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Opening extract from

Hidden Among Us

Written by

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1

Rafe

I'm building a tower.

The red and yellow bricks are smooth in my hands, and the fire is making them warm. Rain bashes at the window. It's getting dark but Mum says it's not the night. The radio is playing. Mum has gone out to the barn to get wood. She's cross because the roof is leaking and our firewood keeps getting wet. Most days since we came to live here I sit in the wheelbarrow and go with Mum, but today I was making my tower and I said no.

So now I'm on my own. It's Uncle Miles's house, but we never see him. Dad says he's like a ghost. Lissy doesn't count because she's a baby. A few weeks ago, she wasn't even here at all. She was just nobody.

The scream comes blasting out of nowhere.

Lissy, upstairs. It's not her usual crying. Something else. Something bad.

I'm scared so much it hurts in my belly but I get up anyway, leaving the tower of bricks by the fire. The hall is cold. It's full of the screaming from upstairs.

"Lissy!" I shout. "Lissy, it's OK!"

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What am I going to do?

I'm running up the stairs now because it sounds so bad, that screaming, like someone's hurting her, or she's scared—

And she stops when I'm halfway up the stairs. The scream stops. Our house is quiet again, just the radio in the kitchen. And me. Like it was before she got here, before she was born.

"Lissy?" I call, but she doesn't answer because she is just a baby. She can't do anything.

I run. Up the stairs, along the hall. The curtains are open and I can see Lissy's baby basket on the big bed. Rain is rushing down the window.

Maybe that's it: she's gone back to sleep, really quickly.

I feel sick now but I keep going, walking slowly across the stripey rug till I reach the bed and stand there looking into Lissy's basket.

She's gone. My baby sister has gone.

There's just a tangled blanket. And a pile of dead leaves, all brown and broken. Where did they come from? A leaf jumps like it has come alive, and the biggest spider ever crawls across the sheet where Lissy lay.

I can hear screaming again but this time it's me.

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2

Miriam

She's been gone for over three weeks. My baby. If we'd left the Reach when Adam wanted to, when I was still pregnant, would they still have found us? It's all my fault.

Will writing this down even help?

It's two o'clock in the morning now, but it was only just past midnight when I left Adam and Rafe sleeping together in the big double bed. I couldn't stand lying there in the dark, wanting to turn back time.

I've let everyone down.

I knew sleep would never come. I went downstairs; I pushed open the great oak front door and stepped outside into the darkness. Miles once told me this door was made over seven hundred years ago, but there are parts of the house which belong to a time before that. Hopesay Reach is an old, old place. It remembers everything.

Miles took away all our protection, and they came.

The cold was breathtaking, but I deserve to suffer. I've got to find Lissy, whatever the cost. I dropped to my knees on the front lawn – whitened with a late frost, a killing frost that will blast every last blossom from the fruit trees.

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All I could hear was her sharp cry echoing inside my head.

She needs me; I can't help her.

I begged.

It was all I could do, my only option. I begged them for mercy, in a jumbled mix of French and English that probably didn't even make sense.

"Je veux mon bébé," I whispered to the cold, cold ground. *"I'll do anything. Bring her back and I'll do whatever you want."*

I would have torn open the earth to find her; I leaned forwards ripping the grass with white-cold hands. I broke the ground, tearing a fingernail from its root. Exquisite pain shot up my hand and through my arm, but it was nothing compared to losing Lissy. My mouth opened wide but the scream was silent, and that's when it happened. I never thought they'd listen.

One did.

A voice whispered through the darkness. "*Miriam*—"

I scrambled up, breathing hard. The frozen grass burnt my bare feet. The yew tree on the lawn was shaking: branches twisted and whipped by a sudden violent wind. The waters of the lake shivered. The yew is older than Hopesay Reach itself, older than the village church, they say, and it must have weathered a million storms. But that wind sent two of its branches crashing to the ground. My hair was torn and twisted; I remember the nightgown flapping against my legs.

I looked up. A ragged black shape passed across the silver face of the moon. It circled in the sky, wheeling above me, wings spread. I didn't know what it was – some kind of bird of prey, a falcon? It dropped hard and fast like a stone. But

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when the bird landed, there was no falcon, just a tall boy with tangled red hair.

