THE RAVEN THRONE



STEPHANIE BURGIS

BLOOMSBURY

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The Dragon with a Chocolate Heart
The Girl with the Dragon Heart
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STEPHANIE BURGIS

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For Jenn Reese, Holly Webb, Deva Fagan and Ying Lee,
with love and thanks for lighting my way through
this novel. xo

'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown'

– William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 2*

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PROLOGUE

Ivy was sneaking up the castle walls again, because the Raven Queen was dreaming. In her dreams, all her waking shields slipped from her grasp. Then the land of Corvenne reached out to embrace her with every green tendril.

In the morning, castle guards would chop down the new growth, keeping those high stone walls as bleak and bare as they had stood for fifty long, violent years before Queen Cordelia finally came to the throne. For now, though, it grew, because the twelve-year-old queen still slept, her small body tossing and turning within her massive, canopied bed. All her ladies-in-waiting slept as well, so none of them noticed those affectionate tendrils of lush green ivy that curled through the cracks in Cordelia's wooden shutters and crept along the rush-covered floor towards her bed.

Nearby, both her triplet siblings slept too, in the luxuriant bedchambers they had been given six weeks ago,

their high walls draped in the finest tapestries and silk. But in their dreams, the two of them were anything but regal.

Giles sang to the moon in the high, yipping voice of a young red fox, and the forest around him echoed with wild cries and howls of approval.

Rosalind battled every bit as fiercely in her dreams as she did in waking life, but instead of wielding her favourite sword or bow, she kicked out at her enemies with big, padded hare feet, sending animal intruders of all sizes fleeing from her family's burrow.

Their mother slept dreamlessly in her own royal chambers, content in the knowledge that her children were surrounded by her best spells and wards of protection as well as by their human guards.

Even the queen's older half-brother, Connall, the quiet and serious new Duke of Harcourt, slept through the night. For the first time in his life, his dreams were free of fear. The ancient spirits of the land itself had chosen his sister to be queen and gifted her full use of their powers. Every dangerous duke and duchess in the realm had been forced to accept her claim to the throne when she had magically mended the broken Raven Crown, bringing the land and its people back into unity. With the magic of the land itself at her disposal, his little sister could upend human battlefields and tear stone walls apart.

What fears could keep *her* family awake any more?

Inside the queen's royal chamber, dark green ivy curled over her bed and draped across her sleeping body in a loving, protective embrace that made her restless twitching finally slow and cradled her into a deep, restful slumber.

But not everyone in the castle was so innocently sleeping. Far below, in its dark and long-forgotten depths, an ancient mystery had been hidden long ago … and a new evil was about to strike.

1



Prince Giles of Corvenne woke with a new song in his head, which was entirely usual. He also woke with a wild animal snuffling around his feet, which was becoming *far* too usual nowadays.

Rolling his eyes, he pushed off his covers and sat up. 'Wrong room,' he told the little hedgehog through his yawn as it froze in sudden panic before him. 'You're looking for my sister Cordy, three doors down. The long-haired one. I just happen to smell like her.'

The hedgehog rolled up into a tight, prickly ball of fear, but Giles had had plenty of practice over the years in coaxing wild creatures to be agreeable. Next to handling his two triplet sisters, *this* was easy. It only took a few minutes of his softest, sweetest humming to persuade the creature into warily unrolling. After a further few minutes

of careful petting, it even settled into the crook of his arm, where its hard prickles poked through the fine linen weave of his nightshirt.

'Your High—? Oh, *no*.' The Master of the Princely Bedchamber, a tall and harried-looking man named Wincester, grimaced as he opened the door of Giles's bedroom ten minutes later and saw them both. 'Not again?'

'At least this one hasn't left any droppings on the bed,' Giles said cheerfully. 'I quite enjoyed the company.' A hedgehog was a far better surprise than a snake or a rat, when it came to the various wild visitors who'd come slithering or scampering to pay court to Cordy over the last few weeks – and it *had* been awfully nice to have an appreciative audience for his music again for the first time in too long.

Wait, no! He couldn't let that traitorous thought take root even for an instant.

Once upon a time, it was true, Giles had dreamed of becoming a famous bard. He'd spent years training for it in his family's enchanted forest before unexpectedly becoming a prince six weeks ago – but on a battlefield full of terror, he had promised the ancient spirits of the land to support his queenly sister's reign and do everything he could to keep their kingdom safe. He meant to keep that promise.

Here in the outside world, bards were seen as '*common, hired entertainers*' – a phrase that had dripped with disdain when he'd heard it from his newly met adult cousin, the Duke of Lune, only four weeks earlier. Lune had overheard Giles singing a silly song to his sisters in the open street just after Cordy's coronation, but he'd been kind enough to wait until later, when the two of them could speak in private, before he'd launched into his cousinly chastisement. It had only taken a few words from the duke for Giles to realise, with a cold wash of humiliation, just how rash a mistake his thoughtless singing could have been.

