

BY
ANY OTHER
NAME

 A Novel 

JODI PICOULT



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Image page 498 (left): John de Critz (attr.), Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of
Southampton in his youth, c.1592, Cobbe Collection, Hatchlands Park
Image page 498 (right): Nicholas Hilliard (1547–1619), Henry Wriothesley,
3rd Earl of Southampton. Watercolour on vellum on card with three
hearts showing on the verso, height 41 mm, width 32.5 mm, 1594.

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*For Elyssa Samsel and Kate Anderson:
adopted daughters, beloved collaborators, gifted songwriters
and most important,
fierce women*

NOTE: The Emilia chapters are peppered with references to actual Shakespearean plays and poetry.

They are listed in the back of this novel, in case you would like to check to see how many you caught.

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here.
– Lady Macbeth, *Macbeth*



O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace.
– Beatrice, *Much Ado About Nothing*



To whom should I complain? Did I tell this,
Who would believe me?
– Isabella, *Measure for Measure*



My tongue will tell the anger of my heart
Or else my heart concealing it will break.
– Katherine, *The Taming of the Shrew*



Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them.
– Emilia, *Othello*

BY ANY OTHER NAME

MELINA

May 2013

Many years after Melina graduated from Bard College, the course she remembered the most was not a playwriting seminar or a theatre intensive but an anthropology class. One day, the professor had flashed a slide of a bone with twenty-nine tiny incisions on one long side. ‘The Lebombo bone was found in a cave in Swaziland in the 1970s and is about forty-three thousand years old,’ she had said. ‘It’s made of a baboon fibula. For years, it’s been the first calendar attributed to man. But I ask you: what *man* uses a twenty-nine-day calendar?’ The professor seemed to stare directly at Melina. ‘History,’ she said, ‘is written by those in power.’

THE SPRING OF HER SENIOR year, Melina headed to her mentor’s office hours, as she did every week. Professor Bufort had, in the eighties, written a play called *Wanderlust* that won a Drama Desk Award, transferred to Broadway, and was nominated for a Tony. He claimed that he’d always wanted to teach, and that when Bard College made him head of the theatre programme it was a dream come true, but Melina thought it hadn’t hurt that none of his other plays had had the same critical success.

He was standing with his back to her when she knocked and entered. His silver hair fell over his eyes, boyish. 'My favourite thesis student,' he greeted.

'I'm your *only* thesis student.' Melina pulled an elastic from her wrist and balled her black hair on top of her head in a loose knot before rummaging in her backpack for two small glass bottles of chocolate milk from a local dairy. They cost a fortune, but she brought Professor Bufort one each week. High blood pressure medication had robbed him of his previous vices – alcohol and cigarettes – and he joked that this was the only fun he got to have any more. Melina handed him a bottle and clinked hers against it.

'My saviour,' he said, taking a long drink.

Like most high school kids who had notched productions of *The Crucible* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* on their belts, Melina had come to Bard assuming that she would study acting. It wasn't until she took a playwriting course that she realized the only thing mightier than giving a stellar performance was being the person who crafted the words an actor spoke. She started writing one-acts that were performed by student groups. She studied Molière and Mamet, Marlowe and Miller. She took apart the language and the structure of their plays with the intensity of a grandmaster chess champion whose understanding of the game determined success.

She wrote a modern *Pygmalion*, where the sculptor was a pageant mom and the statue was JonBenét Ramsey, but it was her version of *Waiting for Godot*, set at a political convention where all the characters were awaiting a saviour-like presidential candidate who never arrived, that caught the attention of Professor Bufort. He encouraged her to send her play to various open-submission festivals, and although she never was selected, it was clear to Melina and everyone else in the department that *she* was going to be one of the few to *make it* as a produced playwright.

'Melina,' Bufort asked, 'what are you going to do after graduation?'

'I'm open to suggestions,' she replied, hoping that this was where

her mentor told her about some fabulous job opportunity. She wasn't naïve enough to believe that she could survive in New York City without some sort of day job, and Bufort had hooked her up before. She'd interned one summer for a famous director in the city – a man who once threw an iced latte at a costume designer who hadn't adjusted a hem, and who took her to bars even though she was underage because he preferred to drink his lunch. Another summer, she'd been behind the cash register at a café at Signature Theatre and behind a merch booth at Second Stage. Professor Bufort had connections.

This whole business ran on connections.

'This is not a suggestion,' Bufort said, handing her a flyer. 'This is more of a command.'

Bard College would be hosting a collegiate playwriting competition. The prize was a guaranteed slot at the Samuel French Off-Off-Broadway Short Play Festival.

The professor leaned against the desk, his legs inches away from Melina's. He set down his chocolate milk, crossed his arms, and smiled down at her. 'I think you could win,' he said.

She met his gaze. 'But . . .?'

'But.' He raised a brow. 'Do I have to say it? *Again?*'

Melina shook her head. The only negative comment she ever received from him was that although her writing was clean and compelling, it was emotionally sterile. As if she had put up a wall between the playwright and the play.

'You are good,' Bufort said, 'but you could be *great*. It's not enough to manipulate your audience's feelings. You must make them believe that there's a reason *you* are the one telling this story. You have to let a bit of yourself bleed into your work.'

And therein lay the problem: you couldn't bleed without feeling the sting of the cut.

Melina began to pleat the edge of her T-shirt, just to avoid his gaze. Bufort pushed off the desk and circled behind her. 'I've been acquainted with Melina Green for three years,' he said, drawing close. 'But I don't really *know* her at all.'

What she loved about playwriting was that she could be anyone but herself, a technically Jewish girl from Connecticut who had grown up as the least important person in her household. When she was an adolescent, her mother had had a terminal illness, and her father was struck down by anticipatory grief. She learned to be quiet, and she learned to be self-sufficient.

No one wanted to know Melina Green, least of all Melina herself.

‘Good writing cuts deep – for both the playwright and the audience. You have talent, Melina. I want you to write something for this competition that makes you feel . . . vulnerable.’

‘I’ll try,’ Melina said.

Bufort’s hands came down on her shoulders, squeezing. She told herself, as she did whenever it happened, that he meant nothing by it; it was just his way of showing support, like the way he had pulled strings to get her jobs in the city. He was her father’s age; he didn’t think about boundaries the way that younger people did. She shouldn’t read into it.

As if to underline this, suddenly, he was no longer touching her. Professor Bufort raised the chocolate milk again. ‘Show me what scares you,’ he said.

THAT YEAR MELINA LIVED IN an apartment above a Thai restaurant with her best friend, Andre. They had met in a sophomore playwriting class and bonded over the fact that *Our Town* was overrated, that the musical *Carrie* was underrated, and that you could both love *Phantom of the Opera* and find it uncomfortably rapey.