Despite my agony and fear, I'm still breathless at the wonder of it, three hours later in the grey light of dawn.

He was one of the Hidden. There was a smear of blood across his cheek; so beautiful I couldn't take my eyes away, not for a second. There was something familiar about him, even then. I felt like I'd seen him before.

"Miriam." He spoke quietly. He knew my name. I didn't know his, not then, but I saw the fear and hesitancy in his eyes. "I hear your voice in the rain." He shrugged: an odd, fluid and wholly inhuman movement that always betrays his kind to those who know, and I do. "I come against my father's word."

I'll admit a jolt of fear knocked through me when he spoke. *My father?*

"Please," I whispered, "please help me. I can't bear to be without her. Please bring Lissy back. She'll die. She'll die without me. Won't she?"

"You ask me to do what has been forbidden."

Tears streamed down my face and I asked if she was still alive.

"Of course." He sounded incredulous, as if I'd said something stupid, but how could the Hidden know how to look after a baby? They can't have their own children, not any more.

It's why they took mine.

"Why don't you come with me?" he said, so gentle and beguiling.

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"I'll take you to her."

I looked back at the house. "My little boy." I shook my head. "I can't come with you. Not to stay. I can't leave him. He's only four."

It's true what the fairy tales say: a man follows his beloved into the fairy hill. When he steps out into the light of day, it is not the next morning. A thousand million mornings have come and gone as he danced with the Hidden, with the fairies, the fee, the elves, the Sidhe, whatever you choose to call them. In the end, it is all the same. He dissolves into dust. I couldn't risk that, finding Lissy but leaving Rafe without a mother.

"Please don't cry. Lissy belongs to us now." He sighed, as if upset by the difficulty I was causing, my inability to accept she was gone.

"But she's my baby," I whispered. He wasn't going to help me. I turned away, and all I wanted to do was lie down on the frozen ground and die.

"Wait." He laid one cold hand on my arm. "Then we'll make a covenant: you can borrow her."

"What do you mean?" My voice was cracked, desperate. Even after all these years, there are still a few English words I don't recognize. "What's a covenant?"

"An agreement. A deal." He shrugged again. "I'll bring Lissy to you, and no matter how far from here you run, in fourteen years you must return to Hopesay, where our worlds meet. Bring her home to the Reach. Don't fail me, Miriam, I'm trusting you."

I told him fourteen years wasn't enough. We *could* run.

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We could hide. "What if I don't bring her back?"

He smiled. "You will. Don't try to cheat me, Miriam."

I tried to interrupt, but he spoke again, and what he said and did will freeze my blood and bones till the day I die.

The boy reached out and softly blew on his outstretched fingertips. As I watched, a tangle of briar roses appeared from nothing, cupped right there in the palm of his hand, fresh green leaves and petals stained pink like the sky at sunset, still flecked with dew.

"With this gift, I curse thee, Miriam Harker," he whispered. "Hear this. Unless one of the Hidden willingly gives up their own life in exchange for Lissy, in fourteen years any mortal child born from your body will die if you don't bring Lissy home to my father." He smiled, as if he'd just made a joke and he was waiting for me to laugh.

I watched, breathless with horror. The green leaves twined about his fingers were starting to wither, turn brown. The petals began to curl up, yellowing.

"So don't try to shut the Gateway, Miriam," he said, gently; "and don't cheat."

The briar roses shrank to nothing but a withered stick, then a small heap of dust in his palm, which he let fall to the frozen ground.

"Just promise you'll bring her back." I couldn't believe what I'd just seen. My whole body tingled with fear. Yes, and wonder, too.

The boy nodded. "My word is my bond. Do you believe in a god, Miriam? Some enormous mind who made the very earth we stand on? A force that shapes the world and makes

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sense of it, something kind and good and merciful?"

His question stunned me; I thought it might be some kind of trick. Twenty-five years of church-going prompted me to find an answer, even though in truth I'm not sure there is one. "Of course I believe in God."

"Good," he said, quietly, "because only such a thing will now save me from my father's rage. I'll come back with the sun, and bring her."

