"Vivid and sensuous."

—Emma Donoghue,
bestselling author of *Room*

COMPANION

The

ANOVEL

KIM TAYLOR BLAKEMORE



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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Chapter Five

I will hang next Thursday. I've been given the time: 10:15 a.m. Not just "sometime in the morning," but this specific time that falls neatly between the men's constitutionals and their lunches. I've been excused from the laundry that day.

Matron is attending; she told me it is required of her, but I noticed she is not indifferent to the duty. As she read the missive, her cheeks drooped and she turned a greenish blue. She averred it was man's sin to hang another. I told her it was man's sin to kill another, and there was nothing to wipe that stain from me.

10:15 a.m., Mr. LeRocque.

What does the Almanack bode for the weather? How many spectators will pack the yard? Ten? One hundred? Will they wipe sweat from their brows or huddle under black umbrellas? Will Matron guide me through the crowd? Will people hiss *murderer*? Will the man who puts the noose around my neck really wear a hood? Or will his face be naked? Is he handsome, this man, this face that will be the last I see? Will he look at me at all? Or will he mask me in black wool too?

10:15 a.m. At least there's no clock here to bludgeon me. Maybe I should stay ignorant—not ask the day, not ask the time. But it will be there, anyway, tapping the backs of my eyelids when I close them and chittering in my ear when awake.

I don't know how to beg for mercy, and there is no chance I will receive it. I am as detached from atonement as the Devil. All I can do

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is endure the days and outlast the nights. Wish they would end and plead they do not.

It's near spring now. Look at my window: the icicles no longer bare their teeth. And the sky is blue, like Cook's gingham spring dress. The ground to the laundry is more mud than dirt, and spears of flecked grass push toward the promise of thaw.

"The linen room will flood. And the wall behind the glasses and plates will bloom with mold. Who's there to clean it?"

Mr. LeRocque stares at me. He swallows, the lump of his Adam's apple gliding under the skin of his throat. The directive flutters at the tips of his fingers, as if the formal decree of execution will scorch.

I drop my head against the chill of the wall. "Tell whoever's at the house now that a mix of lye and chamomile does the trick. And not too hard with the brush; gentler strokes save the paint." I grip my legs tighter to my chest and dig a bare heel into the floor. "What have you brought today?"

"Rum cake."

I glance at this gift left just inside the bars, at the deep brown of it and the sugared orange peels curled atop. I envision Mrs. LeRocque lifting the last piece out of the baking tin. Perhaps her mouth is tight with disapproval of her husband's request for cake or pudding or pie. I have so far been most impressed with the lemon tart.

"I like rum cake."

LeRocque beams and relaxes back in his chair, his hands slapping his knees, the paper flittering from his grip. He reaches out, grasping, the chair tilting awry and resettling as he captures the note. Lays it on his knee, smoothing it as best he can. Then he lurches up, legs splayed like a sailor as he stumbles and walks the corridor, breathing in and out.

He fumbles in his coat, pulling a long handkerchief from his pocket and wiping his mouth. He holds himself up against the wall with one hand, wheezing, not looking at me. Eyes screwed shut, lips flapping like a fish.

"You'll need a stronger stomach than that, Mr. LeRocque, if you're to visit on Thursday."

He turns suddenly, face sheened with sweat and the handkerchief balled tight. Crouches down and reaches a rough hand through the bar. I do not want his comfort.

"Go away."

I want my bed. It's four steps away, but my legs are heavy as lead. The best I can do is crawl to the mattress. Pull the sheet up over my head and press myself to the wall.

"I'm sorry," he says.

I know this cell as well as I knew my room at the great house. Eyes open or closed I see the high walls, crude and rippled. The paint peels in the north corner, and the east has turned a shade of salmon. The floor lists to the door and picks up a slant near the slop bucket. There is light only as God or the whim of the matron provides it. Laura Reed's gone back with the other four women. At least for now, she is quiet and tamed. The cells are empty of people but stuffed with stores: saws and glue and a broken barber's chair, an old pump, a warped shaft, a cracked pulley. Matron told me yesterday there is a new wing at the asylum for the women. That the warden would get his wish soon and all the women would go. That it wouldn't do to move me with them. Too much trouble.

