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CHAPTER ONE

THE RAVEN

Every morning, Clara woke up with a word in her head. Most of the time, the word had something to do with humdrum events that come up most everyday, words like "test" or "chocolate" or "gymnastics." But sometimes, when a nightmare troubled her in the wee hours of the night, the word changed to "monster," "dungeon," "ditch," "drowning" or "nothingness," like echoes of the bad dream in final attempt to devour her.

The word "raven" awoke Clara the morning her parents took the car to go visit their elderly aunt. She sat right up in bed, trying to remember what nightmare had brought forth the image of a raven swirling through her drowsy thoughts.

There had not been a nightmare. There had not even been a dream worth recollecting back here in the real world. So she promptly dismissed the raven croaking its song on this Saturday morning, and got up.

As she looked for her slippers under the bed, she remembered the story Great-aunt Cuckoo often told her, the one about the black bird who served as a messenger of death.

In secret, Clara liked to go over certain passages of the story word by word. Especially the beginning! Yes, she liked the beginning far more than the melancholy ending, which Great-aunt Cuckoo could never tell without shedding a tear and heaving a big sigh.

Unlike her parents, who seemed to put a Capital Letter to Every Word, Great-aunt Cuckoo had a voice like a silky ribbon, and she spoke softly.

"Once upon a time there was a little girl who had the gift of clairvoyance..."

"Of clairvoyance, you mean," Clara said the first time she heard the story.

"No, clairvoyance. She was a very wise little girl, who had the gift of being able to travel to a marvellous land of such blinding light that most people could not even see its wide-open doors..."

The little girl found the keys that led to the doors, and conquered the creatures of the luminous land. But when she went home, her heart was so filled with sadness that all the beauty she was later to create, thanks to her gift, was never enough to comfort her.

The first time she had asked Great-aunt Cuckoo what the creatures of those light-filled lands were like, she had placed her finger on her lips and whispered, "We cannot describe such beings. We best not even talk of them, if we wish to be prudent. One of them resembles a raven, but that's the only one you can really recognize. If you see one, one day, you can be sure he brings nothing but bad tidings."

Clara always waited impatiently for the days to visit Great-aunt Cuckoo, so she could hear the story again. She and her parents were Great-aunt's only close family, and they lived near enough to visit often.

Great-Aunt possessed, however, two faults - the ones Clara's parents hated the most - the faults most old ladies possess: she was talkative as a magpie and she talked to Clara almost exclusively about the past and about their dear departed family members.

"My sister Laure, your grandmother, was an adorable little girl. Delightful! Everyone fell into raptures with her. But, well, she had a rather unusual illness...Since the age of seven, and far into her life, she could not stand being in a room or a garden alone. Mother Barbier, an old sage who lived in our village - oh, we were so frightened of her, darling - anyway, she said someone had cursed her. But your grandmother spent so many hours with Mother Barbier that in the end, she got over it, yes, mastered her fear of empty rooms. Those times were different, and we believed in different remedies..."

Straight away, Clara's mother said her memory was defective. "Oh come on, Aunt Helen! She was just frightened of being in closed rooms, that's all."

"I know what I'm talking about, Virginia love. Your mother also feared gardens and they don't even have roofs, do they?"

Virginia rolled her eyes at this farfetched logic, but she did not get cross.

The few times Clara had seen her mother truly angry was when Cuckoo mentioned Uncle Antoine, her mother's mysterious brother. Clara had never met him, but according to Cuckoo, he was "handsome as the devil and as much of a dreamer as an angel."

Clara loved her Great-aunt Cuckoo in spite of everything, because she seemed a tiny bit crazy, in a nice way, and because she felt they were completely aware of each other as individuals.

In order to obey her parents, who didn't want her to waste time with these "mere fantasies," her bookshelves only held adventure stories about lost explorers - if they avoided dinosaurs, yetis or legendary monsters - and historical novels, as long as they didn't mention love.

Her father, a "researcher and professor," had managed to interest her in what the real world offered in the realm of marvels and oddities: insects of the Amazon, volcanoes, the aurora borealis, the rites of African tribes... He was very proud of her and frequently said so.

That aggravated her mother. She would toss her pretty brown hair with a furious look, push her glasses back up and say, "You're going to Spoil her, Rodolphe, and she will no longer have a Taste for Effort! She already thinks she is quite Intelligent enough as it is!" But Clara could easily see she was hiding a smile and that she also was proud of her.

"One does not say 'intelligent enough,'" her father would reply. "Intelligence is not a quantifiable thing." He never said exactly what the right word was.