As soon as she walked through the door, Andre looked up from where he was watching the *Real Housewives*. ‘Mel! Vote on dinner,’ he said.

Andre was the only person who called Melina by a nickname. Her name, in Greek, meant *sweet*, and he said he knew her too well to lie to her face every time he addressed her.

‘What are my options?’ Melina asked.

‘Mayonnaise, Vienna fingers, or take-out Thai.’

‘Again?’

‘You’re the one who wanted to live over Golden Orchid because it smelled so good.’

They looked at each other. ‘Thai,’ they said in unison.

Andre turned off the television and followed Melina to her bedroom. Although they’d been living in the apartment for two years, there were still boxes on the floor and she’d never hung up any art or strung fairy lights around the headboard the way Andre had. ‘No wonder you get shit done,’ he murmured. ‘You live in a cell.’

Like her, Andre was a playwriting major. Unlike her, Andre had never actually finished a play. He would make it to the end of the second act and decide he needed to revise the first before he could finish, and then get stuck endlessly rewriting. For the past semester he’d been working on a retelling of *King Lear* with a Black matriarch who was trying to decide which of three daughters deserved her secret recipe for gumbo. He’d based the main character on his grandmother.

He handed her the mail, which today consisted of a manila envelope addressed to her in her father’s messy handwriting. The relationship between Melina and her father had decayed during her mom’s illness to the point where putting any weight on it was too tender, but in his own sweet and distant way, he tried. Lately, he had gotten interested in genealogy, and he told Melina he’d discovered she was related to a Union general, Queen Isabella of Spain and Adam Sandler.

She tore open the packet. *Just found this ancestor on Mom’s side of the family. First published female poet in England – 1611. Maybe this writing thing is in your blood!*

The note was clipped to a small sheaf of papers. She glanced at a photocopied picture of a severe-looking Elizabethan lady with a stiff white ruff around her neck, and then tossed the packet onto the mess of her desk. ‘My ancestor was a poet,’ she said dismissively.

‘Well, my ancestor was Thomas Jefferson, and you see where *that* got me.’ Andre propped himself up on an elbow. ‘How was Bufort?’

She shrugged.

‘What are you submitting for the competition?’

Melina rubbed her forehead, where a dull ache had started. ‘What makes you think I’m going to submit anything?’

Andre rolled his eyes. ‘A Bard playwriting competition without an entry from you would be like Scotland going into battle without Mel Gibson.’

‘I don’t even know what that *means*.’

‘To be fair, he’s better at make-up than you are, which is criminal because I’ve never met anyone else with those weird-ass silver eyes of yours, and if you *knew* what mascara was, they’d pop even more,’ Andre said, looking her over from her messy braid to her torn cargo pants to her ratty sneakers. ‘Do people who see you ever, like, offer you hand-outs?’

Andre was always harping on how she put no effort into her appearance. It was true that sometimes she was writing so fiercely she forgot to shower or brush her teeth. And that she liked to wear leggings and fuzzy sweatshirts when she knew she had a long night at the laptop ahead of her. ‘What are *you* entering in the competition?’ she asked, changing the subject.

‘I don’t think I’ll have anything ready,’ Andre hedged.

‘You could,’ Melina said, looking him directly in the eye.

‘But you’re going to win,’ he said, without even an ounce of rancour. It was one of the reasons she loved him. They were in the same programme, and instead of their relationship being competitive, it was supportive. Andre, she knew, would have and had clapped back at other students who were convinced her success at Bard wasn’t deserved, but rather the rumoured result of an affair with Bufort. It would have been funny, if it hadn’t hurt so much – she hadn’t even kissed a guy in the four years she’d been at college, much less embarked on a torrid May–December romance.

She sighed. ‘I . . . don’t know what to write about.’

‘Mm. You could try that idea about the thing that happened in Vegas that didn’t stay in Vegas.’

'I feel like comedy wouldn't be taken seriously,' Melina said.

'Isn't that the point?'

'Bufort wants me to do something *personal*,' she said, pronouncing the word like a curse. 'Something painful.'

'Okay then,' Andre said, 'write about something that hurts you.'

SHE WROTE A PLAY CALLED *Reputation*, where none of the characters had names. They were The Girl. The Boy. The Best Friend. The Nemesis. The Father.

The Girl was fourteen, and invisible. For years she had been fading, in direct proportion to The Mother's illness. After the funeral, she disappeared entirely, edged out of sight by The Father's grief. Until one day, The Boy – eighteen – said hello.

She was certain that it must be a mistake, but no. He saw her. He spoke to her. And when he touched her, she could see herself again – hazy, but coming back into focus.

The Boy was everything she was not: he took up space, he knew everyone, he was impossible to miss. In his presence, she felt bigger and solid and seen.

It started with kisses. Each time his mouth touched hers, she felt a little more substantial. Wherever he put his hands on her, she could see the outline of her body. But when he rucked up her skirt and started to unbutton his pants, she shoved him away and said no.

The next day at school, The Boy's Best Friend was talking about her to people she did not know. *The Boy said she climbed him like a tree*, he said. *She was tight as a fist*.

Her Nemesis walked by with a friend. *I knew she had to be a slut if he was interested in her*.

The Girl's face burned so hot she was certain people could feel her embarrassment, even if they could not see it. She found The Boy and demanded to know why he'd lied.

Don't you want to be with me? he asked.

Yes but.

I have a reputation to uphold, The Boy said. Does it really matter what they think, as long as you and I know what's true?

She wanted to walk away, but he caught her hand, and like magic, she flickered into view.

The Girl had a reputation now, too. When she stood in the line at the cafeteria, unseen, she heard herself described as easy. Changing in the locker room for gym class, she heard herself described as desperate.

The Girl spent more and more time with The Boy, because he was the only person who seemed to know who she really was. In private, he was mostly kind and sweet. She thought maybe she saw a version of The Boy that was invisible to everyone else, too.

One night, he pushed up her skirt again and began to unbutton his pants. *Everyone thinks you're doing it, he said. So you might as well.*

This time, The Girl didn't say no.

Did she choose? Or did she give in under pressure?

Did it matter?

Because at the moment The Boy pushed into her, she manifested fully and permanently into view – albeit a messy, aching footnote in someone else's story.

PROFESSOR BUFORT LOVED THE PLAY. He called it raw and thoughtful and provocative. Melina's play was chosen as one of the three finalists in the competition, along with one from a Middlebury student and another from Wesleyan. On the day of the judging, where there would be a reading of each play performed by Bard theatre students, Melina spent the morning riddled with nerves and throwing up. This was the first play she had crafted where she was the main character, albeit buried under layers of language.

If people found the play lacking, was *she*? She couldn't separate herself from the script, she couldn't look at the actors playing The Boy and The Girl without seeing herself at fourteen, untethered after her

mother's death, latching on to the only person who seemed to want her company. She couldn't hear the words she had written without remembering that lost autumn, when she had no voice, and others filled in the silence with lies about her that became truths.

