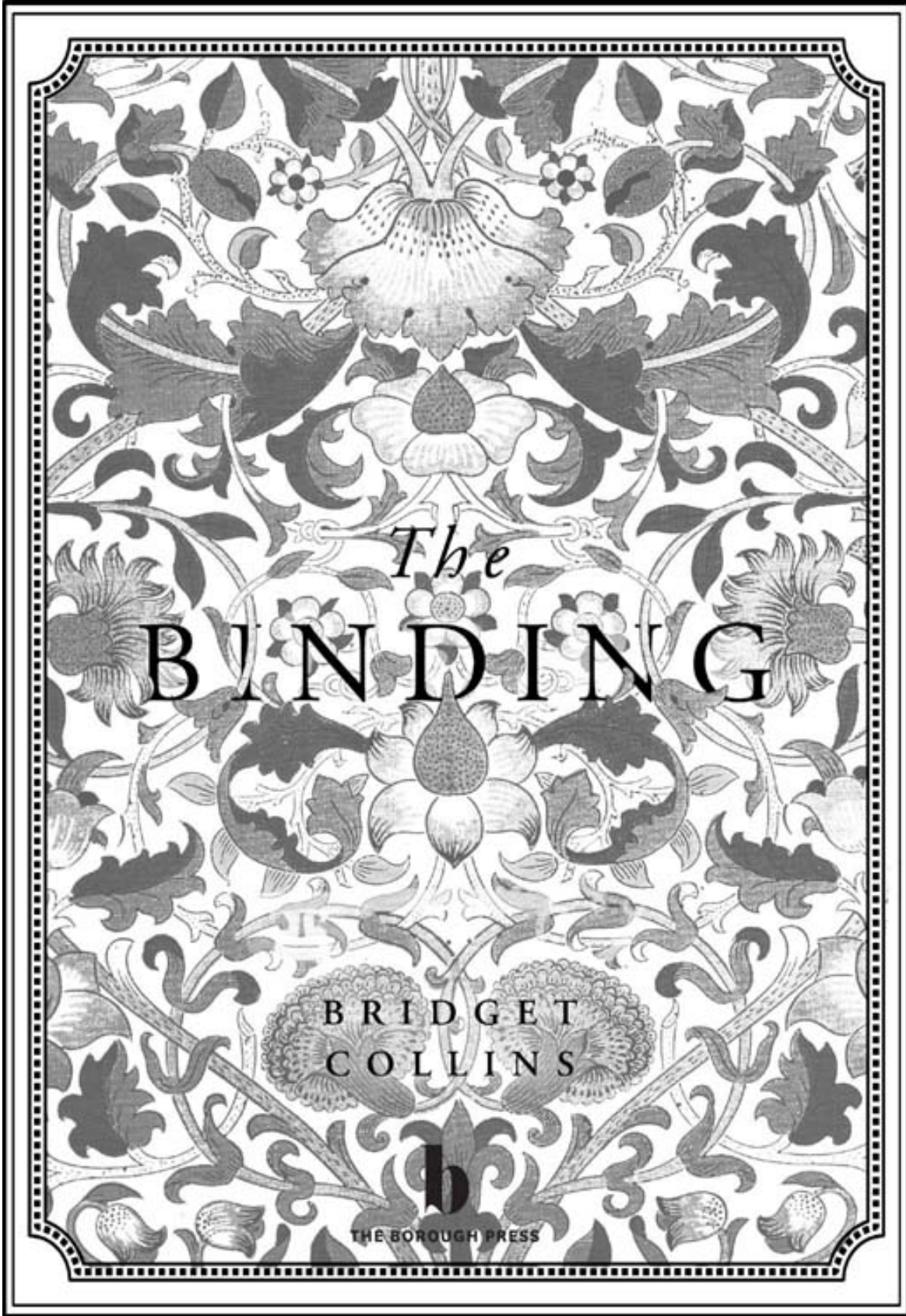


'Spellbinding'
TRACY CHEVALIER

The
BINDING

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[Praise for *The Binding*](#)

‘*The Binding* is a dark chocolate slice of cake with a surprising, satisfying seam of raspberry running through it. It is a rich, gothic entertainment that explores what books have trapped in them and reminds us of the power of storytelling. Spellbinding’

Tracy Chevalier

‘Pure magic. The kind of immersive storytelling that makes you forget your own name. I wish I had written it’

Erin Kelly, author of *He Said/She Said*

‘*The Binding* held me captive from the start and refused to set me free. It is a beautifully crafted tale of dark magic and forbidden passion, where unspeakable cruelty is ultimately defeated by enduring love. Breathtaking!’