Apparently, after all the rumours that had circulated about Mother for the past twelve years, at least half of the royal court was already convinced that their whole family was a bunch of outlandish sorcerers who couldn't be trusted for long with the Raven Throne. The *last* thing any of them needed was for Giles to prove the nay-sayers right by behaving in such an embarrassingly unregal manner.

Fortunately, hedgehogs couldn't care less about the rules of princely dignity, so he'd had a fabulous time singing his secret new song to his small, prickly visitor. Parts of the tune sounded almost like a wild fox yipping, which was utterly hilarious, although it might have worried some small animals. Oddly enough, the hedgehog had seemed to like those bits best of all.

The rest of the court would be waiting for Prince Giles, though, by this time of day – and his poor Master of the Bedchamber, who was not comfortable with wild animals in any situation, was giving the hedgehog a deeply pained look. 'It hasn't left any droppings *yet*.' Wincester shuddered. 'It must be crawling with fleas though.' Visibly bracing himself, he held out his hands in a brave display of willpower. 'Please allow me to dispose of it for you, Your Highness. I will simply put it out of the window and—'

'We're three storeys off the ground! The poor thing would be crushed.' Giles gave the hedgehog a reassuring stroke between its prickles. 'No, I'll take it to Cordy. We all know it was looking for her anyway.'

'I'm sure Her Majesty will be delighted.' From the gloomy tone of Wincester's voice, he wasn't sure of anything of the sort. 'However, she may have more important duties—'

'More important than a hedgehog? You really don't understand Cordy yet, do you?' Giles jumped off the high bed, ignoring the steps, and landed lightly on his peacock-blue-stockinged feet. 'Don't worry. I'll be back soon, hedgehog-free. One day, though, you *will* find yourself loving a wild animal. I'm sure of it!'

'Your Highness …' Wincester's sigh was not discreet.

'The archives of Raven's Roost are said to hold ancient scrolls that date back hundreds of years, to times long before even this castle was built … and yet, I doubt that even their famous archivist could find evidence of such a miracle ever occurring.'

'Ha! It's a wager between us then.' Giles beamed as he strode out of the room, triumphantly cradling the hedgehog. Six weeks ago, when they'd first met, Wincester had hardly dared meet Giles's gaze. He had bowed and scraped and been so excruciatingly respectful that Giles could tell he'd expected to be sacked – or executed – if he said a single word out of place.

Now, he was teasing Giles just like Giles's own relatives did! *So* much progress had been made.

Giles knew this castle could feel like a real home one day, no matter what Cordy and the rest of their family thought. He just had to *make* it happen!

Humming under his breath, so no one else could hear, he strode into the antechamber, which was buzzing with activity. Half a dozen official gentlemen of his bedchamber, ranging from boys his own age to full adults, were busy sorting out a range of luxuriant outfits for him to wear at different times of day. They all stopped to bow when he entered the room, murmuring in respectful unison, '*Your Highness*,' exactly as they had from the

beginning – but this time, the two boys closest to his age both snuck him real grins as they straightened.

Even world-weary seventeen-year-old Lord Lyffed, who was always publicly bored by *everything*, let his haughty features relax when Giles caught his eye and pointed to the elegant wooden box where the gilded deck of cards was kept.

'I'll finally win a game off you tonight before bed, Lyffed. Just wait and see!'

'Perhaps you shall,' said Lord Lyffed coldly … and then his lips twitched into a smile so small, it was *almost* impossible to see.

'When pigs fly!' said one of the younger boys, and a warm chorus of friendly laughter ran through the room, to Giles's delight.

Still grinning, he sailed through the next door and emerged into a second, much larger antechamber. There, four armed guards framed the four corners of the room, each standing tall, stern and unmoving under the painted dark eyes and triumphantly outswept wings of the massive ravens who covered the plaster ceiling. All the elegantly dressed ladies-in-waiting, though, were fluttering in an anxious, exclaiming crowd around a fiercely scowling girl in a nightdress who stood in the centre of the room with a red squirrel standing upright and chittering loudly on her shoulder.

'Good morning, Ros,' Giles said cheerfully to his triplet sister, over the combined noise of human and animal agitation. 'Did you find yourself a new pet too?'

'It's not funny.' As Rosalind pushed through the crowd to meet him, the red squirrel shifted to crouch on the back of her neck, hanging on to her short black hair with its sharp foreclaws. Its bushy copper tail twitched warningly back and forth as it glowered at the world around her. 'This rodent chewed half of the string off my bow!'

'Has it ever struck you that some people manage to sleep at night *without* keeping dangerous weapons in their beds?'

'My bow isn't dangerous to *me*.' Rosalind rolled her eyes. 'It's only dangerous to intruders.'

'Oh, really?' Giles smirked at the squirrel over Rosalind's shoulder. 'Your latest intruder apparently found it delicious.'

'Your Highnesses!' Their sister's official Mistress of the Bedchamber, Lady Hastings, bustled up and burst into their conversation as if she couldn't hold back her feelings any longer. 'Neither of you needs to worry about dangerous intruders! We have trained *guards* to deal with that sort of thing. You see?' She pointed to the closest corner, where a heavily armed woman gave them a sharp, respectful nod.

Giles gave her a friendly smile in return.

