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The Raven Mysteries Lunatics and Luck

Written by

Marcus Sedgwick

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Book 3

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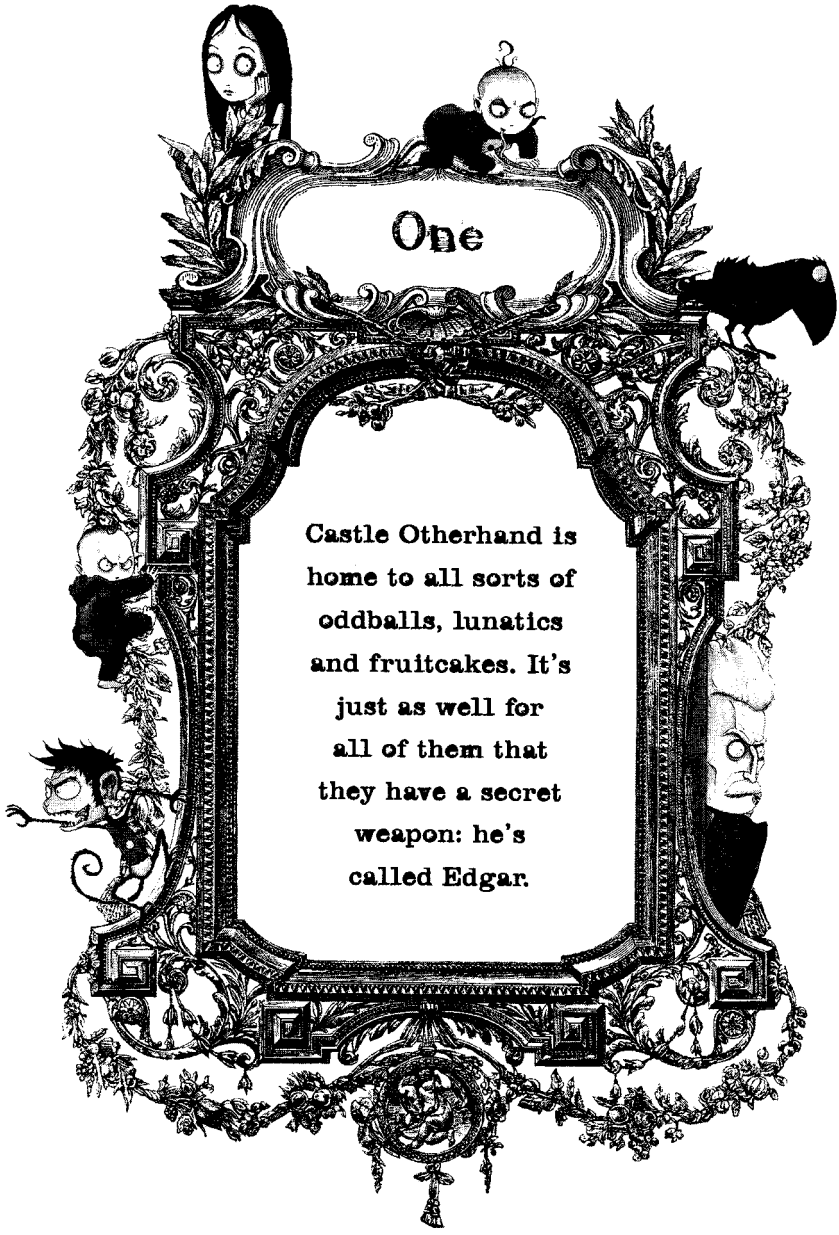
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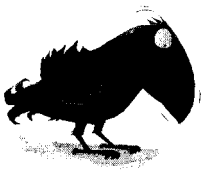
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One

Castle Otherhand is home to all sorts of oddballs, lunatics and fruitcakes. It's just as well for all of them that they have a secret weapon: he's called Edgar.



Aaaaark!

I think I'm going grey. Yesterday I found two grey feathers in my tail, and today three more on my little black belly. I say 'little' but I am wondering if it's not as little as it used to be. I've been doing a lot of standing sideways and gazing into the mirror, and if I breathe in it doesn't look too bad, but a bird can only hold his breath for so long before he goes lightheaded, sees stars, and falls off the mantelpiece, and that sort of thing can lead to trouble. Trouble with monkeys, for a start.

I suppose I might be getting on a bit, but you know, it's not the years, it's the damage this place does to me.

For example, I doubt I would have any grey feathers at all were it not for the frequent trauma and horrors I am subjected to living at Castle Otherhand, not to mention the general oddness that infects the old stones from time to time.

I'm speaking of weirdness here; peculiarities, kookiness and outright lunacy, and I can think of no greater example of this than the most dubious and downright barking series of events that

recently occurred.