The right word to describe me is peculiar, thought Clara as she watched her father making off toward his laboratory, the shirt label hanging out of the collar of his shabby sweater. He just had time to stammer something about the "idea of the century" before his lanky figure disappeared behind the door of his library.

"No," Clara rectified. "The right words for me are Spitting Image of her Parents." According to her mood, she would either sigh or break out laughing.

At times she hated being the spitting image of her parents. Teachers always expected the very best of her. The other students laughed at her behind her back, calling her Einstein, and that irritated her. Plus she had impossible hair, curly as the hide of a sheep.

She was a bit precocious. No one ever took her simply for a young girl, even if she did still sleep with her ragdoll, Miss Buba.

Miss Buba had been given to her at birth. She could not remember ever living without her doll, whose dress was a bit tattered now, but who always looked directly at her with her painted wood eyes, exactly as if she were going to speak any second.

Clara often invented conversations for her and Miss Buba, where she would invariably talk the doll into a corner with her brilliant arguments. And whenever she felt the time

was right, she recounted Great-aunt's story of the little girl who knew how to "clairvoyage."

That morning, the morning of the raven, she could not find Miss Buba in her bed. Next to tears, she went to look for her mother. She finally found her in the kitchen, wearing a dark red dress that wasn't at all her style. Clara asked her where her doll was.

"Well, just think, this is the First Time in a very Long Time that you haven't slept with Miss Buba," her mother said, as she filled a basket with small cakes and homemade jam. "I found her on the bench on the terrace."

Clara frowned. "That's impossible! I had her when I went to bed, and I remember I tucked her in after I finished my book about the Big Bang."

"You must be Mistaken," her mother said.

"But I know I did!" Clara shouted, exasperated. Just then, Miss Buba suddenly screamed "Raven!" in the piercing voice she reserved for their most fervent debates.

Her mother, however, laughed and caressed her cheek.

"Well then, Miss Buba probably thinks you are too Big now to Sleep with a Doll and so she left to set up house in the garden, All by Herself..." Clara looked at her, eyes round with wonder, so she laughed again. "I'm just kidding, Trumpet!"

She hated it when her mother called her Trumpet.

"You must have forgotten, and just thought you had taken her up, because you are in the Habit of that! Go on now; let me finish getting these things ready. We're going to spend the day with Great-aunt Cuckoo."

Clara forgot the doll and grinned. "Can I come too?"

"No, darling, you're not coming this time, because we have some Papers to go over with her. It won't be much fun. And now that you're getting Big, you need to learn how to Take Care of Yourself for a bit, all right?"

"All right," said Clara in an unconvincing voice.

"Raven!" The voice in her head rang with the force of a trumpet's high notes.

When her parents waved for the last time as they drove out through the gate, she had only one wish - to rush out after them and beg them not to leave.

She stopped herself from doing it.

How could she explain to her father, a renowned biologist, and to her mother, a math professor who swore only by cold reason, that they shouldn't take the car out because a raven had brushed her with its wings in the dark hours before dawn?

Her father would be sure to say that Superstition was the Outcome of Ignorance and that people had died to fight against such idiocies. She had no desire to revisit all those heroes of centuries past, who would stare at her with Dad's disappointed look and Mom's irritated face.

Her mother would say that they wouldn't be home late, that nothing would happen and that, if there were a problem, she could always cross the street, remembering first to look right and left, and go see Mrs. Cameux.

Then she'd call her a scaredy-cat, and pretend to find it all very charming. But Clara had absolutely no fear of being alone. She was a little bit afraid, it was true, that the raven would return; however, she could never be afraid in her lovely home, so perfectly square and perfectly white, so comfortable and clean that nothing could ever get at her even if she was alone.

But as soon as her parents had turned the corner, the raven landed on her head and croaked in her ears. First she turned on the TV to watch a documentary, then opened her

math book to finish her homework, then played at making Miss Buba dance on the windowsill. She even dragged out one of those magazines her father published his incomprehensible articles in, but nothing helped. The raven hung on, hopping around in her brain, or perched on her vocal cords, or throwing images into her mind's eye, a whirlwind of awful images conjured from his wings blacker than night. She kept seeing her parents disappearing around the corner, and in spite of the reassuring words she kept repeating to herself, she could not stop shivering.

Random bits of news about road security crossed her mind. A fat man dressed in a grey suit repeating words she had already heard at school and on the radio: the Government was doing all it could to prevent the accidents that frequently occurred on busy weekends and holidays.

