Also by
Kiran Millwood Hargrave and Tom de Freston

JULIA AND THE SHARK
LEILA AND THE BLUE FOX

Kiran Millwood Hargrave

THE RAVEN'S GIFT



with
Tom de Freston

STAR BOARD

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For Yas, and Sarvat, who through loss have remained loving, generous, and open to the world.

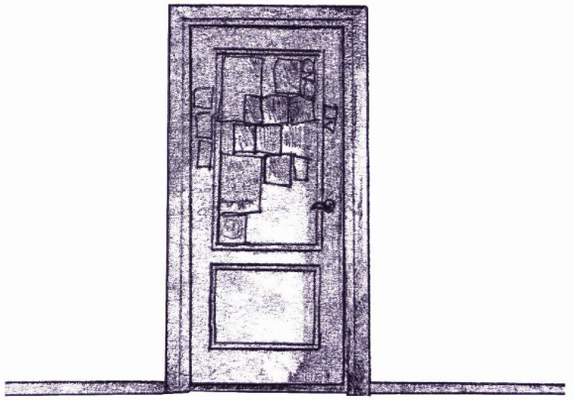


Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there, wondering, fearing, doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before.

from 'The Raven' by Edgar Allen Poe


WINTER





ONE

There it is. The Door. It's been closed since Dad collected what Frankie would need for hospital. Even when the funeral home asked if there were clothes she'd want, Mum picked the hoodie and jeans she'd lived in until she had to wear those hospital gowns to make it easier for the tubes going in and out every which way. If Frankie could have chosen, she'd have died in them.

Well, she'd been cremated in them at least. Those clothes were ashes now, like her body. And the ashes were in an urn in Mum's bedside cabinet. They'd been on the kitchen table for a while, still in the funeral parlour's expensive cardboard bag with smooth white ribbons for handles, looking like a gift from John Lewis.

On the side, in sickly cursive, *forever with you* and an even sicklier drawing of a dove. Harry wanted to punch it in its stupid paper face.

But after a few weeks Mum had picked the bag up at breakfast and left the room, and Dad had gone after her, and Harry had listened to his mum's footsteps *pad-pad, pad-pad* up the stairs and then Dad's *thud-thud-thud-thud* and the creak of the floorboards in their bedroom. Then voices, an argument, then crying, both of them, while his Cheerios went past soggy-crunch into sad little swollen O's of mush and he told himself, over and over, *Don't cry, idiot.*

When they came back down, Mum had washed her face, her cheeks and nose pink, and smiled a smile that looked like a crack in her face. She laid a cold hand on his wrist and he did his best not to pull away.

'She's in my bedside cabinet, all right, sweetheart? I wanted her closer, if that's OK. We can take her out whenever you want, and you can go see her, of course.'

And though Harry wanted to shout it wasn't OK, to bring her back, to open the urn and through some molecular miracle, some physics warp of the space-time continuum, reassemble Frankie in all her hoodie-and-jeans and gap-tooth and fizzy-hair and eye-roll glory – he had just nodded. What else was there to do? His parents didn't notice he left his cereal. They'd not eaten theirs either.

They are out. Dad took Mum on a walk, the first fresh air she's had in days. It's the first time they've left him alone in the

house since. It's the first time he's been left alone in the house ever, because usually Frankie was here. Or rather, in there, in her bedroom, with the Door closed.

Harry lays his hand on the door handle. It's the same as his, standard silver metal, and the door's the same too, but Frankie's is covered in posters and stickers that Dad shouted at her for putting on because they wouldn't scrape off. Harry knows them so well he's stopped seeing them, but now he looks again. A cartoon opossum, teeth bared, under the phrase **CLEARLY THRIVING**; a Phoebe Bridgers ghost; Shrek in sunglasses labelled **I'M SWAMPED**; a glossy magazine cut-out of Hayley Kiyoko sticking her tongue out; little Pac-Mans, Blinkys, Pinkys, Inkys and Clydes dotted across it all. If he peeled back the posters, he knows he'd find Paramore and, under that, One Direction. All these are names he only knows because Frankie made him listen to all the music she liked. It's an archaeological dig of Frankie's changing taste. But he doesn't touch it, any of it. He doesn't want his parents to know he's been inside.

