

# THE FALSE PRINCE



JENNIFER A. NIELSEN

THE  
FALSE  
PRINCE

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THE ASCENDANCE TRILOGY  
— BOOK ONE —

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*For Mom,  
Every great thing I ever learned from  
you was taught by example.*

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• ONE •

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If I had to do it all over again, I would not have chosen this life. Then again, I'm not sure I ever had a choice.

These were my thoughts as I raced away from the market, with a stolen roast tucked under my arm.

I'd never attempted roast thievery before, and I was already regretting it. It happens to be very difficult to hold a chunk of raw meat while running. More slippery than I'd anticipated. If the butcher didn't catch me with his cleaver first, and literally cut off my future plans, I vowed to remember to get the meat wrapped next time. Then steal it.

He was only a few paces behind now, chasing me at a better speed than I'd have expected for a man of his girth. He yelled very loudly in his native language, one I didn't recognize. He was originally from one of the far western countries. Undoubtedly a country where killing a meat thief was allowed.

It was this sort of thought that encouraged me to run faster. I rounded a corner just as the cleaver suddenly cut into a wood post behind me. Even though he was aiming for me, I couldn't

help but admire his throwing accuracy. If I hadn't turned when I did, the cleaver would've found its target.

But I was only a block from Mrs. Turbeldy's Orphanage for Disadvantaged Boys. I knew how to disappear there.

And I might have made it, if not for the bald man sitting outside the tavern, who stretched out his foot in time to trip me. Luckily, I managed to keep hold of the roast, although it did no favors to my right shoulder as I fell onto the hard dirt road.

The butcher leaned over me and laughed. "'Bout time you get what's comin' to you, filthy beggar."

As a point of fact, I hadn't begged for anything. It was beneath me.

His laughter was quickly followed up with a kick to my back that chased my breath away. I curled into a ball, prepared for a beating I wasn't sure I'd live to regret. The butcher landed a second kick and had reared back for a third, when another man shouted, "Stop!"

The butcher turned. "You stay out of this. He stole a roast."

"An entire roast? Really? And what is the cost?"

"Thirty garlins."

My well-trained ears heard the sound of coins in a bag, then the man said, "I'll pay you fifty garlins if you turn that boy over to me now."

"Fifty? One moment." The butcher gave me a final kick in the side, then leaned low toward me. "If you ever come into my

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shop again, I'll cut you up and sell you as meat at the market. Got it?"

The message was straightforward. I nodded.

The man paid the butcher, who stomped away. I wanted to look up at whoever had saved me further beating, but I was hunched in the only position that didn't send me gasping in pain, and I was in no hurry to change that.

The pity I felt for myself wasn't shared by the man with the coins. He grabbed my shirt and yanked me to my feet.

Our eyes locked as he lifted me. His were dark brown and more tightly focused than I'd ever seen before. He smiled slightly as he studied me, his thin mouth barely visible behind a neatly trimmed brown beard. He looked to be somewhere in his forties and dressed in the fine clothes of the upper class, but based on the way he'd lifted me, he was much stronger than I expected of a nobleman.

"I'll have a word with you, boy," he said. "You'll walk with me to the orphanage or I'll have you carried there."

The entire right side of my body throbbed, but the left side was okay, so I favored it as I started to walk.

"Stand up straight," the man ordered.

I ignored him. He was probably some rich country gentleman who wanted to purchase an indentured servant for his lands. Although I was eager to leave behind the tough streets of Carchar, servitude wasn't in my future plans, which meant I could walk as crookedly as I wanted. Besides, my right leg really hurt.

Mrs. Turbeldy's Orphanage for Disadvantaged Boys was the only place for orphaned boys in the northern end of Carthya. Nineteen of us lived there, ranging in age from three to fifteen. I was almost fifteen, and any day now, Mrs. Turbeldy would send me away. But I didn't want to leave yet, and certainly not as this stranger's servant boy.

Mrs. Turbeldy was waiting in her office when I walked in, with the man close behind me. She was too fat to credibly claim she starved along with the rest of us, but strong enough to beat anyone who complained about that fact. In recent months, she and I had settled into a routine of barely tolerating each other. Mrs. Turbeldy must have seen what happened outside, because she shook her head and said, "A roast? What were you thinking?"

"That we had a lot of hungry boys," I said. "You can't feed us bean bread every day and not have a revolt."

"You'll give me that roast, then," she said, holding out her plump hands.

Business first. I clutched the roast more tightly to myself and nodded at the man. "Who's he?"

The man stepped forward. "My name is Bevin Conner. Tell me yours."

I stared at him without answering, which earned me a whack on the back of the head from Mrs. Turbeldy's broom. "His name is Sage," she told Conner. "And as I told you before, you'd be better off with a rabid badger than this one."