Before I could speak again, he was gone. Simply gone, leaving nothing but a whirlwind of green summer leaves. As I watched, they withered and turned brown, just as the briar roses had done, landing on the frosty earth.

And now I'm scared. So, so scared. Fourteen years isn't enough.

I have to find a way of unravelling that curse, of cheating him – them. The Hidden.

His father.

I won't let them have Lissy. I won't let her go.

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PART TWO

THE CHEAT

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3

Rafe

Fourteen years later

"Yes?" The librarian barely looked up from his computer; I got a prime view of his greasy thinning hair. I showed my Reader's Pass: he had no choice but to help commit my crime. He wouldn't know that until afterwards, though.

I handed over my request, written on a sheet of paper with the school letterhead. All I could do was hope that and the forged letter from the Head of History would be enough to impress the librarian. My heart rate accelerated.

When the librarian looked up, his expression was blank, all trace of emotion ironed from his face. "You do realize that we advise all researchers to inform us of their needs up to two hours before—"

I shrugged, carefully. Could he sense my panic? "Sorry."

The librarian glanced down at his computer screen. "What you've asked for is restricted access, anyway."

Frozen sweat spread across my back, between my shoulder blades. I tugged the counterfeit letter out of my back pocket and handed it over. My tormentor glanced at it, sighed, and at last, he got up out of his seat.

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"If you'd like to follow me, sir." Extremely sarcastic with the *sir*.

But inside I was punching the air. I'd done it. First stage complete. Now I just had to finish the job.

Stealing a priceless manuscript from one of the most famous institutions in the world.

I walked after the librarian, keeping my eyes on the back of his shirt. The faint dark sweat mark between his shoulders. Wrinkled trousers. Past rows of long dark wooden tables, walls lined with bookshelves – a chubby woman with glasses, head down. Some idiot in a tie-dyed t-shirt. So this was where all those awkward losers ended up: the ones who, unlike me, never learned to disguise their intelligence.

One step at a time.

The sheaf of yellowish paper was fragile – almost brittle – between my fingers. A jumble of black lettering.

I must have looked surprised because the librarian said, "It's more of an obscure journal than a book." He gave me a grey-lipped smile. "According to my records, this issue hasn't been touched since 1917. Congratulations – in a few moments you'll be the only living person on earth to know what the author knew."

The only living person on earth. It was hot and stuffy in there but I felt cold, all the same. I would be sharing secrets with the dead.

"The Reading Room closes in two hours. Of course, you're free to make notes. I'm sure I don't need to point out to a young man from *your* school that annotating the manuscript itself is strictly forbidden." One last sarcastic

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smile, and the librarian was gone.

I chose a seat furthest from the information desk and put on the latex gloves he'd given me, horribly slippery against my skin. I glanced down, allowing myself a look. The words flew out at me, stark and terrifying, releasing a wave of memories I wish I could have surgically removed. It's still so clear after fourteen years. *My parents both crying, led away by policemen. The empty baby basket, and—*

I forced myself to make sense of the letters on the page.

It is well known they take children, for what purpose only God can tell—

This was it. I'd found it. No time to read on. I had to get this over with. Get out of there.

I had no bag except a library-branded clear plastic carrier; my stuff was all waiting in the locker room downstairs, according to the strict regulations. That was OK. That was just fine. I didn't need a bag. I picked up the manuscript, leaning back in my chair. Everyone else was busy reading. The tie-dyed guy stared off into space but towards the door, well away from me.

Now. I had to do it now.

After fourteen years I was going to know for sure who they were. Why they took my sister. And if they were coming back.

Just as I was about to hide the journal, I saw that someone else had broken the rules, too.

There was writing in the bottom margin. Brown ink, sloping old-fashioned letters – no one writes like that any more: a hundred years old at least.

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They will kill you—

Then I felt true cold fear, all right: an ice-cold hand taking hold of my guts and twisting.

What was it supposed to mean? *Who?*

I slid the manuscript down between my tucked-in shirt and my skin and walked out of the Reading Room, through the British Library café – black smoked glass everywhere like some kind of low-grade club in Shoreditch – out past the lobby and down a flight of steps into the wild mad roar of the Euston Road: four insane lanes of lorries, cars, double-decker buses and lycra-wearing cyclists gambling with death. A bit like me.