He presses down on the handle, and the door opens easily, and inside is bright and warm. He expected a creaky swing from the hinges, for it to be dark, cold, dusty, but it's not been long enough for dust and spiders, and no one has pulled the curtains or turned off the radiator. It's a small room, smaller than his, though she had first dibs. She wanted this one because of the tree outside, the way its leaves brushed the window and made the light green.

Now it is November and there are only bare branches, and on the branches a black bird, big and ugly, that stares in. Harry claps his hands at it, but it doesn't fly away. Harry hits the window, and it still doesn't fly away. Its eye is inky black. Harry starts to open the window. He'll show this stupid bird. But it takes off before he can find anything to throw.



Harry turns from the window, cold pulling the warm air from the room, and looks around. Her bed is unmade, and there are books stacked on the floor up so high they have toppled on to the pillow. Her wardrobe doors are open and there are clothes piled inside. A smell rising, familiar to Harry, the smell of morning walks to school and hospital visits, sitting toothache-sweet over antiseptic. Frankie's cheap perfume – what was it called?

Angel.

The only area that is neat is her desk. The cables are slotted into a colour-coded cable tidy, and there are box files labelled with

her projects on the shelf above the desktop screen, the keyboard and mouse, the drawpad. Frankie had a laptop she used for school, but this is like a stockbroker's set-up, or a hacker's. Harry spins the padded wheelie chair and slams his hand down to make it stop. She had her laptop and latest sketchpad at the hospice with her, and her belongings were returned to them in a blue NHS plastic bag that is hung up in the hallway under her oversize jacket. But there are sketches here, landscapes for whatever game she was dreaming up. An open field circled by mountains. A classroom. A series of lakes connected by waterfalls – this he recognises.

He picks up the picture. Frankie is – was – OK at drawing, but she wanted to be a games designer, not an artist. Still, there's enough here to bring it all back in a crush of memory: the green roll of the Fairy Knowe, soft beneath his bare feet, the gentle push of water dropping,

small pool
after small
pool, down the
hillside like black
slate handfuls
cupped and
overflowing.



Fairy Knowe, where he and Frankie had swum despite the water being early-spring cold.

You're mad, said Dad, shaking his head.

You shouldn't, said Mum, but she pulled from her rucksack towels she'd brought, *just in case*.

They'd waded in off greened slippery rocks, spike-pimpled skin and chattering teeth and whooping with shock and *Oh!* shouted Frankie, somewhere between laughter and tears, *****!* and Dad said *Frankie!* and Mum laughed and took a photograph. She had it printed at Boots and it is still on the fridge, sun curled and faded. Frankie in her blue-and-grey narwhal-print swimsuit, the ends of her curly hair flattened with wet, her left arm a blur reaching for Harry, always half a step behind, thin and ghost-white, only up to his thighs in his red swimming shorts.

Harry puts the picture down and throws himself on to Frankie's unmade bed. He presses the heels of his hands into his eyes. *Don't cry, idiot.* He is so bored of crying. So bored of being sad and hating everyone including himself, because they are alive and Frankie isn't. He didn't even like her that much. She was annoying, knuckling his head and making him listen to songs she

liked that sounded like noise to him, calling him ickle bovver and laughing too loud. But *god*, he loved her.

When he opens his eyes there are bright spots across his vision. He doesn't know how Frankie slept in this bed. It's so soft, the mattress saggy and the feather pillow like a wispy cloud slipping around under his neck. He asked for a memory-foam pillow for Christmas, and Frankie had laughed and laughed. But memory foam had been invented by NASA to protect its astronauts during space travel, and if it was good enough for the Apollo missions it was good enough for him. Frankie ended up on a memory-foam mattress in the hospice anyway, and now Harry wonders if she'd been comfortable, if he should have offered to bring this pillow from home. Even if, he thinks, punching it in an effort to get comfy, it is structurally redundant.