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Conner raised an eyebrow and stared at me as if that amused him, which was annoying because I had no interest in providing him with any entertainment. So I tossed my hair out of my eyes and said, “She’s right. So can I go now?”

Conner frowned and shook his head. The moment of amusement had passed. “What can you do, boy?”

“If you bothered to ask my name, you might use it.”

He continued as if he hadn’t heard me. Also annoying. “What’s your training?”

“He don’t have any,” Mrs. Turbeldy said. “None a gentleman like yourself would need, anyhow.”

“What did your father do?” Conner asked me.

“He was best as a musician, but still a terrible one,” I said. “If he made a single coin from playing, my family never saw it.”

“He was probably a drunk.” Mrs. Turbeldy rapped my ear with her knuckles. “So this one’s made his way through theft and lies.”

“What sort of lies?”

I wasn’t sure if the question was directed to me or Mrs. Turbeldy. But he was looking at Mrs. Turbeldy, so I let her speak.

She took Conner by the arm and pulled him into a corner, which was an entirely useless gesture because not only was I standing right there and perfectly able to hear every word, but the story was also about me, so it was hardly a secret. Conner

obliged her, though I noticed he faced himself toward me as she spoke.

“First time the boy came in here, he had a shiny silver coin in his hand. Said he was a runaway, the son of a dead duke from somewhere in Avenia, only he didn’t want to be a duke. So if I took him in and gave him preferential care and a place to hide, he’d pay me a coin a week. Kept it up for two weeks, all the time laughin’ it up on extra servings at dinner and with extra blankets on his bed.”

Conner glanced at me, and I rolled my eyes. He’d be less impressed when she finished the story.

“Then one night, he took with a fever. Got all delirious late in the night, hitting at everyone and yelling and such. I was there when he confessed it all. He’s no son of anyone important. The coins belonged to a duke all right, but he’d stolen them to trick me into caring for him. I dumped his body into the cellar to get better or not, I didn’t care. Next time I checked on him, he’d got over the fever on his own and was a good deal more humble.”

Conner looked at me again. “He doesn’t look so humble now.”

“I got over that too,” I said.

“So why’d you let him stay?” Conner asked Mrs. Turbeldy.

Mrs. Turbeldy hesitated. She didn’t want to tell him it was because I picked up goodies for her now and then, ribbon for her hats or chocolates from the cake shop. Because of that, Mrs.

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Turbeldy didn't hate me nearly as much as she pretended to. Or maybe she did. I stole from her too.

Conner walked back to me. "A thief and a liar, eh? Can you manage a sword?"

"Sure, if my opponent doesn't have one."

He grinned. "Do you farm?"

"No." I took that as an insult.

"Hunt?"

"No."

"Can you read?"

I stared up at him through the parts of my hair. "What are you wanting me for, Conner?"

"You'll address me as Sir or Master Conner."

"What are you wanting me for, Sir Master Conner?"

"That's a conversation for another time. Gather your things. I'll wait for you here."

I shook my head. "Sorry, but when I leave the comfort of Mrs. Turbeldy's fine establishment, I go on my own."

"You're going with him," Mrs. Turbeldy said. "You've been bought and paid for by Master Conner, and I can't wait to be rid of you."

"You'll earn your freedom by doing whatever I ask of you and doing it well," Conner added. "Or serve me poorly and serve me for life."

"I wouldn't serve anyone for an hour until freedom," I said. Conner took a step toward me, hands out. I threw the roast I'd been holding at him and he flinched to avoid it. Using that

moment, I pushed past Mrs. Turbeldy and darted into the street. It would've been helpful to know that he'd left a couple of vigils at the door. One grabbed my arms while the other clubbed me over the head from behind. I barely had time to curse their mothers' graves before I crumpled to the ground.

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## • TWO •

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I awoke with my hands tied behind my back, and lying in the bed of a wagon. A throbbing headache pulsed inside me, worsened by the jostling of the wagon as we rode. The least Conner could have done was give me something soft to lie on.

I resisted the temptation to open my eyes until my situation became clearer. My wrists were tied behind my back with a coarse rope, one that might be used to lead a horse. If it was, then I wondered if the rope was a last-minute idea. Maybe Conner hadn't expected to be taking me by force.

Conner should have come more prepared. This thick rope worked to my advantage. It was easier to loosen the knots.

Someone coughed near me. Didn't sound like Conner. Maybe it was one of his thug vigils.

As slowly as possible, I inched one eye open. The cool spring day had become a bit overcast but wasn't yet threatening rain. Too bad. I could've used a bath.

One of Conner's vigils was at the far end of the wagon,

looking at the view behind us. That probably meant Conner and the other vigil were on the seat at the front of the wagon.

Another cough, to my left. I let my head bounce with the next jolt of the wagon to see where it had come from.