If that wasn't stressful enough, she had altered the play the tiniest bit, adding a scene for the final reading that Professor Bufort did not know about. For all she knew, it could get her disqualified. But the play wasn't finished, not without the epilogue, which made it relevant in the present day.

The auditorium was packed. Andre had saved her a seat in a spot that was all too exposed for her tastes, only a few rows back from the stage. She mumbled apologies as she clambered over people who were already seated.

'I had to tell people I had mono to keep them from sitting here,' Andre said.

She rolled her eyes. 'I'm fashionably late.'

He glanced from her messy bun to her Crocs. 'No. You're just late.'

Professor Bufort stepped onto the stage. 'Thank you all for attending the readings that constitute the final round of the inaugural Bard College Playwriting Competition. It has been a struggle keeping our judge this year a secret,' Bufort said. 'You know him for his incisive reviews, and his coverage of the theatre industry as a whole. Please welcome, from *The New York Times*, theatre critic Jasper Tolle.'

Andre and Melina looked at each other. 'What life is this?' Melina whispered. '*Jasper Tolle* is going to judge *my* play?'

Everyone knew him – even people outside the business. Hailed as a wunderkind who had been hired by the *Times* at twenty-six, and then – with his sharp and cutting commentary – he'd attracted a following that either despised or adored him. Within three years he'd moved from covering black box productions in northern New Jersey to Off-Off-Broadway to select shows geared towards Millennials, like *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* and *Murder Ballad*. Jasper Tolle

was half the age of the senior critic at the paper. He had fan accounts on Instagram and Facebook. He made theatre – an art form usually embraced by audiences with grey hair – cool again.

‘Holy shit,’ Andre breathed. ‘He’s *hot*.’

He was, Melina supposed, for someone in his early thirties. He had white-blond hair with a cowlick in the back, and behind his tortoiseshell glasses, his vivid blue eyes glittered like cut glass. He was tall, lanky, and looked aggrieved, as if this was something he’d put on his calendar months ago and now regretted.

‘He is giving sexy Voldemort vibes,’ Andre murmured.

‘*Never* say that again.’

Bufort pushed the handheld mic towards the critic, who cleared his throat, cheeks reddening.

Interesting, Melina thought. He was a critic who liked to hide behind his words.

Not much different than a playwright.

MELINA’S READING WOULD BE THE third of the three. After each, Tolle would take the stage and give his reaction, choosing a winner after the final performance. The first play, written and acted by the Wesleyan student, was a one-man show about the multiverse. The second, written by the Middlebury student, put the Marvel Avengers into group therapy.

When the student actors filed in to perform *Reputation*, each carrying a chair and a music stand on which to place their script, Melina felt her heart careen in the cage of her ribs. If she passed out, Andre would have to wake her so that she could hear Jasper Tolle’s comments on her work. She was about to tell him this when she saw Professor Bufort lean towards the critic and murmur something.

She imagined he was telling Tolle that Melina was his student, maybe even his protégée.

She swallowed hard and threaded her fingers through Andre’s.

In rehearsals, her play had run twenty-eight minutes – which was two minutes under the allotted time for each reading. But that was

before she had given a two-page epilogue to the actors at last night's final rehearsal.

As Melina watched the reading now, the dialogue felt as if it were being pulled out of her own throat: painful, familiar, jagged. The audience laughed where they were supposed to. They fell silent when the narrator described how The Boy tugged at The Girl's clothes. At the last line of the version she had submitted to the festival, she heard a single, thunderous clap from the front row and realized it was Professor Bufort, trying to drive applause.

He didn't know it, but the play was not over.

Eight years later, the narrator said.

All the actors sat, except for The Girl and the narrator.

The narrator walked behind The Girl's chair. *It's different from your other work*, he said, his voice playful, a character who was no longer an observer but a participant.

Yes, The Girl agreed.

I've been acquainted with you for three years, but I don't know you at all.

The narrator put his hands on The Girl's shoulders and kneaded them.

The actress froze. *Professor?* she whispered.

The narrator leaned close to her ear. *Show me what scares you.*

The play ended there. 'Damn,' Andre murmured.

There was a scattering of awkward claps – how do you applaud harassment? – but Melina barely noticed. She was focused on the profile of Professor Bufort, on the tight set of his jaw.

I'm sorry, she wanted to say.

It had been Bufort who wanted her to bleed on the page. And when she dug up the high school memory of being gaslit by a villain who had convinced her he was a hero, Melina had realized that history was repeating itself.

Jasper Tolle took the stage, bouncing on the balls of his feet, completely unaware that the last playwright had blown up her academic career. 'Okay,' he said, looking at his little black notebook. 'Melina Green? Where are you?'

When she didn't move, Andre grabbed her wrist and yanked her hand in the air.

'Ah,' Tolle said. 'Well. That was . . . a lot. I suppose we should just discuss the biggest hurdle here . . .'

Melina saw black spots in front of her eyes.

' . . . namely, that this is a coming-of-age story, which lands it squarely in the TYA camp.'

Theatre for Young Artists – in other words, kiddie theatre. Melina's face burned. In what world was losing your virginity under morally grey circumstances considered children's fare?

'That's not true,' she blurted out.

Jasper Tolle literally took a step backwards, as if she had punched him. 'I beg your pardon?'

'*B-brighton Beach Memoirs*,' she stuttered. '*Billy Elliot. Equus. Spring Awakening*. Those are all coming-of-age stories.'

'Yes, but those works have critical merit,' he countered, and her jaw dropped at the jab. 'Those don't read as . . . small.'

'Because they're about male characters?' Melina asked. She realized, for the first time, that she was the only female finalist. It hadn't occurred to her that would be like running a race with extra hurdles.

'Because their main characters aren't unlikable. Don't get me wrong, there is some truly impressive writing in here, but is this really a story an audience can relate to in a more universal way?'

She ground her teeth together. For God's sake, one of the other plays was about superheroes in a mental hospital.

'The play is supposed to make you uncomfortable,' Melina said.

'Well, it did, but not for the reasons you think. It was overly sentimental. To fashion it all as a prelude to the last scene – which felt tacked on, incidentally – makes you wonder if The Girl even learned anything.'

Melina was so angry she was shaking. She felt Andre's hand creep protectively around her knee. 'That,' she ground out, 'is the point.'

Tolle paused, assessing her. 'May I ask if this play was inspired by an incident that happened to you?'

She didn't want to answer, but she nodded.

'In the future,' Jasper Tolle said, 'steer clear of those subjects. If you're too emotional to handle criticism because a play is so personal, you won't make it as a playwright.'

She opened her mouth, but he held up a hand.