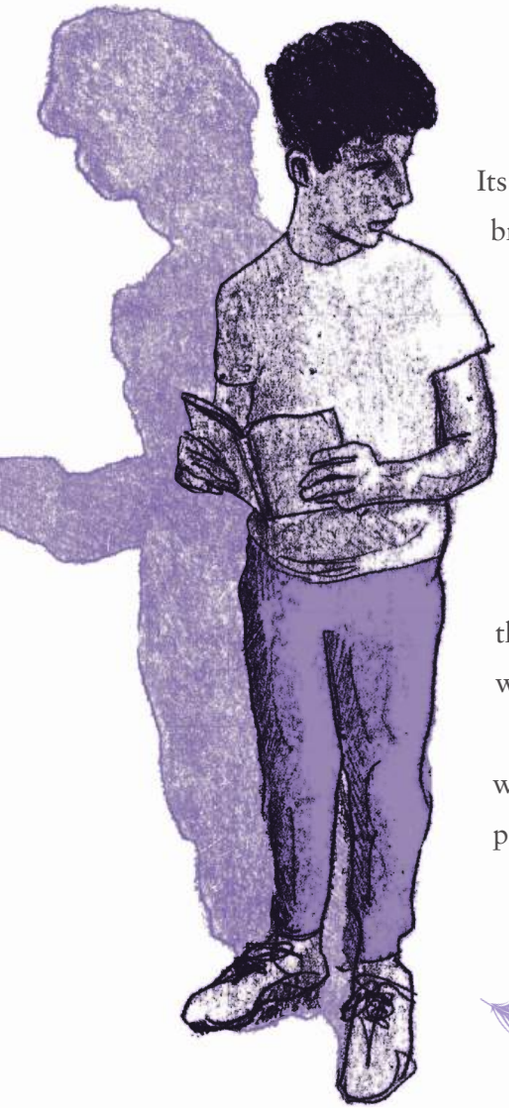
His knuckles hit something hard through the flimsy material, and he winces. Sliding his hand under the pillow, he finds the edge and pulls it out, sitting up to look at it in the light from the window.

It's a book. No surprise there; Frankie loved books. Horror and mysteries mainly, Holly Jackson and Maureen Johnson, but this is an old book. He can tell by the way the binding is falling apart, like his NASA annuals Dad brought back for him from Houston. Hardback too, which is why his knuckles hurt. And it's by a man, though Frankie mainly read books

by women, unless they were Stephen King.

Edgar Allan Poe

It looks like a horror novel, the cover taken up by an illustration of a big black bird on a purple background, and it's obvious what kind of bird it is, because the title is



The Raven

Its feathers seem to shimmer in the light briefly shadowed from the window, and Harry looks up. A chill across his nape. The bird is back.

It's clearly the same kind as shown on the cover of the book he's holding. A raven. *Creepy.*

Harry shudders and shakes the book at the window, trying to get the bird to leave. But it looks at him with that black and ugly eye.

Harry doesn't like birds. Frankie was the lame one, convincing her parents to string up bird feeders in the

garden and sitting watching the windows as she ate breakfast at the kitchen island. The lame one, and yet more popular than Harry ever has been, even though space is cooler than birds. It's *space*. Stars and black holes and distant galaxies and gaseous planets. That blows sparrows and jays and finches out of the water – or rather the sky – surely.

But Frankie always had a knack for making other people care about what she cared about. She could always bring people around to her point of view, but Harry prefers to keep things to himself.

He watches the bird, the raven, and it watches him back. It's looking at him funny, it really is, and he feels a bubbling rush of anger, like he has more and more since Frankie got sick, a random and undeniable swell of fury. It feels like a balloon full to bursting, or a wave gathering speed, and usually he just grips his fist so tight his nails leave crescent moons in his palm or bites on his cheek until the skin goes gristly and flappy, but no one is around and so he shouts, a loud and purple shout, and he throws the book at the window.



The bird flies away before it hits the glass. The anger pops, just like that, and shame comes hot and prickly. He shouldn't have thrown Frankie's book. He pushes himself off the bed and hurries to where it's fallen, inelegantly splayed on the rug. One of the corners is rucked and creased, and he curses as he smooths it down.

The text is large on the page, weirdly spaced. It's not a novel at all, but a poem. But this isn't what catches his eye – it's what surrounds it. Scribbles in Frankie's cramped, spiky hand. She never wrote things down, always used her computer or, in the hospice, the tablet their parents bought her. But the margins of the page are covered in her writing.

7/9 –
ring pull,
a downgrade

10/9 – crisp
packet, back to
specialised stuff

15/9 – nothing

16/9 – jackpot,
mood ring!
Proper retro,
still works.
I'm orange a lot.

Harry frowns at the lines. What is this nonsense? A list of junk, and the comments make no sense. 'Downgrade?' 'Specialised stuff?' He flips through a few more pages. More dates, more entries saying things like:

19/10 – hairpins,
three of them, laid
out in a row, all neat
and

23/12 – Christmas
dinner! Pigs in
blankets, some fancy
seeds. N didn't get the
memo. Safety pin ha!

'Harry?'