

THE
HIDDEN
PRINCESS

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THE
HIDDEN
PRINCESS

KATY MORAN



WALKER
BOOKS

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*This book is for Denise Johnstone-Burt,
who made me a real writer*

Prologue

Nicolas de Mercadier

Fontevrault Abbey, Duchy of Anjou, 1152

I run for the tower, tearing through a tangle of lavender bushes. I need cover. I need to hide. Dried blood and tears dry on my face, on my neck, bitter salt on my lips. It hurts to move. My right-hand eye is swollen shut and my back is on fire. I'm gasping for breath, sweat pouring down my face as I look up. There's a window. It's cut deep into the tower wall high above me, the ledge in shadow. If only I could reach it I could hide up there, blending into that small patch of darkness.

I scramble up the mimosa tree, shaking loose great clouds of yellow blossom like flakes of sunlight; I climb the wall like a frantic spider, digging my fingers and my bare toes into whatever cracks in the stone face of the tower that I can find; higher, higher.

Don't look down.

I haul myself onto the window ledge; I can't breathe. I'm spent. *Oh, God, what if Anjou finds me?* I glance down into the chamber below, chest heaving. It's empty except for one long table set out down the middle, a bench on either side. The table is already laid with silver vessels and jugs, but there

are no servants. The far wall is hung with tapestries. It's a long way down to the floor. I can't get down that way without breaking my neck.

And the nail-studded wooden door swings open.

It'll just be servants. Won't it?

It's not; it's Anjou himself, heir to the throne of England and my devil of a stepfather, still red and sweaty with the effort of blacking my eye and scourging the skin from my back – filthy, disgusting, sweating pig. My mother's at his side, her arm resting in the crook of his elbow. A surge of hatred boils through me when I see his face, him touching her. *Oh, God in heaven, don't look up.* Mama does: her eyes flicker towards the window ledge I'm sitting on, then away. She's seen me but this time she's chosen to preserve what's left of my hide. *Traitor.*

Still standing, Mama and Anjou wait in silence as a number of men step quietly into the room. The most corpse-like of them all is clad in the red habit of a cardinal. There is an abundance of golden chains, glossy bear hides, costly purple robes and ermine trimming – and yet not a single lackey. There's only one reason men cut of this cloth are prepared to pour their own wine and that's subterfuge.

Well done, Nicolas. You're hiding in a secret meeting crammed full of what looks very like the most rich and powerful collection of criminals in Christendom.

Anjou will definitely kill me now. It began when I looked at him the wrong way as I served my mother at fast-break, blew up like fire in the wind when my apology was “insolent”, and now with a bloodied back and a fat black

eye I have stumbled on his treachery. If I'm caught, he'll kill me this day – if I don't crack open my head like a hen's egg falling from this windowsill before he gets the chance.

“How long must we wait?” The cardinal speaks in Latin, his voice thin and tired. He sounds a little afraid, and sweat trickles down between my shoulder blades. “Have you summoned us here as some kind of game, my lord Anjou, or do we really expect the guests you promised us?”

“Believe me, I'm serious.” Anjou sounds as if he is on the edge of losing his temper – again. Mama is sitting very still and straight – this is no intimate gathering of friends.

And before anyone else can speak the air is full of white feathers, twisting and tumbling as if a goose-down bolster has burst open. The sweat chills on my back. Feathers: everywhere. All I can hear is the thin-voiced cardinal muttering a string of prayers and blood pounding in my ears. *Feathers*. They fly up past my face, whirling and soft, tickling my bare feet – so thick do they fall I can't see below me at all. What witchcraft is this? At last, the white cloud sinks to the floor, and now I see that this *is* no witchcraft. It's the Hidden, and I've never seen one of the Hidden in the flesh before. I've only ever heard the stories, the songs, and the breath freezes in my chest at the wonder of it.