Literally, *held up a hand*, as if he could block whatever was about to come out of her mouth.

'You're – what? Twenty-one?' Tolle asked. 'You have a lot to learn. Arguing doesn't make you look provocative. Just . . . difficult.'

Melina grabbed her messenger bag and vaulted over the row's thicket of knees and legs and backpacks to get to the aisle. She burst through the auditorium door into the hallway just as Jasper Tolle announced that the winner of the Bard Playwriting Competition was the Middlebury student, for his fresh exploration of Iron Man with attachment disorder.

Melina didn't care if she looked like a sore loser. She didn't care if Jasper Tolle thought she was a bitch. She had tried to put herself into one of her plays, but she clearly hadn't fictionalized the experience enough. Lesson learned.

A few moments later, people began to trickle out of the auditorium, webbed in conversations. She turned away when Jasper Tolle and Professor Bufort walked by, paying no attention to the girl who had just lit the fuse to blow up her future.

An arm curled over her shoulders. Melina fell against Andre, finally letting herself cry. 'Not sexy,' he said, patting her on the back. 'Just Voldemort.'

Melina felt a laugh bubble up her throat.

'I thought it was amazing, Mel,' Andre said, holding her at arm's length so that he could meet her gaze. 'And I'm sorry if even a splinter of that happened to you in real life.'

That was why she had written it. Maybe there was another girl in that auditorium today who would be bolstered to say no when she was pressured to say yes. Maybe there was someone *in* power who would pause before they crossed a line.

Maybe there needed to be more stories like this, not fewer.

'Fuck Jasper Tolle,' Melina said.

Andre steered them out of the auditorium. 'You took the words right out of my mouth,' he replied.

THE FOLLOWING WEEK SHE WROTE to Professor Bufort, asking for a meeting. He didn't respond, and so she went to his office hours. His door was locked, and there was an envelope taped to the door with her name on it.

Inside was the grade for her thesis. She had submitted five plays, including *Reputation*. In her major, she had never gotten less than an A on any assignment.

C+. Requires too much suspension of disbelief.

SHE WENT HOME TO AN empty apartment. Andre was in class, probably, and Melina was grateful for that. She walked into her spartan bedroom and fell facedown on the bed.

She would graduate without a recommendation from her thesis adviser. Other teachers in the theatre department would brand her a troublemaker. Students she had considered friends would avoid her in case rejection was contagious. She had become persona non grata.

Andre was the only person on the campus who defended her. He insisted that nothing had changed; they would move to New York City as planned after graduation to try to make it as playwrights. But Melina didn't know if she had the courage for public excoriation again. If you didn't want to face a guillotine, you stayed far away from the chopping block.

And yet. Bufort had told her once: *Real writers can't not write.*

She looked at the piles of paper on her desk. She took the title page of her doomed play and crumpled it in her fist. Her rage became an engine. She grabbed more pages, tearing and tossing them like confetti, until the floor was a sea of print.

Then Melina's gaze snagged on a black-and-white printed image of a woman. The lady's eyes seemed to follow her. Her father's note was still clipped to one corner.

Emilia Bassano. Her ancestor. The poet.

The historian A. L. Rowse, in 1973, called Emilia Bassano the 'dark lady' of Shakespeare's sonnets – a black-haired, Jewish woman of dubious virtue. Although this was disproved, she deserves recognition on her own merits as the first published female poet in England, at a time when women were forbidden to write for a public audience.

Melina's chest loosened as she realized she was not the first in her family to struggle to find her place as a writer.

She flipped through her father's genealogy packet, tracing the generations from Emilia Bassano to herself.

BY ANY OTHER NAME

Rehearsal Script

EMILIA sits on a carved bench beneath
the embrace of a lush emerald willow.
At her feet a faerie house. THE WOMAN
enters.

THE WOMAN

A theatre.

EMILIA

An audience.

THE WOMAN

A comedy.

EMILIA

A tragedy.

THE WOMAN

There once was a girl who became invisible so that
her words might not be.

EMILIA

There once was a girl. A beginning and an end.

EMILIA becomes her younger self.

THE WOMAN

There was a story, whether or not others ever
chose to listen.

EMILIA

(places a chess king in the faerie
house)

Greetings Oberon, King of the Elves.

THE WOMAN

Emilia named him after the elf king from a French
poem she had translated.

EMILIA

(places a chess queen in the faerie
house)

And you shall be his Queen.

THE WOMAN

The poem made no mention of a Queen. She wasn't
important enough to be recorded.

EMILIA

What to call a larger-than-life faerie queen?

EMILIA, THE WOMAN

Titania.

EMILIA

1581

Emilia is 12

By the age of twelve, Emilia Bassano knew that most people saw only what they expected to see. She thought about this as she lay on her belly, her skirts bunched up beneath her, her chin on one fist. With her free hand, she was building a faerie house. The whitest pebbles from the front drive of Willoughby House ringed a carpet of moss. On it, she had crafted a tiny home of twigs, laced together with long shoots of grass and capped with a roof made of birch-bark. Dog-rose blossoms served as windows; twined columbine and kingcup lined the entrance. She added a spotted red toadstool she'd found in the woods, a perfect throne.

She'd filched a polished obsidian king from Peregrine Bertie's chess set. Also known as the Baron Willoughby, he was the brother of Emilia's guardian – Susan Bertie, the Countess of Kent. It was their quarrel that had made Emilia flee outside to escape. She placed the chess piece close to the toadstool. *I'll call him Oberon*, Emilia thought, naming him after the king of the elves in the French poem *Huon de Bordeaux*, which she'd studied last week with the Countess. 'Your Majesty,' Emilia said, 'here's your lady wife.' She reached for a second piece she'd taken from the chess set, a smooth ivory queen.

If Oberon had a wife in the poem, she wasn't important enough to mention.

Emilia needed a name that made her unforgettable. *A faerie queen who's larger than life*, she mused. 'Titania,' she pronounced.

Finally, she set down the third chess piece between the king and queen. A small, dark pawn.

She could still hear the argument between the Baron and the Countess, as clear as day.

I can't bring Emilia with me, the Countess had said, when Emilia hadn't even known she was going somewhere.

Nor I, Susan, her brother argued. *I must leave for Denmark soon.*

Take her, the Countess replied. *She's a girl, not gunpowder.*

Now Emilia stroked the pawn with a fingertip and reimagined the story. The pawn was a child. An orphan. *The king and queen both want you*, she mused. *They cannot stop fighting over who gets to keep you. They love you so much that it will tear the whole world apart.*

'There you are!' With a rustle of skirts, the Countess sank down beside her. She didn't scold Emilia for disappearing or tell her that there would be grass stains on the silk of her dress, and for this, if for nothing else, Emilia adored her. The Countess was only in her twenties, and had already been widowed. For most women that would spell freedom – no longer owned by their fathers or husbands – but she'd been summoned back to court by Queen Elizabeth. Sometimes the Countess made Emilia think of a wolf willing to chew off a limb to escape a golden trap.