Two boys sat there. The shorter one closest to me seemed to be doing the coughing. Both were near my age. The coughing boy looked sickly and pale, while the other was larger and tanned. They each had light brown hair, though the coughing boy's hair was nearer to blond. He had rounder features as well. I suspected wherever he came from, he'd spent more time sick in bed than at work. And just the opposite for the other boy.

I judged myself to be a blend of the two. Nothing about me was remarkable. I was only of medium height, one of many ways I disappointed my father, who had felt that it would hinder my success (I disagreed — tall people fit in fewer hiding places). My hair was badly in need of cutting, tangled, and dark blond but getting lighter with each passing month. And I had a forgettable face, which, again, worked in my favor.

The boy coughed again and I opened both eyes to determine if he was sick or had something to say and was clearing his throat to get our attention.

Only he caught me looking at him. Our eyes focused so solidly on each other that it was pointless to pretend I was still asleep, at least to him. Would he give up my secret? I hoped not. I needed time to think, and time for some unfortunately placed bruises to heal.

Time was not on my side.

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“He’s awake!” That was the larger boy, who got the attention of Conner’s backseat vigil.

The vigil crawled across the wagon to slap my cheek, which wasn’t necessary because my eyes were mostly open. I swore at him, then winced as he yanked me into a sitting position.

“Not too rough,” Conner called from his seat. “He’s a guest, Cregan.”

The vigil now known as Cregan glared at me. I didn’t say anything else, figuring the phrase I’d just used to curse at him had satisfactorily explained my wishes for the cause of his death.

“You’ve met Cregan,” Conner said, then added, “Mott is our driver.”

Mott glanced back to nod a hello at me. He and Cregan couldn’t have been designed to look more different from each other. Mott was tall, dark-skinned, and nearly bald. What little hair he did have was black and shaved to his scalp. He was the one by the tavern who’d tripped me when I was trying to escape the butcher. In contrast, Cregan was short — not much taller than I was, and shorter than the tanned boy near me. He was surprisingly pale for a man who likely spent much of his day outdoors, and he had a thick crop of blond hair that he tied back at the nape of his neck. Mott was lean and muscular while Cregan looked softer than I knew him to be, judging by the way he’d clubbed me at the orphanage.

How strange that there could be two people so different from each other and yet my dislike for them was equally fierce.

Conner motioned to the boys in the wagon with me. “That’s Latamer and Roden.”

Latamer was the cougher. Roden had ratted me out for being awake. They nodded at me, then Latamer shrugged, as if to say he had no more of an idea why we were here than I did.

“I’m hungry,” I said. “I’d planned on having roast for dinner, so whatever you’ve got had better be good.”

Conner laughed and tossed an apple onto my lap, which sat there because my hands were still tied behind me.

Roden reached over, snatched the apple, and took a big bite of it. “One of the rewards for not having fought coming along. I’m not tied up like a prisoner.”

“That was mine,” I said.

“The apple was for anyone willing to take it,” Conner said.

There was silence for another moment, except for the sound of Roden eating. I stared icily at him, though I knew it’d do no good. If he came from an orphanage as I did, he knew the rules of survival. Rule number one said you took food whenever it was available, as much as you could get.

“Neither of you fought Conner?” I asked Latamer and Roden.

Latamer shook his head and coughed. He probably didn’t have the strength to fight. Roden leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his legs. “I saw the orphanage you came from. It was ten times the place I lived in. Then Conner comes and says if I cooperate, I could get a big reward. So no, I didn’t fight.”

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“You might have given me that nice speech instead of having me hit over the head,” I told Conner. “What’s the reward?”

Conner didn’t turn around to answer. “Cooperate first, then we’ll talk reward.”

Roden tossed his apple core from the cart. He didn’t even have the decency to eat all of it.

“You can untie me now,” I said. It probably wasn’t going to be that easy, but there was no harm in asking.

Conner answered. “Mrs. Turbeldy warned me that you have a history of running away. Where do you go?”

“To church, of course. To confess my sins.”

Roden snorted a laugh, but Conner didn’t seem to find the same humor. “I can starve that blasphemy out of you, boy.”

I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, hoping to end any conversation involving me. For the most part, it worked. Roden said something about his devotion to the church, but I let it go. None of it mattered. I didn’t plan on being here much longer.

About an hour later, the wagon stopped in a small town I’d been to once before. It was named Gelvins, although as small as it was, I’m not sure it deserved any name. Gelvins was more like an outpost than a town, with only a few shops on the street and a dozen pathetic excuses for homes. Carthyan homes were normally well built and sturdy, but Gelvins was poor and its farms dry. A sturdy home was a luxury few here could dream of, much less afford to build. Most of these thin wooden structures looked like they would be finished in a stiff windstorm. Our wagon

had stopped in front of a shack with a small sign over the doorway identifying it as the Gelvins Charity Orphanage. I knew this place. I'd stayed here several months ago after Mrs. Turbeldy temporarily kicked me out.

