

*By God, if women had but written stories  
Like those the clergy kept in oratories,  
More had been written of men's wickedness  
Than all the sons of Adam could redress.*

— The Wife of Bath's Prologue, *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, translated by  
Neville Coghill

*The wisest man in the world is one who doesn't care who's in charge.*— Attributed to  
Ptolemy

## PROLOGUE

### WHO PAINTED THE LION?

*The Swanne, Southwark  
The Year of Our Lord 1406  
In the seventh year of the reign of Henry IV*

My father would oft remark that the day I was born, the heavens erupted in protest. Great clods of ice rained upon poor unsuspecting folk, and the winds were so bitter and cold, those who could remained indoors. Any sod who couldn't, risked death in the fields along with the shivering, miserable beasts. He didn't tell me to arouse my guilt, but to remind me to hold up my head and stand proud. I may have been born the daughter of a peasant, but it wasn't every day a lass could say she made her mark upon the world.

I came into being on the 21st of April 1352, a day henceforth known as 'Black Saturday' and not because the woman who'd carried me the last nine months died moments before I arrived, casting a ghastly pall over what should have been a celebration.

The story I grew up with was that my mother's fate was very nearly my own as, even in death, her womb refused to expel me. It wasn't until the midwife, seeing the rippling of her stomach as if some devil-sent spawn was writhing within, understood the Grim Reaper had not yet departed the room. He was awaiting another soul to carry forth. Wishing him gone, she snatched his sacred scythe from his gnarly hand and ripped open my mother's body and, amidst blood and swollen entrails, pulled me forth like a sacrificial offering of old.

My father, hearing the screams of dismay and fear, forwent the sacred rules of the birthing chamber and burst through the door. Determining that the shade of blue colouring my flesh, whilst it looked fine upon a noblewoman's mantle, was no colour for a babe to be wearing, hoisted me off the bloodied rushes where the midwife had dropped me and, ordering her to

cut the umbilicus, swung me by my ankles, slapping my flesh until it turned a much happier puce.

Only then did I bawl – loud, long and lusty.

The midwife promptly fainted; my father gathered me to his chest, laughing and crying while I hollered noisily, competing with the raging storms outside.

It was decided then and there (or maybe this is something I invented later) that though I was born under the sign of Taurus, I was a child of Mars – a fighter who stared death in the face and scared him wit-less. Papa declared, and the midwife – who came to at my screams – concurred: the moment I burst into life, the Reaper picked up his robes and fled the room. He even forgot his scythe.

But Mars was not alone when he blessed me with the blood and spirit of a warrior. Oh no. For while Papa, unaware Mama had died as he tried to soften my cries and sought for something in which to swaddle me, Venus, Mars' wanton bride, peered over his shoulder. Because she liked what she saw, she leaned forward and placed the sweetest of kisses upon my puckered brow. Not finished, she turned me over and pressed one each upon my peach-like buttocks as well. In doing this, the goddess of love and ruler over all Taureans thrice blessed me with her own deep desires. Desires that lay dormant for many years until they gushed forth, destroying all in their path.

God was preoccupied tending to my mother's swiftly departed soul and Papa's grief. His distraction allowed the pagan gods to claim me – Mars and Venus, Ares and Aphrodite – Roman or Greek, I'm partial to both.

Christened Eleanor, it was the name I wore for many years before fate forced me to change it. But I'm getting ahead of myself, some-thing I'm inclined to do and pray you'll forgive me.

The years went by and the wheel of fortune turned until it forced God – who I swear until then barely acknowledged my presence, for He never heard my prayers – to notice me.

Before my monthly courses began to flow, my father passed from this earthly realm leaving me in the care of the woman who had elevated him beyond his wildest dreams. The Lady Clarice, a formerly wealthy landowner whose entire family and many servants died during

the Botch, hired my father, by then an itinerant brogger who brokered wool for a living, as steward of her neglected sheep and fallow lands. Papa proved worthy of my lady's faith, increasing her holdings and the quality of her flock. Eternally grateful, or so she said, she made my father promises that, upon his death, she failed to keep. Foremost was that she would care for me if he died – unless you count being taken into service at the manor as caring. I was ten years of age.

Before handing me over to the housekeeper, Mistress Bertha, my lady imparted some words of wisdom. She told me I'd but one gift, the most valuable thing a woman could own. Misunderstanding her meaning, I waited eagerly for what she was about to bestow. Turns out, I was already in possession of it. My lady was referring to my queynte – my cunt. But, she made sure to emphasise, it was only of worth if it was untouched, pure and virginal. Then, it was an opportunity – something to be used to one day better my situation by marrying well. I was ordered to protect my maidenhead as the Crusaders did the walls of Jerusalem (though, one presumes, with more success).