It was not extraordinary for a girl of limited means to be trained up into service in an aristocratic household. Emilia's family were court musicians and had emigrated from Italy at the request of King Henry VIII, after he heard them play their recorders. Emilia's own father had taught Queen Elizabeth, then a princess, how to play the lute and speak Italian. However, although Emilia's family now played for the entertainment of the Queen, they never would be nobility.

Emilia had been sent to the Countess at age seven, when her father had died and her mother had left London in service to another

aristocratic family. Her parents had not been married, but they lived together while her father was alive. Emilia did not remember her mother very well, except for the fact that she was young, much younger than her father, and so lost in her own daydreams that, even as a child, Emilia knew not to rely on her. Baptista Bassano, her father, had the same olive skin as Emilia, and called her *passerotta* – little sparrow. She remembered the melodies he played on his recorder, some haunting, some jaunty; how the notes curled through her. She remembered her mother saying, almost regretfully, that her father's music could coax the stars from the sky. Those were the only bits she had left of her parents now. Emilia took the memories out regularly, like silver that had to be polished, lest you become unable to see the intricacies of its pattern.

'What have we here?' the Countess asked, as if it were perfectly normal to play in the dirt under the shrubbery. 'A faerie house?'

'Another world,' Emilia confirmed. She considered asking the Countess where she was going and begging to come along.

The Countess's mouth tipped at one corner. 'What a pity we live in *this* world, where it's time for lessons.' She extricated herself from the hedge more gracefully than Emilia did, but not before she gathered up the chess pieces. 'If the Baron finds these missing, he'll become a bear.'

Emilia pictured a wild beast dressed in the Baron's doublet and breeches, a stiff lace ruff beneath its bristled snout.

'Cheer your heart, child,' the Countess said, chucking Emilia under the chin. 'Once we're gone, perhaps the *real* faeries will come live in the house you've built them.'

Emilia fell into step behind the Countess. She wondered if it were that simple; if anything became possible when no one was watching.

EMILIA SAT IN THE GREAT hall, which was the room in the Baron's home where the family gathered. In their Lincolnshire country home, Grimsthorpe, there was a separate room for tutoring, but in London the library was used by the Baron. Emilia studied languages, reading,

writing and dancing (music had been dropped after it became clear that Emilia could have taught her tutor more than he could teach her). Because the Countess herself had been educated – which was far from the norm for a woman – she oversaw Emilia’s reading. The Bible, of course, but also tracts on decorum and Christine de Pizan’s *City of Ladies*. Today, the Countess had Emilia translating Marie de France’s lai ‘Bisclavret’. It was about a baron whose wife worried about his repeated disappearances. To Emilia’s delight, the husband confessed: at times he transformed into a werewolf, and only donning his human clothes allowed him to turn back into a man. The wife, disgusted, promised to give her love and her body to a knight who’d been flirting with her if he stole Bisclavret’s clothes – ensuring that the baron would not return. But when the werewolf pledged his fealty to the king, the wife’s plan was thwarted.

‘This cannot be right,’ Emilia said, doubting her own translation. ‘*More than one woman of that family / Was born without a nose to blow, and lived denosed.*’

The Countess laughed. ‘*Oui, parfait,*’ she said. ‘And what is the message of this poem?’

‘Men are beasts,’ Emilia said flatly. She imagined, again, the Baron with the face of a bear.

‘No, my dear. This is a poem about loyalty,’ the Countess said. ‘The wife turns on Bisclavret, and is punished for it. Bisclavret is loyal to his king, and is rewarded for it.’

‘So they’re both beasts,’ Emilia answered.

‘Should the wife be forced to stay married to a werewolf? And if not, what tools does she have to extract herself from that bond? Teeth and claws are weapons . . . but so are a woman’s body and her love.’ She shrugged. ‘You can’t blame Bisclavret for being cursed as a werewolf. Yet nor can you blame a woman cursed by her sex.’

‘But she loses her nose,’ Emilia pointed out.

‘Life as a woman is not without risks,’ the Countess said. She covered Emilia’s hand with her own. ‘Which is why,’ she added softly, ‘I am to wed Sir John.’

Emilia had met the man when he visited.

The Countess cupped her cheek. 'Afterwards, he will take me to Holland. I shall write,' she promised.

Emilia felt her eyes burn. She thought of the little dark pawn on the chessboard, being moved around at the whims of whoever was playing the game. Yet she had learned to show people what they wanted to see, so she smiled until a dimple appeared in her cheek. 'I wish you all joy,' she said.

THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICED about London was the stench – body odour, faeces and vomit, mingling with the smells of woodsmoke and cooked meat. The streets knotted and tangled as if they had been mapped by a child. Sellers hawked their wares, from feathers to jugs of milk to rush lights, their voices competing with the clatter of hooves and the rattle of carriage wheels. Emilia darted out of the way of conveyances and the occasional diving bird, the kites scavenging a mouldy crust or a scrap of thread for their nests. Her leather boots slid on cobblestones that were slick with mud and refuse. Beggars with rags wrapped around their oozing limbs sat on the thresholds of doorways, hands plucking at Emilia's skirts. She passed a cockfight ringed with men shouting out their bets; and when a brawl between two skinny boys spilled into the street, she ducked into an alley. There, a light-skirt was making a quick coin, her skirts pulled up to her waist. She stared blankly over the shoulder of the man rutting into her, as Emilia hurried by.

When in London, Emilia visited her cousin Jeronimo's family for Friday supper. Although she'd grown up outside the city gates, in Spitalfields, with her mother and father, the rest of her cousins now lived on Mark Lane, in the Italian community.

Mark Lane was jammed with two-storey wooden homes that listed drunkenly, like a smile made of uneven teeth. Before Emilia had even turned the corner, she could hear music spilling from various houses. She could play almost any instrument, but she would never be as fluent

as her cousins. They effortlessly strung together notes the way she entwined words – spinning a melody so perfect you couldn't imagine that a moment before it had not existed in the world.

The red belly of the sun was scraping the roof of her cousin's home when Emilia finally stepped inside. Jeronimo's sons, Edward and Scipio, barrellled into her legs in greeting. Their mother, Alma, laughed. '*Piccolini*, let her breathe.'

From the corner of the room closer to the hearth, her cousin looked up from the lute he was stringing and smiled. 'How is the world of the nobility?' he teased.

'The same as it was yesterday when you were at court,' Emilia said.

Jeronimo made a noncommittal sound. She knew, as did he, that the Bassanos' reign as Queen Elizabeth's musicians would last only as long as her favour – and that it could be revoked at any time. Then what would become of them?