There are four of them, tall and cloaked and more beautiful than any mortal, two girls and two boys, one much younger with wild red hair – a child, a Hidden child? I was always told the Hidden hatched full-grown from seething hot spawn spewed from the mouth of Hell. But here is a child who looks no older than me: thirteen. The other taller boy is wrapped

in a cloak of swan's feathers that tangle in his black curls and pool around his feet. One of the girls is red-headed like the child, and the other's hair is silver-white like a pewter jug – I can't help noticing their hair, great swathes of it, shining and wild, not mortal, seeming to move and shimmer as if it is alive. Not one of the Hidden looks any more than three or four years older than I am – seventeen, maybe, but they could be much older than that. I drank these stories with my wet-nurse's milk: the Hidden don't age. They don't die unless you strike them with iron – they're cursed never to enter the kingdom of heaven. And they're *here*.

“What do you want, mortals of Fontevrault?” He of the feathered cloak speaks directly to Anjou, but his eyes are lingering on Mama, and a faint smile crosses his lips. I can't take my eyes away from them. There's something so familiar about the way they hold themselves: I've seen that strange, cat-like poise before—

Anjou doesn't reply, and I swallow the urge to laugh. He's scared of them. *Coward*.

“We want to strike a covenant with you.” Mama stands, placing both hands palm-down on the table before her, and one of her rings glints in a shaft of light shining in through the window behind me. “Would any here dispute that our kind consorting with yours has its dangers?” Her voice is dry and calm, as if she is discussing the storage of winter linen.

The three full-grown Hidden share a swift glance but it's the cloaked one who speaks again, the swan-feathered boy, smiling as if these gathered noblemen and princes are nothing but foolish children. “Our longing for mortal

children, you mean?” he asks, very gently. “Or *your* longing for a drop of our immortal blood in your clans to make sure your rule is never shaken?” He sounds amused, as if on the verge of laughter.

“Both.” Mama’s voice rings out, and I know that tone. I wouldn’t argue. I half want to laugh because this chamber is full of men – rulers – and they are all too afraid to speak to the Hidden. Even Anjou. The task is left to my mother.

The dark-haired Hidden boy shrugs, and the white feathers billow around his shoulders. “Very well, my lady. If we cannot live together, we shall live apart. If you do not come near us, the Hidden will grant you the same favour.”

Just at that moment, the red-headed boy looks up. Right at me. For a thousand years, our eyes lock together, and I know that he’s been where I am now – just a boy in boiling water up to his neck. He understands: if he’s really the Devil’s spawn then I am too, for we’re the same. The Hidden boy looks away, back down at his white hands clasped together on the table, and my mouth is drier than the time Anjou stuffed it full of sand because I swore at him.

“Agreed,” Mama says, her voice hard. “We will expunge the Hidden from all that is written: it shall be as if you were nothing but a tale to frighten children. My lords?”

But before they have a chance to speak, the white-haired girl smiles, and as one, every man in the room turns to look at her, as if somebody has just lit an oil lamp in a dark room.

“Are you quite sure,” she says softly, “that there is not something you haven’t told us, mortals? A detail you may have neglected to mention?”

And as I watch, Mama freezes, holding her hands utterly still and flat down on the table as if she is fighting the urge to hurl the nearest wine vessel at the girl and smash her beautiful face.

“Rose?” The boy in the feathered cloak throws his white-haired companion a glance I can’t read the meaning of, and just as he does she makes a great show of looking up, right at the window where I am curled up into a ball, frozen with terror, on a narrow stone window ledge. The red-headed boy and girl glance at each other – she reaches out and places one hand over his, as if in protection. An older sister, perhaps?

All I can hear is the drumming of my heart.

One by one, the noblemen and the cardinal all follow the white-haired girl’s gaze, some turning in their places on the bench to fix their eyes on me. Mama remains seated. She doesn’t move. She doesn’t even flinch. My legs burn with cramp, but I daren’t move. If I fall from this ledge, I’ll die – a bloody mess on the flagstones far below.

And then, last of all, Anjou turns. He stands, leaning back against the table, squinting against the sunlight streaming in through the window behind me, and I see new heights of rage in his eyes as some kind of understanding dawns. The chamber is silent. No one knows what to say. They all just watch me, and I’m sure that time has frozen and I will be trapped in this moment for ever, and softly – so softly – I swing one leg over the window ledge, ready to climb down the wall and run for my life.

