriage, there was no retinue, no guards surrounding the rig—an indication that only a messenger would be riding inside. But messages could be life-changing. Especially if they bore an invitation to a royal ball.

I crept along the hillside, further muddying myself, until I was far enough along to stay out of sight. Climbing up through the vines, I slipped across the road and through a concealed hole in the laurel hedge, the rabbit knocking against my hip bone.

It went without saying: My daughters were never allowed in the woods.

CHAPTER TWO

Before there were half-moons of dirt beneath my nails, there were jewels on my fingers. And before there were lines on my face, there was joy. But all of that was long ago. I've sold most of my jewels. There is, alas, no price on joy. But if joy were a commodity, I'd trade all I have—all that's left of it—for my daughters. Rosie. Mathilde. (Here a few images come to mind: Twin braids. A freckle on a calf. Mathilde's scar. The long shadows cast by a child's eyelashes. Minute details that come to represent a whole being.)

My name is Lady Etheldreda Verity Isolde Tremaine Bramley. The man in the woods thought I, mud-spattered and soiled, was a peasant. I have been familiar with the loam of the earth since I was a girl, but he was wrong.

My father was a brewer—a respectable trade that was still far from gentility. Brewers make enough money that their daughters, and their dowries, might be considered for marriage with the landed class. But our village was small, with few gentlemen, and we socialized with the yeomanry and gentry alike, caught somewhere between the two worlds, capable in both, fully accepted by neither.

Our family manor was on the outskirts of the king's territory, far from most of the nobility and the day-to-day machinations of court, its customs

and norms. I grew up with little knowledge of those formalities, in a household of men. I passed most of my time in the kitchen, stealing rolls and tarts and apples; in the stables, feeding the same rolls and tarts and apples to the livestock; or outside, assisting the boys and the men.

As a brewer, my father spent his days busied by every manner of task—boiling wort, cleaning barrels, keeping records. He and my brother often involved themselves in the needs of the house and our land, stepping in to smith or woodwork. Both at the brewery and at home, I was allowed to observe or, less frequently, help. If something were to break or go wrong, instead of calling for a specialist, my father would first turn to his hands. Always, he said, you start with the tools you have. Through him, I learned how to manage a home and a cellar: how to salt or smoke a successful hunt's bounty; how to prune a cherry tree; how to rack barrels without breaking your back; how to mix clay, soil, straw, and dung into daub and apply it across the stable's wattles. When I wasn't trailing after my father, I explored the woods around our home, put my hands and feet in the river, and made tiny pretend creatures from twigs and leaves. The days of my girlhood were dusty, dirty, sooty, and sweaty. Above all, they were happy.

On my twelfth birthday, a tutor named Agatha—a severe woman with pox scars and beautiful red hair who covered her smell of sour milk with a pungent lilac water—was hired to oversee my education: namely, to instill me with knowledge of the manners and etiquette that would be necessary for marriage. It was through Agatha, a bit belatedly, that I was taught the formalities and customs of genteel women, a counterbalance to my years spent shadowing my father.

I was also taught how many raps a knuckle can take before it bleeds. How fingers held too firmly on an arm, or a neck, will leave marks of a sickly yellow. How a forcefully articulated dressing-down—or an afternoon of forced repetition—could hurt the mind more than any pinch or punishment. But Agatha's methods were effective, and I also learned how to hold and manipulate a fan to send messages, how to walk with a ladylike gait, and how to properly wield a spoon (scoop the food away from your body). I learned

how to create and repair linens and manage a household and lead a dinner prayer. I learned to eat slowly, with small, refined bites, and to listen politely, and to lift my chin, and to speak softly. Because this was not part of my life from the very beginning, to this day, being a woman with a title can feel like a carapace that I inhabit.

I resisted the switch—from long days outdoors in the sun or the mist to long hours in the great hall learning table manners and the art of the curtsy—not because I feared Agatha or feared marriage, but because I missed the freedom of unplanned afternoons. I didn't know to fear marriage: Marriage was just assumed. A duty and an inevitable future.

If I had paid close attention, I might have seen some of the warnings. Rosy-cheeked girls who wed and watched their skin turn gray. Women in our village who married men so far away we never saw them again. Swollen lips and bruised eyes—echoes of violence, as ancient as man himself—that made themselves known at the market and local taverns.

But the stories we passed on and murmured about were what happened to the girls who had *not* married. There were women who fell into ruin. Spinsters who lived at the mercy of unknown relatives. In my hamlet, an unwed maidservant was once discovered to be with child, and then, later, beaten to death by an unknown hand—purple at the belly, a thrashing meant to induce miscarriage—so that she could not, would not, name the father. A different year, a pregnant woman had wandered into our township. Alone and in labor. She could not walk. She crawled in the dirt. And no one helped her, for to help her would be to assume responsibility. The constable threw her convulsing body over the back of a horse and carted her to county lines. I'd once heard a story of a widow whose deceased husband left her and her daughter nothing but the choice of prostitution. Both of their bodies were later found in the shallow stream where people did their washing, limbs bloody, faces forgotten, except where the daughter's forehead had been branded with a hot iron. Each telling gruesome. Whispered about. But without a sense of surprise or horror: These instances were recounted and incanted as warning.