Emilia swung one of her small second cousins onto her hip and glanced around the little home. Her relatives were not as wealthy as the Countess and the Baron, of course, but thanks to their roles at court, they were still gentry. They had carved wooden chests brought from Italy and curtains instead of plain wooden shutters. But they also had only a single loft bed, in which they slept with the children. Even if she asked her cousin to take her in after the Countess wed, there was not space for her. She was a shadow caught between two worlds, like the faeries.

'Tell us a story, Emilia,' the smaller boy said, reaching for the braided rope of Emilia's hair. When she came to Mark Lane she dressed as a commoner, with her hair down and a plain kirtle over her chemise.

Emilia sat on the hearth with the boy in her lap, letting his brother settle beside her. 'Do you know who I met today?' she said. 'A faerie queen.'

'Was she beautiful?' one boy asked. 'Like you?'

Beauty, Emilia knew, was relative. Her olive colouring was far

from the fashionable pale skin on display at court; her hair was darker than night; her eyes a ghostly silver. Taken separately, her features were arresting, odd. But combined, they drew attention – men’s glances, their wives’ narrowed eyes.

‘Prettier even than Queen Elizabeth,’ Emilia said, and she heard her cousin muffle a snort.

Alma winked at her, opening a cupboard to retrieve a folded square of linen embroidered at the edges. It was probably the finest item in the household.

‘The faerie queen had promised to care for a friend’s orphaned babe, but her husband, the faerie king, wanted to take it away from her.’

‘Why?’ one of the boys asked.

Emilia considered this. She could not remember being as young as her little second cousins, and certain that nothing on God’s earth could separate a child from their parent.

‘Because the faerie king feared that the queen would love the babe so much, she would forget him.’

The boys leaned towards her, rapt. ‘What happened?’

‘The king . . . wanted to teach the queen a lesson. So he told his faerie servant to find a purple flower that would make someone fall in love with the very first thing they saw. And he brushed that flower over the queen’s brow as she slept.’

Alma smoothed the embroidered linen over the scarred wooden table in the centre of the room. ‘Emilia, *cara*,’ she said, ‘the shutters?’

Emilia slid away from the children and stood, dusting off her skirts as she crossed to the open window that lacked the leaded-glass panes the Baron had. ‘But who did she fall in love with?’ asked one boy.

A donkey cart rattled past outside. ‘Why . . . an ass!’ Emilia said, and the children fizzed with giggles.

‘That’s enough,’ Alma chided. ‘Jeronimo?’

The sun had slipped below the horizon. Emilia’s cousin made sure the shutters were closed and then wriggled a loose stone from the fireplace. Behind it was a small safehole, from which he drew a parcel wrapped in muslin, and another piece of folded linen. He unwound

the muslin like he was peeling an apple, revealing two brass candlesticks that he set on the table. Alma added tallow candles and then reached for the linen to drape over her head. Emilia took her little cousins' hands and led them to the table, bowing her head. '*Baruch atah Adonai,*' Alma sang, lighting the candles with tinder from the hearth. '*Eloheinu melech ha-olam asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik neir shel Shabbat.*'

Amen, the rest replied, in perfect harmony.

A secret prayer, for a forbidden religion. Like the other converso Jews who had come from Spain and Italy, the Bassanos were Christians now in the eyes of the world, attending church and praying to the Virgin and her Blessed Son.

People saw what they wanted to see.

GOING TO COURT HAD ALWAYS felt to Emilia like a performance. Although she did not play recorder or lute beside her male relatives in the great hall, she had been carted along as an apprentice of sorts even when she was very young. She knew the frenetic scramble to present competent nonchalance as the Queen arrived in the room; she understood how music was meant to regale at times and fade into the background at others. Being a courtier was not that much different.

The Queen and her entourage had only recently returned to the palace at Whitehall from St James's, moving between those properties and Hampton Court, Greenwich, Richmond and Windsor Castle. There were so many confidants and advisers to Her Majesty, in addition to ladies-in-waiting and visitors from other royal houses, that a palace would periodically become overrun and foul with debris and waste. Then the entire troupe would relocate while it was cleaned and aired.

Dressing for court was the opposite of dressing for her forays to the Italian community in London. Emilia would be rubbed down by a maidservant with clean cloths, and then with perfume. Over a long linen smock she wore a pair of *bodies* – an outer layer made of brocade

with whalebone stitched in vertically, a busk jammed between her budding breasts all the way to her belly. The *bodies* were ratcheted tight down the back through eyelet holes and finished with false sleeves crusted with lace and pearls. Tiers of skirts in black and white – the Queen's colours – completed the outfit, until Emilia could not even breathe without rustling. Her hair was dressed and a headpiece fitted to her scalp, ensuring a megrim at her temples before the end of the night. She looked like a miniature version of the Countess, without the swells of cleavage.

The Baron was in attendance, too, although he wasn't happy about it. 'If Oxford is here,' he muttered, as they waited to enter the crush of the great hall, 'I shall not be held responsible for my actions.'

'If Oxford is here,' the Countess said with a laugh, 'I shall eat my fan.'

The pumping lifeblood of court was gossip, and the Earl of Oxford, Edward de Vere, had provided plenty this spring. Back in April, one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting – Anna Vavasour – had given birth to Oxford's son. The scandal wasn't that Oxford was already married, but that this love affair had happened without the Queen's consent. She had thrown both of them into the Tower, and rumour was that Oxford had been released this week.

There was no love lost between the Baron and Oxford, who was the brother of the Baron's wife, Mary. The Baron's marriage nearly hadn't been allowed because the Queen didn't like how Oxford treated his own wife, accusing her of adultery and declaring their child a bastard. He was, simply, a wild card.

They were swept forward into a glittering sea of people. Entertainment varied from masques to bearbaiting to jousting in the tiltyard to Emilia's favourite: plays performed by troupes that had the patronage of a noble. She had grown up with music filling all the spaces of her childhood and knew that the right notes in the right order could make one weep or make one feel lighter than air. The same could happen with the right words, spoken in the right order, by the right actor.

Tonight, though, the entertainment was to be dancing. Emilia

could hear the lively strains of her cousins' instruments, but the gallery for the musicians was on the far side of the hall, and she had about as much chance of reaching them in this crush as she did of getting to the Far East. Long, narrow windows let a spill of moonlight wash over those partnered in the vigorous dance. An enormous fireplace held banked flames even though it was warm outside, so the room reeked of sweat and soot. Tonight's music was a galliard – a pantomime of courtship, where the men chased the women. Sometimes the man would reach under a lady's busk to lift her in the air, or raise his thigh and balance his partner upon it. It was shocking to watch, and even more shocking to perform – which was exactly why the Queen used to dance it with her favourite – Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester – before he'd lost her regard. Now she was in the middle of the floor, partnered with Sir Christopher Hatton.

