THE RAVEN HEIR

Books by Stephanie Burgis

The Dragon with a Chocolate Heart
The Girl with the Dragon Heart
The Princess Who Flew with Dragons

The Raven Heir

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BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-1444-5; eBook: 978-1-5266-1442-1

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



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For Ollie and Jamie Samphire.
I love you both exactly equally

‘Are not these woods more free from peril than the envious court?’

– William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

1



Beyond the castle's moat, the deep, dark forest was shot through with trails of sunlight, tracing golden paths of possibility. Robins sang from hidden branches while swifts dived and darted over the sun-dappled water. They were all wild with the first taste of summer, and so was the dark-haired girl who sat, bare feet dangling against stone, on the windowsill of her tower bedroom, watching them fly.

Inside the castle, her mother and her older brother, Connall, were busy in the herbarium as usual, casting stinking enchantments to protect their home against the world. Cordelia's triplet sister, Rosalind, was loudly bashing mock enemies in the first inner courtyard, using the latest long stick that she'd adopted as a sword. Their triplet brother, Giles, strummed a lute soulfully in his

tower bedroom high above, windows left open to spread his endless wailing song through the warm air.

But outside the castle, the birds were free, and so could Cordelia be, if only—

N*o!* Catching herself leaning forward, she forced herself to stop before wings could sprout from her back.

She couldn't turn bird and fly out into the sunshine. N*ot today*. She'd promised Mother never to do it again without Connall's supervision, even though that was a *ridiculous* rule. It meant only going out once or twice a week, when she wanted to fly free every day. They lived all alone in the centre of an enchanted forest. Who could possibly hurt her among the trees? And why would they want to?

But those were questions that Mother would never answer, like everything else about their family's past … and the last time Cordelia had given in to temptation and flown free on her own for one delicious, stolen afternoon, Mother had cast a cloud of dark smoke to wrap tightly around her window for an entire week in punishment. So Cordelia only sighed and tipped her head back now to soak in the gorgeous warmth of the sunshine on her face and the vast, familiar murmuring of the deep forest around her …

Until harsh voices called out suddenly in the distance.

She jerked upright, eyes flying open. No animals in the forest made sounds like that! Sixteen-year-old Connall's voice was the closest she could think of – but even his wasn't nearly so deep.

'Mother?' she whispered.

If her mother had been paying attention, she would have heard that whisper through the tug of connection that she'd laid upon all her children. Spellcasting must have taken all her focus, though, for Cordelia still sat, uncertain and unanswered, on her windowsill a minute later when the first grown men she'd ever seen burst through the trees into the narrow clearing beyond the moat, wearing armour that clanked and flashed in the sunlight.

'There!' The first one strode forward, as big and hulking himself as the raging bear painted on his shield. A great black beard jutted out beneath his iron helmet. 'The sorceress's castle – and no dragons guarding the gate after all!'

'None that we've seen … *yet*.' The man who answered was lean and poised, like the wolf who snarled on his own shield – and he looked every bit as ready to spring. His head turned, predatory gaze sweeping the clearing. 'We may have slipped past her outer shields with our ploy, but that's no guarantee of our safety from now on.'

Cordelia held her breath, unmoving on her perch, as more and more armoured men and women flooded out of the trees behind the first two. Each of them carried a shield with a wolf or a bear in one hand and a long, sharp-looking sword in the other, and they took up position behind their two leaders.

Too late to change into a bird for safety now! She should have slipped inside before, if only her insatiable curiosity had allowed it. Her feet and arms were nearly as pale as stone, though, and her comfortable old linen gown – carefully ripped along the sides to allow herself proper adventures – was a deep green that matched the ivy on the walls. Perhaps they wouldn't notice her?

'No dragon,' said the leader of the wolf-knights, 'but a little spy watching us with big eyes for her mistress. You, girl!' he called out. 'Tell the Dowager Duchess she has visitors!'

T*he Dowager Duchess*? Cordelia stared at him.

There were no duchesses in their castle. No one lived with their family at all except for Mother's friend Alys, who looked after the goats, argued with Mother over what to plant in the kitchen gardens, and was almost always covered in dirt up to her bony elbows.