And all this time, Lissy was running for her life and she didn't even know it.

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4

Joe

The house loomed up behind me, all rain-slick stone and glittering windows. Daylight was fading now, and the air felt like damp cold hands on my skin.

Out in the courtyard, Connie was crouched down by a puddle, bare feet in the water, bright red shorts and legs streaked with mud. Her hair was pinned back with a load of shiny clips that stood out bright against the grey evening; they were decorated with red plastic cherries, an orange pineapple. The overgrown cobblestones shone with wet.

"Connie!" I called. "Your mam's looking for you."

She turned and smiled, a jumble of white teeth. "All right. In a minute, Joe. Don't worry about Mum. She's just in a massive stress because of Lissy." Connie reminded me of a puppy, loud and enthusiastic. "We were on our way to pick Lissy up when she texted and said she'd got on the train instead. I couldn't believe it! We had to drive all the way here without her!"

"It's not like she robbed a bank." I was sort of intrigued by Connie's sister and I'd not even met her yet.

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"Mum was sooo cross." By the look of it, Connie was half enjoying the scandal and half terrified by her sister's crimes. Catching a train didn't seem like a big deal to me, but I didn't know the full story then. "Anyway," she said, "have you met my friend?"

"What are you on about? There's no one here." I followed Connie's gaze over to the tangle of undergrowth on the far side of the courtyard.

I'd been wrong: we weren't alone.

There was this tall lass standing among the rain-drenched nettles and cow parsley. A wave of shock shot through my body. How could I not have seen her before? Long white hair coiled around her shoulders, even though she looked only a couple of years older than me, sixteen or so maybe. She smiled at us, just watching. She didn't seem fussed about the rain or even seem to notice it, even though it was falling so heavily now her face was dripping.

She never took her eyes off me.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Connie said. "She said she's a princess, and I believe her." She laughed, like she knew it sounded daft.

The girl smiled at me again. My heart was hammering like a bloody train. There was something about her. She wasn't just pretty. It was more than that – I couldn't take my eyes off her, either. She looked amused and a bit thoughtful, and I'd got this bad feeling she was working out how to get one over on me. A bit like a cat teasing a mouse.

"Come inside, Connie," I said again, deliberately looking away from the white-haired girl. The yard had gone very quiet. When me and Dad arrived, he'd pointed out a fledgling

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blackbird nosediving from the branches of an apple tree, and you could hear birdsong everywhere. Now it was silent, as if they'd all been switched off.

Which was creepy, to be honest.

"Come on!" I hissed at Connie, and she looked up, surprised at the panic in my voice. I was pretty surprised too – I just wanted to get away from that girl, and I couldn't have said why if you'd paid me.

"All right, keep your hair on." Connie got up, looking down at her soaked clothes, her mud-streaked legs, smiling. "Mum's going to kill me – these shorts are new!" She ran over to the door, shivering theatrically and waving at the white-haired girl, who lifted one hand but said nothing. I turned back, screwing up the courage to tell her to get lost, but there was no one there. She'd gone. Just disappeared.

Lost in the rain.

I must've imagined the silence before, because now the yard was full of birdsong again – chattering starlings, even a cuckoo.

I followed Connie inside, walking quicker than I needed to, and as we came in I saw how thick the walls were here – nearly two feet of ancient stone. Were all medieval houses built like nuclear bunkers? Connie skipped off down the corridor leaving wet footprints on flagstones worn smooth by centuries of human traffic. I locked the back door behind us, just in case. The girl may have gone but what if she'd got mates nearby, looking for trouble?

Call me suspicious but you don't just hang around in other people's gardens.

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That's when I saw it: a patch of bare grey stone left in paint the colour of curdled milk, just above the door frame. It was the shape of a cross, as if a crucifix had hung there for years and years, since long before the walls were painted.