And my stepfather says, “*Nicolas*.” The hatred in his voice

hangs in the air like the stench of something rotting.

I'm not staying to finish this conversation.

And I slip. I can't hold on. Frantic, I scramble for a grip on the windowsill but the stone is like oiled silk beneath my sweating hands and I really, *really* can't hold on—

I fall, I fall, and the ground rushes up to meet me so fast, and I crash through the mimosa tree, the lavender bushes, and the tearing agony of it becomes everything, and all is black.

PART ONE

A GIRL LOST IN TIME



Connie

Hopesay Edge, present day

“So are you coming tomorrow night, Amy? You could bring Mika in the pram.” I knew it was a stupid thing to say the second I opened my mouth. Even wrapped in the enormous patchwork blanket I’d spent three months knitting, Mika was still smaller than the Creed family’s ancient and bad-tempered calico cat. There was no way Amy was going to bring her newborn to a party in the woods.

“Not this time, Connie.” Amy grinned at me, adjusting the blanket around Mika’s tiny body – she never seemed to mind my ignorance, even though I was three and a half years younger. She was in this total haze. Whacked out on baby hormones. “Mum used to take me and Blue everywhere when we were babies, though,” she went on. “We had these special earphones for festivals and we slept in a wheelbarrow. She says there’s no reason why my life has to grind to a halt just because of Mika.” For a second Amy looked worried. “She’s already on at me about when I’m going to start my course again. I just don’t know how I’m going to fit everything in.” Amy paused. She always knew just what I was thinking. “You look really tired, Con. Are you not

sleeping? It's that time of year again, isn't it?"

I shrugged. For me, early-summer would never be about a new season, a fresh beginning. When the nights grew longer, I always thought of Lissy, and how she wasn't there. But what could I say?

Amy reached out and took hold of my hand, twisting her fingers around mine. "I never really knew your sister. You must miss her so much. I mean, Blue's a total pain, but if he wasn't there it'd just be so weird and wrong. And your brother hardly ever comes home."

I was glad she hadn't said Lissy's name. Even now, six years later, I still couldn't bear the sound of her name.

I had to look away for a second or else I was going to cry. "Look, you should come on Friday!" I sounded too bright, too fake. "We can get Mika some teeny ear defenders. Your mum's right. Mika's gorgeous and amazing, but he's no excuse to sit around at home for the rest of your life."

Amy just raised both eyebrows at me, accepting without argument the fact that I didn't want to talk about my dead sister any more than she wanted to think about resuming normal life. "Don't you know the ancient legends, Connie Harker?" She spoke in an exaggerated stage whisper. "You must never, ever take a newborn baby within a mile of Hopesay Reach."

I rolled my eyes again. "Right. Or the fairies will come and take him away. I've heard all the stories, Ames. And anyway, Blue told me that Nye was going to set up his sound system over in the woods so we don't get the Hopesay zombies calling the police – you won't have to bring Mika

anywhere near the House of Horrors.”

Amy grinned. “I’m not worried about the scary fairies, Con, you know that. I love the Reach, and they’re only stories. I’m just tired, that’s all. You and Blue will have an amazing time.”

I glanced out of the window. It was getting dark. Right on cue Amy’s younger brother stuck his head around the door, white-blond hair flopping into his eyes as usual, the sleeves of his favourite faded old lumberjack shirt rolled up to the elbows. There were some things I could only talk about with Amy but at school me and Blue were always together, just like we’d been since I first came to live at Hopesay Edge. It had been such a dark, confusing time. All those weeks I’d spent in hospital, so weak, knowing that when I finally got out, Lissy just wasn’t going to be there.

“Con, Mum’s heading into town. Do you want a lift? She doesn’t want you walking home in the dark.” Blue rolled his eyes at the over-protectiveness, but despite his piss-taking I knew Mrs Creed was deadly serious. It really was getting dark, shadows lengthening down the lawn, and she never liked letting me walk home alone, superstitious just like everyone else in Hopesay Edge. Blue stepped in, bringing with him the faint, warm scent of the spices his mum had been making him grind in the kitchen – cumin seeds and turmeric.