Conner took Mott with him and left Cregan to guard us. As soon as Conner left, Cregan jumped out of the wagon and said he was going to get a quick drink in the tavern and that he'd personally kill any boy who tried to escape.

"Another orphan?" Roden asked. "Conner's probably been to every orphanage in the country. What could he possibly want with all of us?"

"You don't know?" I asked.

Latamer shrugged, but Roden said, "He's looking for one particular boy, but I don't know why."

"He won't want me." Latamer's voice was so quiet, the snorting of our horses nearly drowned him out. "I'm sick."

"Maybe he will," I said. "We don't know what he wants."

"I plan on being whatever he wants," Roden said. "I'm not going back to any orphanage, and I've got no future on the streets."

"Who is Bevin Conner?" I asked. "Do either of you know anything about him?"

"I overheard him speaking to Master Grippings, who runs the orphanage where Roden and I lived," Latamer mumbled. "He said he was a friend of the king's court."

"King Eckbert?" I shook my head. "Conner's lying, then. Everyone knows the king has no friends."

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Latamer shrugged. "Friend or enemy, he convinced Master Grippings that he was here as a service to the king."

"But what does that have to do with us?" I asked. "A handful of orphaned boys?"

"He just wants one boy," Roden reminded us. "The rest of us will be cast away as soon as we become useless to Conner. He said as much to Master Grippings."

"Let me make it easier on you," I said to Roden. "Untie me and I'll be on my way. That's one less boy to contend with."

"I'll do no such thing," Roden said. "Do you think I want to be punished for your escape?"

"Fine. But the knots are really tight. Could you just loosen them?"

Roden shook his head. "If they're tight, it's because you irritated Conner's vigils, and you probably deserve it."

"Conner wouldn't want him to be hurt." Latamer crept toward me and said, "Turn around."

"I can't maneuver with my arms behind me. Just reach back there."

Latamer stretched an arm across my back, which I caught with my hand and twisted behind him. Roden jumped up to one knee, startled, but with my other hand I slipped a noose over Latamer's neck and pulled it so that it was nearly tightened. Roden froze, waiting to see what I'd do next.

Getting the rope off my wrists had been an easy matter. Knotting it into a noose was a bit trickier, although now was not the time to admire my handiwork. Roden didn't look impressed

with my behind-the-back knot tying. Clearly, he'd never attempted something like that before, or he would have been. Or maybe he just didn't want me to strangle Latamer in front of him.

"Not an inch closer to me," I warned Roden. "Or else I'll dump him over the side of the cart and you can describe to Conner the sound of his snapping neck."

"Please don't do that," Latamer breathed.

Roden sat back down. "I don't care if you kill him and I don't care if you run away. Leave if you want, and pray Conner's vigils don't find you."

I stood, apologized to Latamer for threatening to kill him, then gave a ceremonial bow to Roden. The bow might've been a mistake. Midway through standing up straight, Cregan whacked me in the back with the flat end of his sword. I fell forward, all air knocked from my lungs.

"You know what'd happen to me if I let you get away, boy?" Cregan snarled.

I knew, and I wasn't entirely opposed to it.

"You said you'd kill anyone who tried to escape," Roden reminded him.

"And so I will," Cregan said, baring his teeth when I turned to look at him. He'd replaced his sword with a knife and leapt into the wagon in two steps. I rolled over to make a run for it, but he grabbed my shirt, shoved me back down, and pressed the knife to my throat. "Master Conner doesn't need all of you. And I think he needs you least of all."

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Suddenly, I had a motivation to be needed by Master Conner. “Okay,” I grumbled. “You win. I’ll cooperate.”

“You’re lying,” Cregan said.

“I often lie. But not about this. I’ll cooperate.”

Cregan smiled, pleased to have humiliated me. He replaced his knife in the sheath at his waist, then yanked me up by my collar and tossed me into the corner of the wagon. “We’ll see.”

A minute later, Conner returned to the wagon with Mott and a boy walking beside him. I squinted, certain I recognized him. He was tall and unusually thin. His hair was darker than both mine and Roden’s, but his was stringy and straight and more in need of a trim than mine, if that was possible.

The boy climbed dutifully into the back of the wagon. Conner glanced at my untied hands and then at the thin vein of blood trickling down my neck. He eyed Cregan. “Any trouble?”

“None, sir,” Cregan responded. “Only I believe you’ll find Sage to be more cooperative now.”

Conner smiled as if that was all he needed to know of the matter. “I’m glad to hear it. Boys, meet Tobias. He’ll be joining us in our quest.”

“What quest?” I asked.

Conner shook his head. “Patience, Sage. Patience is the mark of a ruler.”

And that was my first clue about why Conner had taken us. We were all in terrible danger.