Whatever the reason, the cross was gone now. Dad had said the house was really ancient, that it used to be a priory hundreds of years ago till Henry the Eighth closed down all the monasteries. *It's probably haunted,* I told myself. *Headless monks and all that stuff.* Then I told myself not to be an idiot, and wondered again what I was going to do with myself for a whole week. There was no TV: even the radio didn't work. What did Miriam's stepbrother *do* here all the time? Dad said he didn't even have a job, and muttered something about inherited money. So far, the only sign of his existence was a battered old estate car parked on the drive and a dusty bottle of champagne in the fridge with half an inch left in the bottom, which made Miriam tut and shake her head. *Don't worry about Miles,* she told me and Dad. *He's a bit eccentric. More like bloody rude,* I thought, but I'd the sense not to say it.

We'd only just arrived. I was bored out of my brain already.

Connie had left the kitchen door open – I could hear her chatting to Dad – but there was another door off the stone-flagged corridor. This one looked much newer, with peeling white paint, glass panels and a pitted, tarnished brass handle. I pushed it open, thinking that maybe I could kill a couple of hours exploring the house – it was big enough: a great rambling sprawly place, all black and white timbers, windows in odd places, and gloomy panelled rooms. I didn't

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fancy reading, and I'd broken a guitar string so couldn't even do any practice till we'd found the nearest music shop.

I found myself in an old lean-to built against the side of the original house. There was a battered, stained table with a jackknife on it, and a dirty sink with a load of manky feathers blocking the plughole. Someone had been gutting pheasants by the look of it – illegally shot, because it wouldn't be the shooting season for another few months. They were still breeding. *Grandad wouldn't approve,* I thought. He was retired now but still read *Modern Gamekeeping* every month. I looked around the room, feeling uneasy. There was a lot here Grandad wouldn't like: next to a pair of mud-spattered boots, a wooden cabinet leaned drunkenly by the cobwebby window, the door swinging open. I went over and shut it, turning the rusty key. What about Connie? You'd have to be brain-dead leaving a gun cabinet unlocked, especially with a kid in the house. It made me feel nervy, like the Reach was a dangerous place. Hanging on the wall beside it was a collection of what looked like torture instruments, all springs and horrible steel jaws. Gin traps, designed to catch and mutilate poachers. Grandad had one in his shed. *Evil things,* he'd once told me. *They'll maim a man for life, not to mention the kiddies that used to get trapped in them by mistake. It's a good thing they were banned.*

I couldn't help shivering, like someone had just dropped a handful of snow down my back. Unsecured shotguns, illegal traps. *It's not safe here.* I wanted to turn round, go into the kitchen and find Dad. Get back in our car and just drive away.

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"What do you think you're doing?" A harsh, upper-class voice: angry.

I spun around, feeling really guilty, like I was a trespasser, not just an unwilling guest. The stranger was wearing a battered old jacket patched with gaffer tape, and had a soggy roll-up hanging out the corner of his mouth. He looked older than my dad, grey-haired and pale as cheese, but there was something hawkish and dangerous about him. His fingers were covered in blood. *Christ*.

"What do you want?" he snapped. "This is a private house."

So this was Miriam's stepbrother, the bloke who owned this place: Miles, a stupid posh-sounding name. What a charmer.

"I'm here with Miriam."

He frowned and lit a match, holding it to the end of his roll-up, watching me all the time. His eyes were a weird shade of pearly grey, like the sky just after it's pissed it down. He blew out a cloud of rank smoke.

"You're not Rafe. Not her boy." His nostrils widened like he was sniffing the air, and I couldn't help thinking of Grandad's cocker, Meg, when she got on a scent. OK on a dog, a creepy look on a *person*.

I shook my head. "No." Hadn't Miriam explained *anything*? Talk about bloody awkward.

He took another draw on his fag, obviously losing interest. "Stay out of here. It's dangerous. The Reach isn't a safe place. She shouldn't have brought you here." He gave me a long, searching look, then turned and took an old shotgun

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from the cabinet, not even seeming to notice that I'd shut the door, turned that rusty key in the lock. It should've had a proper combination, a padlock. Shouldering the gun, he turned and went out the garden door, letting it slam shut. I stood watching rain hammer against the window, thinking about the empty fridge. It was like he never went to the shops, but just lived on scrawny old birds from the woods.

I don't mind admitting I wanted to go home. That I was even a bit scared.

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