Lucy Blunt was good.

Lucy Blunt was bad.

Lucy Blunt will be hanged.

On Thursday.

Cook would appreciate the candied peels. A little sweet and a little tough, same as what follows us breath to breath, she'd say.

I'll give the slice to Matron. She's got a sweet tooth and hasn't once denied my gifts. Mrs. LeRocque's gifts.

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"A vivid and sensuous domestic drama, *The Companion* is also an atmospheric crime story."

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"As her date with the gallows approaches, Lucy Blunt is struggling to understand why she is at odds with society. In a literary tradition stretching from *Jane Eyre* to *Alias Grace*, her intoxicating account took me to another time and place, a confession with the illicit excitement of a thriller. *The Companion* offers everything I like about modern historical fiction; a resonant voice that brings women's lives out of the shadows."

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"The Companion is a brilliant study of all that makes us human—our terrors, regrets, passions, and the lies that shape our worlds. Kim Taylor Blakemore's novel is both astonishing and captivating, and will leave readers spellbound."

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"With exquisitely vivid and lyrical writing and a subtly layered narrative, *The Companion* is a fascinating and beautiful novel. If you enjoy Sarah Waters, you'll love Kim Taylor Blakemore's latest."

-Lily Hammond, author of The Way Home, Alice & Jean and Violet

"The Companion is a totally absorbing read - beautifully written, atmospheric and intriguing. Kim Taylor Blakemore's characterization is both convincing and compelling as she evokes the gritty reality of nineteenth-century life to great effect. I loved this book."

-Lindsay Jayne Ashford, bestselling author of *The Woman on the Orient Express*

"The narrator is riveting. The prose, gorgeous."

-Ron Hansen, National Book Award Nominated author of Atticus, The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford, and Mariette in Ecstasy

"Reading *The Companion*, I felt myself pulled authentically into a distant time and tale reminiscent of Charlotte Bronte and Henry James. Blakemore's mastery of language and character lend credence to her absorbing narrative of guilt or innocence as a young woman of mysterious identity awaits hanging. There is a body count, right from the opening of the novel. From there, the reader follows Blakemore through almost effortless shifts of time and circumstance, rendered in magnificent language, to an unexpected finality. This is a haunting tale that will remain in the reader's consciousness for a long time."

-Diane C. McPhail, author of The Abolitionist's Daughter

"Kim Taylor Blakemore's novel *The Companion* is the absorbing tale of Lucy Blunt, a young woman condemned to death and deeply haunted by her past. Blakemore skillfully immerses the reader in the tactile world of antebellum New Hampshire with her exquisite choice of details and gorgeous writing style. The novel has everything — complexity, mystery, murder, betrayal, forbidden love — even a ghostly presence. Treat yourself to a few evenings with this captivating story as you explore the mind and experience of a tortured young woman from another time. You'll be glad you did."

-Amy Belding Brown, author of Flight of the Sparrow

"Lucy Blunt's account of her journey to the gallows is a study in female wildness, perhaps constrained but definitely untamed, in this compelling novel. The writing is honed, fresh and intensely physical, pulling the reader headlong into the heroine's tough, sharp-eyed world. Lucy's wit, courage and resourcefulness render her sympathetic; at the same time, her watchfulness, her almost obsessive reading of others in order to gain advantage, is masterfully conveyed. Taylor Blakemore's understated psychology – in particular her grasp of the petty yet crucial maneuverings that take place between rivals – held me entranced until the end."

–Maria McCann, author of *Ace, King, Knave, The Wilding*, and *As Meat Loves Salt*

"Moody and atmospheric, *The Companion* is a compulsively readable treat. Blakemore's meticulously researched world captured me from the very first page, and her intriguing, unpredictable characters kept me guessing until the end. An utter delight for lovers of classic gothic literature!"

—Elizabeth Blackwell, bestselling author of *In the Shadow of Lakecrest* and *On a Cold Dark Sea*