It was easy for Emilia to slip away, though she knew it would be frowned upon, or worse. She ducked past the guards at the edge of the room, trying to find a space less crowded and cooler, only to be cornered by Lord Archley. Although she did not know all the nobles at court, she'd had the bad fortune to meet this one before. He was nearly as wide around as he was tall, with a nose like a pomegranate and a ruff so stiff that it tilted back his head. When he saw Emilia, his eyes gleamed. 'Ah,' he said, his breath stale and gusty. 'The lioness has let the young cub from her sight.'

It was true that the Countess discouraged male courtiers from getting too close to Emilia. Archley dropped a kerchief and bent, his hand sliding under her skirts to graze her ankle. Emilia's jaw tightened and she stepped back. 'My Lord Archley,' she said, and curtsied. *Lord Arselly*, she thought.

'Such pretty manners,' he said. 'In one as fair as the sun.'

Emilia refrained from rolling her eyes. Like every other woman at court, she had powdered her face white as an homage to the Queen. Against her olive skin, however, the powder looked like a mask and only drew attention to how different she was from the rest. 'Merely a daughter; no sun am I,' she quipped.

Archley leaned close enough for her to see the food stuck in his teeth. 'And yet, you make me rise.'

Well, he wasn't the only one experiencing an anatomical upsurge, Emilia thought, suddenly queasy. 'My mistress calls,' she lied, and she tried to edge past him, but Archley's arm snatched her around the waist. She thought of the places the Countess had told her about, soft tissues where one could unman a man with a knee. Archley wore a codpiece, so instead Emilia lifted her foot and ground her heel into his instep. A moment later she was running away blindly. She flew around a corner and smacked hard into another gentleman.

'Please, my lord, excuse me,' Emilia gasped.

The man grasped her shoulders to steady her. 'I cannot,' he said, 'as I am the one who stepped in your path.'

He was lean and old, with silver hair and kind eyes. There was gold thread in the brocade of his doublet, which marked him as the highest of nobility, a privy counsellor.

'You are Countess Bertie's ward,' he said. She sensed that he knew more about Emilia than she maybe knew of herself.

Straightening her spine, she met the stranger's gaze. 'If you tell Her Majesty I stepped out of the room,' Emilia said, 'I shall tell her you were already outside it.'

The man smiled, delighted. 'You know . . . I believe you would.'

Flustered, Emilia dropped another curtsy and spun, edging back into the great hall, where the dancing had reached fever pitch. The crowd swelled and receded like a great beast. Emilia picked the Countess out of a knot of women and fought her way to her side.

The Countess glanced down, smiling faintly. 'And where were you?' she asked.

'Visiting my cousins,' she lied, glancing towards the musicians' gallery, her eyes snagging instead on the gaze of the gentleman with the gold-threaded doublet. He stood talking to the Baron now, watching Emilia over the rim of his goblet.

AFTER THE COUNTESS WAS REMARRIED and living in the Netherlands, Emilia was shuttled between London and Grimsthorpe with the Baron and his wife. Emilia knew that the Baroness did not particularly like her, and when the Baroness fell pregnant, she became even less willing to look after Emilia.

Which is how Emilia found herself on a rain-lashed, three-decked merchant galleon headed to Denmark, certain that she was going to die.

The Baron had been sent on a diplomatic mission and had no alternative but to drag Emilia along. Unlike him, she had never been on a ship, much less one in a storm. Emilia spent the first half of the voyage battling seasickness. After a week, she had become accustomed to the rolling of the world beneath her feet, but she still spent most of the time in her tiny cabin. Sometimes she wrote to the Countess, using a writing box that she'd been given as a goodbye present (*Put your stories to paper, Emilia, and send them to me*). Other times she read books on decorum in the hope that she could make herself as unobtrusive as possible in the Danish court. On the Sabbath, she lit the candle on her bedside table and silently recited a Hebrew prayer, worshipping in the secret temple of her own mind.

That was, in fact, what she was doing when the ship listed so sharply that the candle tumbled, rolling across the cabin's wooden floor. Emilia dived for it, imagining there could be nothing worse than a fire on a galleon. As the flame fizzled in a growing puddle, she realized how wrong she was.

Emilia was certain a leak was something the captain ought to know about. She pulled a wrapper over her night rail and opened the cabin door.

It was like stepping through the doorway of Hell.

A spray of salt water lashed her face, making her eyes burn. The water was ankle deep here, and more was streaming through the scuttle, the hatchway that led to the galleon's third deck. Wood creaked, stretched to its seams. A rending like a splintering tree roared in Emilia's ears, and then a crash shook the entire ship.

Emilia hovered, her slippers soaked, until the galleon tilted again and smacked her hard against the wall. She rubbed her head where it had struck the wood as one of the young sailors streaked past her, holding coils of rope. 'Get back below, milady,' he yelled out.

She pictured herself trapped in the little room as the ship drifted in a slow ballet to the bottom of the ocean. Then she turned to the ladder the boy had shimmied, tucked her skirts between her legs, and started to climb.

The hub of the ship was the third deck, the one exposed to the elements. Emilia had taken a turn there on calmer days, but this was a different world. Each strike of lightning illuminated chaos: One of the three masts broken in pieces, having crushed a railing on the side of the ship. Great billows of canvas sails whipping free in the wind, the crew in a losing battle to pull them in. Orders being piped through the boatswain's whistle, drowned out by the gales. A sailor, drenched and wild-eyed, tied to a mast that still stood, squinting into the darkness with a spyglass.

Emilia screamed when a wave rose, knocking her off her feet and sending her skidding across the deck. She scrabbled with her fingernails and managed to grab on to an iron cleat. She heard her name, torn like parchment, and looked up to see the Baron struggling with the steersman to hold the whipstaff, the pole that attached to the rudder. The Baron wore only his linen underclothes and trousers, moulded to his body by the pounding rain. 'Emilia,' he cried, hoarse. 'Go below!'

The driving rain and seawater seemed to seal her to the pitched deck until she felt an arm jerk her upright. The boatswain, a beefy man who had let her play his carved bone flute once, yanked Emilia to his side. He half-dragged her, half-threw her down the scuttle, where she landed in a heap at the bottom of the ladder in six inches of standing water.

Shivering, aching, Emilia crawled back to her tiny cabin. The silence, after the scream of the wind, hurt her ears. She hauled herself onto the canvas that served as a bed, folding her legs beneath her.

As her eyes adjusted to the black of the cabin, she saw her nails were ragged and there were splinters in her palms from the wood on the deck. But what drew her attention was the spreading dark stain on her wet night rail. Emilia twisted, scanning her body to find the source of the wound. She was tender in places that would be bruises, but she could not find a cut or a scrape. It wasn't until she held her hand between her legs and her fingers came back streaked with blood that she realized she must have grievously injured something inside her.