On long winter evenings in the great hall, after Giles had finished singing his latest ballads, Mother would often

summon up a pile of tiny scented silk-bound books to read out loud to all of them. Cordelia had heard of elegant, powerful duchesses in those pages, along with queens and countesses and fiercely beautiful knights in armour … but none of them sounded anything like Alys.

'The girl's obviously simple,' said the leader of the bear-soldiers. 'No sense looking for any help there.' Shaking his head, he cupped his big hands around his mouth and bellowed, 'Sorceress, reveal yourself! Or we'll attack!'

Cordelia winced. Mother wasn't going to like that threat at all!

For one long moment, silence hung over the clearing. Even the birds in the forest stopped calling. They were wise enough to hide in times like these.

Then Cordelia *felt* Mother rush towards them through the castle, grabbing out for the whole family at once – not her usual gentle brush against their thoughts, but a hot, frantic swipe.

CORDELIA!

I'm fine! Cordelia hastily pushed her own thoughts back at her mother. **But there are men at the gate. They—**

The great silver portcullis flung itself open, and her mother exploded through it. She was still wearing her stained working apron from the herbarium, and more than

half of her long dark hair had twisted free of its constraining plait. But Mother never needed to look tidy to be imposing.

Long weeds from the bottom of the moat shot up and wove themselves together to build a living drawbridge for her to stalk across in fury. Bobbing shapes beneath the green moss and lily pads burst upward as she passed, revealing venomous snakes, long and coiling, heading straight for the invaders. They swam as fast as shadows, and the closest soldiers jumped back, shouting at the sight of them.

I *should have thought to change into one of them*, Cordelia thought wistfully.

It was too late to hide among the water snakes now. Mother's voice snapped through Cordelia's head as she stalked forward:

Get off that windowsill *now*. Out of sight!

Ugh! Cordelia scrambled back into her bedroom and sank obediently to the floor beneath the window … for a moment. Then she lifted herself just enough to peer outside.

It wasn't as if she was in any danger now that Mother was here. If anyone would simply take the time to *explain*—

'Make way!' A hard push shoved her aside, and Rosalind took her place. 'I want to see!'

'Go somewhere else!' Cordelia shoved her sister back, hard. 'You've got your own room!'

'But *you've* got the best view.'

'Out of the way, runts!' Giles skidded in behind them, panting, and squeezed his way into the middle. 'I couldn't hear anything from my tower.'

'Not over the sound of your own voice, you mean,' muttered Rosalind.

Cordelia snorted in agreement.

'Shh!' Connall stepped into the room behind them. '*Quiet.*'

It was a spell, not an order; the lips of all three triplets sealed themselves shut against their wills. Cordelia gritted her teeth, Giles sighed through his nose, and Rosalind punched out wildly, her face reddening with rage – but their older brother ignored the blow, leaning over all of them with his gaze intent and his light brown hands braced around Cordelia's windowsill.

Now Cordelia couldn't even see what was happening through her own window! In her family, she could never keep *anything* for herself.

She could still hear their mother's voice, though. '… bellowing at *my* door as if you had *any right* to intrude on my home after all these years?'

'Duchess.' That was the leader of the wolf-knights, his

voice smoother than his friend's. 'We apologise for the rudeness of our greeting. We fought long and hard to reach your gate, and our manners were strained by the journey.'

'My *patience* has been strained more than enough.' Mother's voice was colder than Cordelia had ever heard it. 'State your business and begone, all of you.'

'Alas, we bring grave news that will not be dismissed so easily,' said the wolf-leader. 'King Edmund – long rest his soul – is dead.'

Cordelia felt Mother's gasp; it was a ripple of unease that billowed through their connection, sending a disconcerting chill through Cordelia's body before Mother snapped her emotions tightly shut, closing herself off from everyone. 'And?' she demanded. 'What has that to do with me?'

'Your game is over, sorceress,' snarled the bear-leader. 'You've lost. You won't hide the heir from us any longer! And if it were up to me, I can tell you—'

'It is time, madam,' interrupted the wolf-leader, 'to return to our kingdom at long last so your child may rule over all of us.'