Rosalind glared at her. 'I can take care of myself.'

'But you don't have to. Not any more. You're a *princess* now!' Lady Hastings shook her head. 'It's just terrible that you were forced to fend for yourself in the wild, but that's all over now, thank goodness. You'll never need to do any fighting again!'

Rosalind's face reddened to nearly the same colour as her squirrel's fur. The comparison was hilarious – but, mindful of their observers, Giles swiftly grabbed her arm and steered her safely away from Lady Hastings, towards Cordy's closed bedroom doors at the far end of the room. 'It's been lovely to see all of you again, but just now—'

'Oh, but you mustn't disturb Her Majesty!' Lady Hastings swooped past them, flapping like a startled swan. 'She hasn't announced herself to us yet for the morning!'

'Don't worry.' Giles gave her an easy smile as he edged past. 'We'll announce ourselves to her instead.'

'*No!*' Lady Hastings flung herself before the closed doors, spreading her arms wide until her fashionably long, drooping sleeves hung like a rippling shield of purple velvet. 'Your Highnesses, with the very deepest respect, I *cannot* allow you to disturb Her Majesty's slumber! I am her Mistress of the Bedchamber. I must fulfil my duties! No visitors until she rises.'

Giles's eyebrows rose. 'But—'

'We're not visitors,' Rosalind snarled. 'She's our sister.' Her right hand dropped to the waist of her nightdress, as if seeking the sword that she so often carried. 'You can't stop us from seeing her!'

'Ros …' Giles hissed. Not everything had to be a battle!

'She is the *queen*,' declared Lady Hastings. 'No matter what your relationship may have been before Her Majesty took the throne—'

'*May have been*?'

Giles cringed. 'If we could all, please, just take a moment and—'

The outer door slammed open like a thunderclap as a new visitor swept into the room. 'What in the world is going on in here?' Giles's mother demanded.

Giles's shoulders slumped in mingled relief and resignation as the ladies-in-waiting gasped, the guards stiffened, and Lady Hastings visibly gulped. *So much for settling all this calmly.*

'Your Grace.' Paling, Lady Hastings swept into a deep curtsey. 'I'm afraid Her Majesty hasn't woken yet.'

'Then we had better wake her.' Mother strode briskly across the floor. 'She has to meet with the Council of Dukes in two hours, and I need to meet with her myself, first.'

Lady Hastings looked anguished. 'If she had only mentioned your appointment to me last night—'

'Her Majesty,' said Mother dryly, 'is only twelve years of age. I think you'll have to grant her a bit of leeway when it comes to remembering all the details of her schedule.' Raising her eyebrows, she gave the Mistress of the Bedchamber an expectant look from her fierce dark eyes. 'Well?'

For one anguished moment, Lady Hastings held firm.

Even here in the fortress of Raven's Roost, the centre of power for the kingdom of Corvenne, there were very few people who could out-stare Giles's mother … and even fewer who were brave enough to try. After all, she'd been known to the whole kingdom for more than a decade as a wicked and terrible enchantress.

Giles hated those old stories. Mother might be a powerful enchantress, but she was only really *terrible* when it came to singing. If only she'd try to act at least a *bit* sweet and harmless now that Cordy was finally queen! The last thing his family needed was for any of the courtiers to spread even more lies about all of them.

The truth was more than troublesome enough.

All throughout history, the rightful Raven Queens and Kings of Corvenne had bound themselves to the ancient spirits of the land when they'd each put on the

magical Raven Crown. Each ruler had wielded the spirits' powerful land magic in exchange for their own promise to protect the kingdom.

Independent human sorcery, though? T*hat* was considered far more worrying. Until now, it had only ever been officially wielded by the six dukes' own few hired magic-workers, and even then only under the dukes' strict supervision.

T*hat* was why Giles had stopped practising his own magic on the very same day that he'd given up singing in public. As the Duke of Lune had so patiently explained, his family's powers made everyone nervous. It was far safer to forget that he had ever had them, for the sake of keeping the peace.

Mother would never pretend to be weak, though, no matter how sensible or diplomatic that might be – and as Giles watched, Lady Hastings slumped in defeat.

'Of course, Your Grace.' Bowing her head, the Mistress of the Bedchamber stepped away from the doors.

'Ha!' said Rosalind, who had no tact. The squirrel on her neck chittered in noisy agreement.

Giles gave Lady Hastings a sympathetic smile as his mother and sister strode past her, the squirrel's bushy red tail swishing tauntingly in their wake. I'*ll fix this later*, he promised himself. He'd just make certain to chat with her

again later in the day and listen, for the fourth time so far, to that story she loved about her older son's jousting triumph. T*hat* always seemed to cheer her up a bit.

Still turning over plans and strategies, he trailed a few steps behind Mother and Rosalind as he strolled into his queenly sister's bedroom …

And then he came to a dead halt, the breath choking in his throat as all his plans evaporated.

Cordy's body lay still and prone on the bed, wrapped in loving chains of ivy as usual … but the ivy had turned ominously brown and brittle-looking, and his sister wasn't sleeping after all.