From here on, said Lady Clarice, my body would be under siege – from the attentions of men and, much worse, the naturally lascivious thoughts a woman possessed and which I admit were already beginning to take up a great deal of space in my head. According to Father Roman, the village priest, women were the gateway of the devil, insatiable beasts who devoured hapless men with their longings. I recall looking at May, my rather plain and plump friend and fellow-maid, thinking the only kind of man she'd devour would be the cooked kind. Regardless, we women were all cast in the same lustful role, high born, low born and anywhere in the middle. Even me, only recently thrust from childhood.

Rather than God, it was the man I thought of as The Poet who saved me from falling victim to my naturally lewd nature. At least, that's how others tell it – especially The Poet. In fact, he's always taken credit for my story.

I call him The Poet because that was how he was first introduced to me. Later, I came to know him as someone possessed of many guises: a wondrous spinner of tales, a wine-merchant's son, a Londoner, John of Gaunt's lackey, a diplomat, a watcher, a cuckold, even an accused rapist. Eventually, I would come to know him in a very different way.

Regardless, he was the man who took my tale from me and became its custodian. I want to believe he meant well in committing me to verse, that he sought to rewrite my history in a way that gave me mastery over it. Mayhap, he did that. He also protected me from my sins –

not the lustful kind. Despite what you may think, bodily desire doesn't make the angels cower. Rather, in writing my tale, The Poet sought to shield me from the consequences of my darker deeds by distracting those who would call me to account. For, while folk are titillated and shocked by his portrait, they don't see *me*. In retrospect, it was a clever manoeuvre. I never thanked him properly. Perhaps this is what this is – a delayed thank-you as well as a setting to rights of sorts. I confess, there are some versions of me he crafted I quite like and may yet keep. We'll see.

Alas, he's gone, and I'll never really know exactly why he portrayed me the way he did, with boundless avarice, unchecked lust, vulgarity, overweening pride and more besides.

The Poet equipped me with every sin.

Betraying my trust in him, using my secret fears and desires, he exposed my weaknesses – my strengths, too – and turned them into something for others' amusement. Oh, amused they were – and still are, for I hear them discussing the wanton Alyson, the Wife of Bath and her many flaws. Mind you, they're a little afeared as well, and I don't mind that so much. Either way, he's dead (may God assoil him), and it's time for me to wrest my tale back and tell it in my own way. As it really happened. And, when my story is complete, you can judge for yourself whose version you prefer: the loud, much-married, lusty woman dressed in scarlet who travelled the world in order to pray at all the important shrines yet learned nothing of humility, questioned divinity, boasted of her conquests and deceits, and demanded mastery over men. Or the imperfect child who grew into an imperfect woman – experienced, foolish and clever too – oft at the same time. Thrice broken, twice betrayed, once murdered and once a murderer, who mended herself time after time and rose to live again in stories and in truth – mostly.

All this despite five bloody husbands.

All this, despite the damn Poet.

## PART ONE

### The Marriage Debt

1364 to 1386

*No sooner than one husband's dead and gone  
Some other Christian man shall take me on.*

— The Wife of Bath's Prologue, The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, translated by  
Neville Coghill

*Noke Manor, Bath-atte-Mere*

*The Year of Our Lord 1364*

*In the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Edward III*

I stared in dismay at the old man standing in the middle of the room who, as the steward announced me in the coldest of tones, looked as out of place as a whore in a priory. On second thoughts, knowing some of the local sisters, mayhap not. What on God's good earth was that pariah, Master Fulk Bigod, doing here at Noke Manor, let alone in her ladyship's solar? His reputation as a peculiar loner who grunted rather than spoke followed him like the stench of his person. A farmer and wool grower, he lived on the outskirts of the village. With four wives already in the grave, it was said he bullied folk until they sold him their daughters or their sheep. Papa never had time for him – not that he was alone in that respect. The man was despised and mostly avoided. By everyone. By me.

Until now.

Dear Lord, was this was to be my punishment? Was this how I was to pay for my sin? I was going to be sent away and made to work for this man. It was said no servant he hired remained long. They fled the coop once they saw what roosted there. God help me. Though what was I doing requesting aid from the Almighty? It was a priest who got me into this mess in the first place. A mess that saw me locked away in my bedroom and now, days later, dragged before my betters.