He shut the door behind him. “So when are they going? Your mum and Nick? They’re definitely going, right?”

His excitement was infectious and I couldn’t help grinning back. “Yes, Blue – my great-aunt’s still dead and they’re off in

the morning. Which means that tomorrow night we're still having the most legendary party of all time."

Amy frowned. "They're away for nearly a week, aren't they? Are you going to be all right hanging around in the Reach by yourself, Con? Why don't you come and stay here?"

I half wanted to laugh, because the solution Mum and Nick had come up with to that little problem was all so unbelievably awful: *Joe, Joe, Joe*. "Don't worry, I've got a babysitter. My stepbrother's coming in the morning. I'll be fine without a lift, but tell your mum thanks anyway." Joe. *Oh, God*. I got up, slipping on a battered red sweatshirt that had once belonged to my brother – Rafe wasn't likely to demand it back. He hadn't been home in five years. I guess if I were teaching hot gap-year students how to dive in India, Hopesay Edge wouldn't be much of a draw to me, either. I blew kisses at Amy and Mika, then turned to Blue. "I'll see you in the morning, loser." I punched him in the ribs just hard enough and left by the back door before Mrs Creed got serious. The last thing I wanted was a ride home with Amy and Blue's mum firing questions at me the whole time about what I was going to do with myself while Mum and Nick were away.

Running down the long strip of garden, I left the black-and-white timbered cottage behind – lit-up windows warm and yellow against the gathering darkness – and I actually sprinted past the neat rows of tiny early-summer onions and carrots in case Mrs Creed decided it was too dark after all and called me back.

I climbed the stile at the end of the Creeds' garden and hopped down into long wet grass. This was the oldest part of the churchyard and all the graves here were pretty ancient, the stone dotted with pale green circles of lichen, names all worn away, with no one to remember them. It was so quiet. Lissy wasn't buried in Hopesay Edge. Mum, Dad and Rafe had scattered her ashes off the headland near Granny's house by the sea. Aged nine, I'd refused to go – that was back when I still didn't believe that Lissy was really dead. Before I'd accepted the truth: she was never coming back. She was just gone.

I ran through the churchyard, feathery fronds of grass sticking to my bare legs, unable to believe that it was really happening and Mum and Nick were actually leaving me with Joe. I mean, so at least this meant he'd never told them what I'd done at Christmas, but I really had no idea how I was going to face him again without actually dying of shame.

I had to stop running and just stand there among the gravestones and horse-chestnut trees, forcing myself to relive the night I'd sneaked out of the holiday cottage: anything to escape Mum and Nick's awful Christmas Eve drinks party, all those leering drunken middle-aged people breathing salmon-breath into my face. And then Joe following me down to the waterfront, jaunty coloured Christmas lights hanging between the street lights and even twinkling on the boats bobbing up and down in the harbour. I used to get so excited about going to the cottage every Christmas. Not any more.

Joe had sat down on the wall beside me. *You're pissed, aren't you? Bloody hell, Connie, you're only thirteen.*

Fourteen. I'm fourteen. I'd stared out at the black, glittering sea beyond the harbour wall, trying to ignore the way those bobbing fairy lights made me feel sick. *Don't tell me you never got drunk when you were my age.*

Yeah, but I used to do stuff like this with my mates. Drinking on your own isn't a good sign, Con. In fact, it's a really, really bad sign.

I'd turned to stare at him, at the chocolatey brown hair falling over his face, those high cheekbones. *If you weren't so gorgeous, I'd be angry with you, you know? Stop interfering, all right?*

Joe had shot me an incredulous look. *Shut up, Connie. You don't know what you're saying. Look, come on back to the cottage and we'll get you some water. If you're quick we can get back before anyone knows you've gone.*

Don't be stupid, Joe. I could stay out all night and they still wouldn't notice. Mum wouldn't, anyway. And I hadn't been able to stop myself. Hadn't really wanted to stop myself, to tell the truth. I just watched my hand reaching out as if it belonged to someone else and I could do nothing to prevent it landing on Joe's knee. The rough, warm feel of his jeans, the fabric of my skirt glittering silver and red under the street lights. It was me. I really was touching him.