Ruth Hogan, author of *The Keeper of Lost Things*

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‘Intriguing, thought-provoking and heartbreaking . . . what a gorgeous book’

Stella Duffy

‘What an astounding book . . . something entirely of its own. Brilliant concept, truly extraordinary writing and a killer plot’

Anna Mazzola, author of *The Unseeing*

Dedication

For Nick

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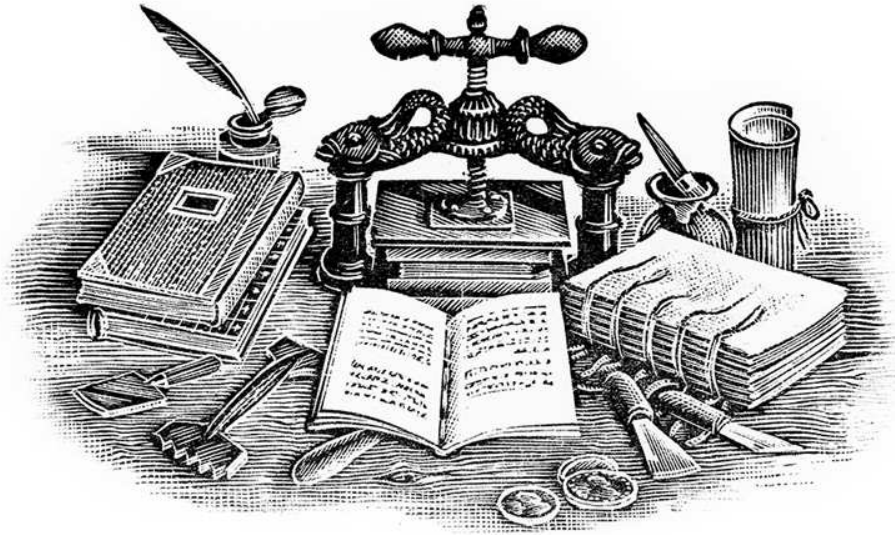
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PART ONE



I

When the letter came I was out in the fields, binding up my last sheaf of wheat with hands that were shaking so much I could hardly tie the knot. It was my fault we'd had to do it the old-fashioned way, and I'd be damned if I was going to give up now; I had battled through the heat of the afternoon, blinking away the patches of darkness that flickered at the sides of my vision, and now it was nightfall and I was almost finished. The others had left when the sun set, calling goodbyes over their shoulders, and I was glad. At least now I was alone I didn't have to pretend I could work at the same pace as them. I kept going, trying not to think about how easy it would have been with the reaping machine. I'd been too ill to check the machinery – not that I remembered much, between the flashes of lucidity, the summer was nothing but echoes and ghosts and dark aching gaps – and no one else had thought to do it, either. Every day I stumbled on some chore that hadn't been done; Pa had done his best, but he couldn't do everything. Because of me, we'd be behind all year.

I pulled the stems tight round the waist of the sheaf and stacked it against the others. Done. I could go home now ... But there were shadows pulsing and spinning around me, deeper than the blue-violet dusk, and my knees were trembling. I dropped into a crouch, catching my breath at the pain in my bones. Better than it had been – better than the splintery, sickening spasms that had come unpredictably for months – but still I felt as brittle as an old man. I clenched my jaw. I was so weak I wanted to cry; but I wasn't going to, I'd die first, even if the only eye on me was the full, fat harvest moon.

'Emmett? Emmett!'

It was only Alta, winding her way through the stooks towards me, but I pushed myself to my feet and tried to blink the giddiness away. Above me the sparse stars slid one way and then the other. I cleared my throat. 'Here.'