I worried my lip as I regarded those who filled the room. There was my good lady mistress, her friend The Poet, the new steward Master Merriman, a number of servants – friends – who could scarce meet my eyes, and bloody, stinking Fulk Bigod.

Papa in heaven, help me.

Ever since it happened, I'd been kept in solitude and ordered to contemplate the shame my actions had brought upon my lady and my dead father. I was told to pray for forgiveness and my everlasting soul. Shocked by how swiftly my fortunes had undergone a change, as if the fates had suddenly given Fortuna's wheel a random spin, I didn't comply. Not straight away.

When I was first confined to my room and Master Merriman latched the door, warning me I'd remain there until the lady decided how to salvage the situation, I banged on the wood and shouted myself hoarse. When no-one appeared to release or console me, and the celebrations outside continued as if nothing momentous had occurred, I did indeed drop to my knees and pray to the Heavenly Father – for a few minutes, then I grew bored. It's hard to stay focused when there's no reply. May as well talk to oneself. I crossed myself, leapt up and pushed open the shutters to see what I was missing out on.

Beyond the manor house, the sun cast a mellow glow over the May Day celebrations that were in full swing. The Queen of the May, Mariot Breaksper, the baker's daughter, had been crowned. She looked mighty fine in her green kirtle, her golden hair unbound and a garland of flowers planted upon her head. Twirling around the maypole, holding the brightly coloured ribbons I'd helped attach, were my friends, their heads adorned with the greenery we'd woken early to cut from the nearby woods. There was clapping, stomping and much laughter, all accompanied by flutes, viols, pipes and drums. Fires were lit and, as the afternoon wore on and the smell of roasting meat carried into the attic to taunt me, I wished I was among it all. With a great sigh, I rested my elbows on the sill, my chin on my palms. Movement in the courtyard below caught my attention. There was a gathering of horses and men and, in their midst, my lady herself. She looked regal in her blue gown, with a particularly lovely circlet of blooms atop her wimple. As I watched, she turned to converse with one of the riders. More soberly dressed than the others, having divested himself of his costume, was The Poet. He'd become a regular visitor over the last few years, and though I'd never really caught his name I always welcomed his presence. A relative of Lady Clarice's – a distant cousin or such – he was employed as a lawyer's clerk at Gray's Inn in London while studying for the bar, or so I'd heard. Thought to be clever, it wasn't his learning I anticipated – it was the stories he brought whenever he came, stories that transported all who heard them with their vivid descriptions of maidens in distress, knights on quests, lascivious friars, righteous monks, foolish millers, vain prioresses, gods, goddesses and mortals misbehaving or enacting deeds of marvellous courage. Whatever the tale, The Poet knew how to hold an audience captive.

Only the night before, on May Day Eve, The Poet had delighted us with the story of Cupid and Psyche. The beautiful young woman, Psyche, was to be married to a monster in order to protect the city. But when her wedding night came, the monster, who insisted they remain in the dark so his bride could not see him, was gentle and passionate. Asked to trust him and to never, ever attempt to look at him, the silly chit listened to her jealous sisters who, beset with envy at how their sister lived and how she described her lusty husband, persuaded her to break the vow. One night, Psyche held up a lantern so she could see who was sarding her. It

was no monster. Taken aback by her husband's beauty, she tipped the lamp and spilled some wax, which burned the beautiful winged god to whom she was really married. He fled, and she then spent years atoning in an effort to find him again. Everyone clapped and cheered when it was finished and called for more. All I could think was how the stupid girl almost lost a grand opportunity. Imagine, being married to a god! Who cares what he looked like? I would have happily remained in the dark if I was given endless coin to spend, a beautiful house in which to dwell, lavish clothes and food aplenty. Never mind a deity to swive me.

The Poet was talking earnestly to Lady Clarice from atop his horse. I'd been looking forward to hearing more of his tales that evening. Now, as a witness to my shame, I was glad it appeared he was departing. I leaned as far out of the casement as I was able, but couldn't hear what was being said. The Poet nodded and touched his chest as if taking an oath. Lady Clarice passed him a purse, which he tucked into his tunic. I began to wonder if he would ever weave a story about me and what I'd done. It would be a good 'un. I forced a chuckle when all I really wanted to do was weep.

The Poet kicked his horse and, as he signalled for his squire to follow, looked straight to where I was watching and saluted me.

I leapt away from the window lest I incur more of my lady's anger. She'd been in a white-hot rage when she ordered Master Merriman to lock me away. With a deep sigh I sank onto the bed and thought about the reason I was banned from the celebrations.

Father Layamon.