Emilia lay back on the cot, crossing her arms over her chest, tears leaking from the corners of her eyes. Her lips moved silently, praying for the second time that night to her god.

She would die here, either drowning in the storm or bleeding until her breath stopped. Her body would be wrapped in a canvas and tossed overboard, among the mermaids and sea dragons. Finally, she would no longer be anyone's problem to solve.

THE GALLEON DIDN'T SINK, AND Emilia did not die. But she did not recover, either. She continued to bleed slowly but surely, like air being let out of a bladder.

Days later, when the galleon limped into the port of Helsingør, Emilia joined the Baron and his small entourage to seek an audience with King Frederick and Queen Sophie of Denmark on behalf of Queen Elizabeth.

Emilia blinked up at Kronborg Castle, still under construction. It rose impressively tall, shining pale walls capped with a glittering copper roof. It was, in her opinion, much lovelier than Her Majesty's Whitehall, which wasn't white at all but tarnished with soot and grime.

They had been given chambers to refresh themselves, which was critical because their clothing was all but destroyed by the storm. Emilia sat while a maid who did not speak English brushed her hair until it shone like a raven's wing and braided it into an intricate puzzle. She was given a robe while her court clothes were dried and pressed. But when the little maid tried to help Emilia into her velvet *bodies*, she

panicked. Wadded in her drawers was a strip torn from a shift, which she had been using as a bandage. Emilia grabbed the edges of the robe and held it tight, but the maid said something she did not understand and yanked, revealing Emilia in her linen underthings, speckled with dried blood.

Emilia's cheeks burned. She kept her eyes averted as her laces were done up, and then she went to meet the Baron, taking quick, tiny steps so as not to dislodge the wad of linen between her thighs. Her *bodies* was black and her skirts were white, and she feared the blood would stain.

The Baron was pacing in the hallway before the throne room. He gave her an appraising look. 'We represent the Queen today,' he said, his pale eyes meeting hers. 'Consider this a test.'

Emilia's mouth dropped open. What was she being tested for? Her usefulness at court upon her return? Was she to charm the Danish monarchs enough to be left behind as *their* new responsibility?

With that, the heavy panelled doors opened, and they were ushered inside. Courtiers flanked the hall, dressed in a flamboyance of velvet and brocade. There were other diplomatic envoys presenting flowery speeches to the monarchs. Emilia shifted from foot to foot as she and the Baron waited their turn. The maid had tied her laces so tight she could barely draw a breath, and her belly felt as if someone was making a fist inside of it. As stars danced at the edges of her vision, she tried to remember when she had last eaten.

Instead, she forced herself to focus as bags of pungent spices were lifted from a chest inlaid with cabochon gems, as a ceremonial sword from a Spanish explorer was offered up to the Danish king. When it was the Baron's turn, they proceeded towards the thrones with guards who bore the ceremonial jewellery of the Order of the Garter, an honorary knighthood for King Frederick from the Queen. They hoped, in return, to receive assurance for Her Majesty that English ships would not come to any harm in Danish waters.

The Baron bowed, and Emilia sank into a deep curtsy. From beneath her lowered lashes, she looked up at the royals. Queen Sophie

was delicate, like a wren that had once made a nest outside Emilia's bedroom window at Grimsthorpe. King Frederick was much older, which was the way of things. But his hand rested on the arm of the Queen's throne, their fingers laced together. There was something unexpected about that that made Emilia's heart thump.

The King spoke, and the Baron straightened. Emilia did the same, but the room swam a little, and she stumbled. From the edge of her vision, she saw the Baron's jaw twitch at her mistake.

Then she felt the drip of blood down her leg.

Sucking in a breath, she shifted her foot to cover the red spot she'd left on the flagstone, trying to rub it away with her slipper. She clenched her legs together. A bead of sweat ran down the busk between her breasts.

Minutes, Emilia told herself. *You have only to last minutes, and then you may retreat to your chamber and expire.*

The Baron droned on in French, and Emilia followed the puffery of compliments being winged to the dais on behalf of the Queen of England. Finally, he gestured for the king to be given the carved wooden box that held the Garter Star. A member of the Danish privy council ferried the box the last few feet to the king. '*Vi acceptere denne ære fra den engelske domstol. Må Guds velsignelse overøse Elizabeth Regina,*' King Frederick intoned, pointing to the spot on his velvet cape where he wanted the jewels pinned.

Emilia hoped it would be done quickly. There was a buzzing in her ears.

Then King Frederick gestured at the star and switched back to French. '*Et maintenant, nous célébrons.*'

A celebration? *Now?*

The Baron began to back away from the thrones, expecting Emilia to do the same, but she was terrified to move and reveal the smear of blood under the cover of her belled skirts.

'*Attends,*' Queen Sophie said, rising. *Wait.* In French, she asked Emilia her name.

Emilia opened her mouth to answer, and promptly fainted.

WHEN EMILIA WOKE, SHE WAS in an unfamiliar bed, a heavy counterpane pulled up to her chin. The maid who had dressed her was sitting in the corner on a stool and popped to her feet as soon as Emilia tried to sit up. Immediately, her debacle in the throne room rushed back. She vaguely remembered a guard hoisting her into his arms and carrying her up the stairs as whispers followed her like the train of a coronation gown. She groaned just as the door opened and Queen Sophie entered, trailed by her ladies-in-waiting.

Emilia tried to scramble to her feet to curtsy, but the Queen waved her off. '*Êtes-vous bien?*' she asked. *Are you well?*

She bit her lower lip, trying to keep herself from crying. *This is a test*, she reminded herself. But surely it was wrong to lie to royalty?

Emilia shook her head, staring down at the bed linens. '*Je pense que . . .*' she began, and then swallowed hard. '*J'ai peur de mourir.*' *I fear I am dying.*

At that the ladies-in-waiting all tittered, hiding their smiles behind feathered fans. Emilia thought how unfair it would be to die far from home, in the company of such cruelty.

To her shock, Queen Sophie climbed the small stool beside the bed and sat on its edge. '*Le Baron a dit que vous n'avez pas de mère.*' *The Baron said you do not have a mother.*

She beckoned to one of the ladies behind her, who produced what seemed to be a miniature pillow, like one a mouse might dream upon. The Queen handed it to Emilia. It was in fact a small pouch, stuffed with what seemed to be dried moss.

'You are not dying,' the Queen said, explaining what was happening to her – that her butterfly body was rising from a cocoon of childhood, that she could count the weeks between the flow, that certain herbs would help with the dull ache inside her.

Emilia grimaced. 'What a nuisance,' she muttered.

She had spoken in English, and Queen Sophie turned to one of