She felt slightly consoled. First, this was not a busy weekend and it was still a month and a half from summer vacation. Next, her father drove prudently. Her mother raised a fuss sometimes because he was a bit distracted and didn't always notice road signs, but all in all, he drove neither too fast nor too slow and knew how to avoid potholes.

She couldn't eat lunch though, that Saturday. She simply could not get rid of that raven!

"Miss," said Miss Buba, "I would recommend the scientific method."

"What do you mean by scientific method, my dear?"

"I mean let's study the problem!"

"In that case, you really meant to say the 'didactic' method." She knew right away that was not the correct word.

"Didactic," Miss Buba corrected her, with a satisfied chuckle.

Clara went directly to her father's study to get the encyclopaedia.

For the word "raven" she found a definition, some illustrations and an article on its symbolism. "The raven symbolizes a bad omen. A messenger of death, he also feeds on death by picking at cadavers on battlefields. This idea is recent and originated essentially in Europe."

She slammed the encyclopaedia shut and did not touch it again. Then, with her elbows on the desk and her chin in the palms of her hands, she looked at Miss Buba sitting against the pencil holder. "I know what you're thinking, Miss Buba," she said in the solemn voice she used with her doll when they were alone. "I've gone nuts. I have lost my mind."

"You're just impressionable, Miss, that's all. We warned you about your Great-aunt Cuckoo's stories. It's only in fables that ravens force themselves into people's homes like this. Remember what happened last year!"

"Last year? Oh, no! I won't let this raven invade my head any more than I would a cuckoo bird. No, no, no! We have to fight! If not, our Saturday will be ruined."

The ragdoll gazed at her with her wooden eyes, and her head seemed to point at the encyclopaedia. This Saturday was definitely beginning ominously.

Clara suddenly realized that Miss Buba was trying to send her a message. She decided to call her Great-aunt Cuckoo to find out if her parents had arrived.

It took her a while to remember the elderly lady's first name and to look for it in the address book next to the phone. Her parents had tried to get her to say "Great-Auntie Helen," but Clara preferred to disobey them rather than endure hearing Great-aunt Cuckoo drone on about how important it was to maintain close relations between family members.

Great-aunt Cuckoo carried her nickname naturally, as if she had never been any other age or had any other purpose than to tell fables and bake orange cakes.

Clara dialled the number and waited an interminable time, long enough for the old woman to extricate herself from her easy chair in her living room and reach the prehistoric dial telephone.

"Great-aunt Cuckoo, it's Clara!" she shouted into the phone, her throat in knots.

"I'm not deaf, Clarinet! How are you, my little dear?"

"Fine, fine, Great-Auntie. Are my mom and dad there?"

A little laugh, as golden and fluffy as a duckling, was her response. "Oh, and as for me, I'm doing just fine, you little lab rat! Thanks for thinking of me! Your parents aren't here yet. They must have stopped along the way to eat lunch."

The idea that her parents had stopped on the way to eat lunch, a thing they'd never done in their lives, made Clara stop and brood. Great-Aunt went on.

"Of course it's perfectly ridiculous to stop for lunch when you have just an hour to go. But perhaps they've finally decided to take a little time for themselves. Or the car broke down. I'll ask old Soret to take his car and check back along the route they would have taken." As she spoke, Great-aunt Cuckoo seemed more and more distracted, as if she was thinking of something altogether different.

"Great-Aunt, if something's happened to them, someone would have called the house, don't you think?"

"Why do you say that?" Her great-aunt's voice sounded deeper and more serious.

"I don't know...but if you promise to keep it to yourself..."

"You know very well you can tell me anything. Is there a problem at home, angel?"

Her tone of voice sounded too sweet to be genuine. But Clara didn't hesitate. If someone could explain the meaning of the raven, it would be Cuckoo. "I can't stop thinking about a raven... he's been right here since this morning, and I'm sure that if I go out, there'll be one in the garden. I can't stop worrying."

She heard a choked kind of cough on the line, then Great-aunt Cuckoo came back, her voice wheezing in a thick wave of static. "I'm going to ask old Soret to call you back, is that all right? Clara? Is this the first time you've seen a raven?"

Clara felt a nervous twitch travel through her chest. She hated that sensation, which would persist through the afternoon, she knew only too well.

"I didn't see a raven! I thought of a raven!"

"Is that the first time?"

"Yes," she lied. She hung up.

Two hours later, the neighbour knocked frantically at the door. She was crying.