You're just so lovely, Joe.

He'd jerked away like I'd slapped him, his face stiff with horror. *What are you doing, Connie? I'm six years older than you.*

You're the only one who gives a shit about me, you know. The only one.

Joe slid sideways along the wall, putting as much distance between us as he could, pity written all over his face. *Listen,*

Con. One day you're going to make a lucky bloke really happy, but you're fourteen and I'm your stepbrother, OK? This is wrong. Really, really wrong. Come on, let's get you back to the house.

His pity was the worst thing, and I think that's what made me angry enough to say it: *Don't give me that stepbrother bullshit. I'm fourteen and I'm not Lissy. That's the most important thing, isn't it? You were her stepbrother, too. I'm not Lissy. She's dead, Joe. Get over it.*

He'd walked away then, without another word, and I'd stayed out all night, and no one came to find me, because no one else gave enough of a crap, and I'd pushed Joe just about as far as it was possible to push him.

I sat down among the gravestones, covering my face with my hands as if I could somehow shove away the memory. I'd made a move on Joe – on my own stepbrother – and now I had to live with him for an entire week. Knowing that he had to be dreading it as much as I was really didn't help. I couldn't help shivering, suddenly unable to shake the feeling that someone was actually watching me, a witness to my melodramatic collapse.

You really just can't stop embarrassing yourself, can you, Connie Harker? It'll be a dog walker, I told myself sternly. *A dog walker who now probably thinks I'm crazy. Loads of people go this way.* There was a public footpath running across the southernmost corner of the orchard at home and now that Uncle Miles was gone people had started using it again, climbing over the stile in the churchyard right into the grounds of the Reach.

But that didn't explain why the temperature had dropped five degrees, cold air biting through my thin sweatshirt. The

skin on the back of my neck tingled like the time Blue quietly pushed a handful of sheep's wool he'd untangled from a barbed-wire fence down the back of my T-shirt and I'd nearly wet myself shrieking. *Run!* I screamed at myself. I couldn't move. My legs just wouldn't obey my brain and I couldn't get up. *Pull yourself together, Connie.* Swallowing my fear, I forced myself back up onto my feet and stood still among the tumbled and silent rows of headstones, goosebumps rising on my legs.

There it was again, that prickling, uneasy sensation of being *watched*. Bright pain spasmed behind my eyes, and I rubbed my temples. Another headache, just like I always got when I woke up after the Dream. I didn't want to think about the Dream now. Not here. Wind shifted the branches of the huge, spreading old horse-chestnut trees, releasing the heady scent of their blossom.

"Hello?" I shouted. "Is anyone there? Come on. Stop messing with me." I did my best to sound tough and unafraid, but my heartbeat wouldn't stop accelerating, and despite that chill in the air a cool trickle of sweat slid down my back.

No reply. All I could hear was birdsong and the rustle of wind in the trees shaking loose pale slivers of horse-chestnut blossom that drifted around me like snow, catching in my hair.

"Don't be an idiot," I said, aloud. "There's no one here but you. You're not getting enough sleep, that's all. Imagining stuff."

I ran, heart pounding in my chest, cutting through the churchyard until I pushed my way through the gap in the

hedge that led to the safety of our orchard – *home* – a glorious tangle of crabbed and twisted apple trees. The chickens had all been put away, which was usually my job, but it was still light – just – so Mum couldn't hold *that* against me, at least.

Winding my way through the apple trees, I stepped out onto the lawn, breathing in the gorgeous warm green scent of cut grass and the rich muddiness of the lake. The Reach sprawled beyond the carpet of lawn: a tumbling mass of warm stone, ancient timbers and a hundred mismatched windows. The sky was a swirling mass of fiery sunset, all reflected in the lake like it was the window to another world. I stood for a moment, my cold unease in the churchyard all forgotten, just drinking in the beauty of it all. It was funny to think how much I'd hated the Reach when we first came: it was here that Lissy had died. In time, though, I'd come to love every twisted chimney and every ancient door, which was proof, I suppose, of the Reach's power – a sure sign that I should have been more cautious.