It all began on the day of the earthquake.

I call it a quake, out of politeness, but if its back were turned I would whisper that it was really only a tremor. Nevertheless, it was terrifying.

There was no warning.

It was a calm and sunny spring morning, the lambs were bouncing vertically in the pastures above the lake, fluffy bunnies were to be seen skipping through the daffodils at the edge of Otherhand Wood, and birds smaller and stupider than me were flying round in circles, showing off to the lady birds.

I was perching on the High Terrace with the children, striking noble poses and gazing out across the valley, giving the impression that I was full of thoughts about the deep and meaningful things in life to anyone who might care to notice. No one did.

Solstice was sitting in a wickerwork chair that she'd borrowed from her mother's room, feet crossed on the table, a large book with the word 'Spells' on the cover propped in her lap.

Cudweed was trying to tie bells to Fellah's tail so that the blasted monkey would not be able

to sneak up on anyone any more; a nasty trick he had just learned and which was giving him much childish pleasure.

The twins were trying to use each other as mounting blocks to climb onto the terrace parapet so that they could continue to exercise the death wish they seem to have been born with.

All was lovely, and then there was a sudden but overwhelming smell of bad eggs.

'Oh, Fellah!' Cudweed said, wrinkling his nose, and I have to say that the monkey almost had the pride to look offended.

But the stink was soon forgotten, as a great and thunderous rumble broke over the valley from the mountain behind the castle. There was a second of quiet, and then everything began to wobble.

High Terrace, castle, chairs, table, children both small and large, monkey and raven alike, everything began wobbling like a jelly.

It lasted perhaps fifteen seconds, twenty tops, but I assure you the whole thing was at the same time both really scary and really, really odd.

'Solstice?' wailed Cudweed, throwing himself under the picnic table.

Solstice herself had a puzzled look on her face, and then slipped out of the wickerwork chair.

Fellah set off at a million miles an hour, or something close to it, over the rooftops of the castle, never to be seen again. Or so I hoped.

The twins rolled around on their backs, giggling and waving their legs, and I decided the safest place to be was in the air, which I was pleased to find, wasn't wobbling.

Then it was over.

'What...?' wailed Cudweed, from under the table. 'What...?'

Solstice picked herself up from the flagstones, and adjusted the hem of her black velveteen dress.

'Ooh!' she said. 'Cudweed! Oooh! I think we just had an earthquake! The earth has ruptured! Releasing stinky sulphurous gases and making everything wibble-wobble ... Let's go to the kitchens and see how much has been broken!'

She ran off excitedly, but Cudweed only stuck his head out from under the table.

'No,' he said. He sounded very determined. 'I'm not coming out.'

The boy had a point, I thought. If I had been an earth-bound creature I might also have opted to stay underneath the nearest piece of furniture, but since I am a master of the skies, I decided to stay where nothing could fall on me.

I soared up, away from the High Terrace, keeping one eye on the twins who appeared to be waiting eagerly for the whole thing to happen again, and from on high I saw that the whole valley was quiet and still. Every creature had bolted for cover, every bouncy lamb and skippy bunny, even the smaller and stupider showy-off birds were quaking out of sight in their nests.

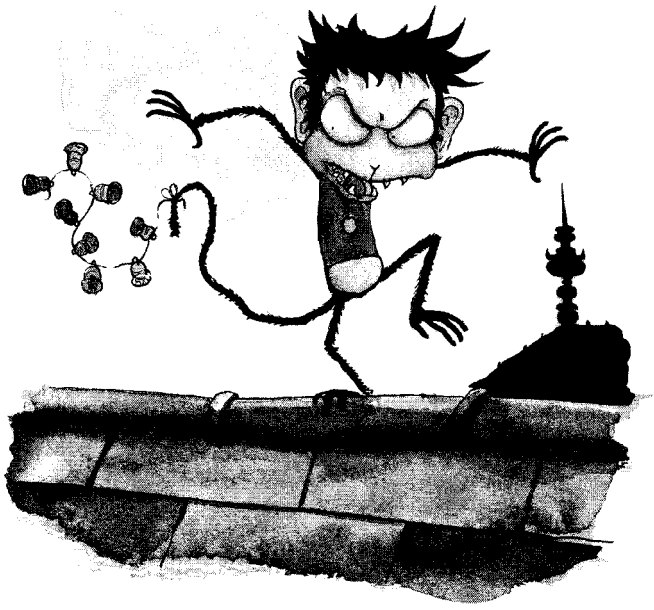
I alone was the Lord of All Creation.

And then I heard a tinkling sound, tiny and tinny, but nonetheless, a definite tinkling sound. It was, I realised after a moment's reflection, the sound of a bell, and once the cogs turned in my brain a bit more, I understood its source.

The monkey.

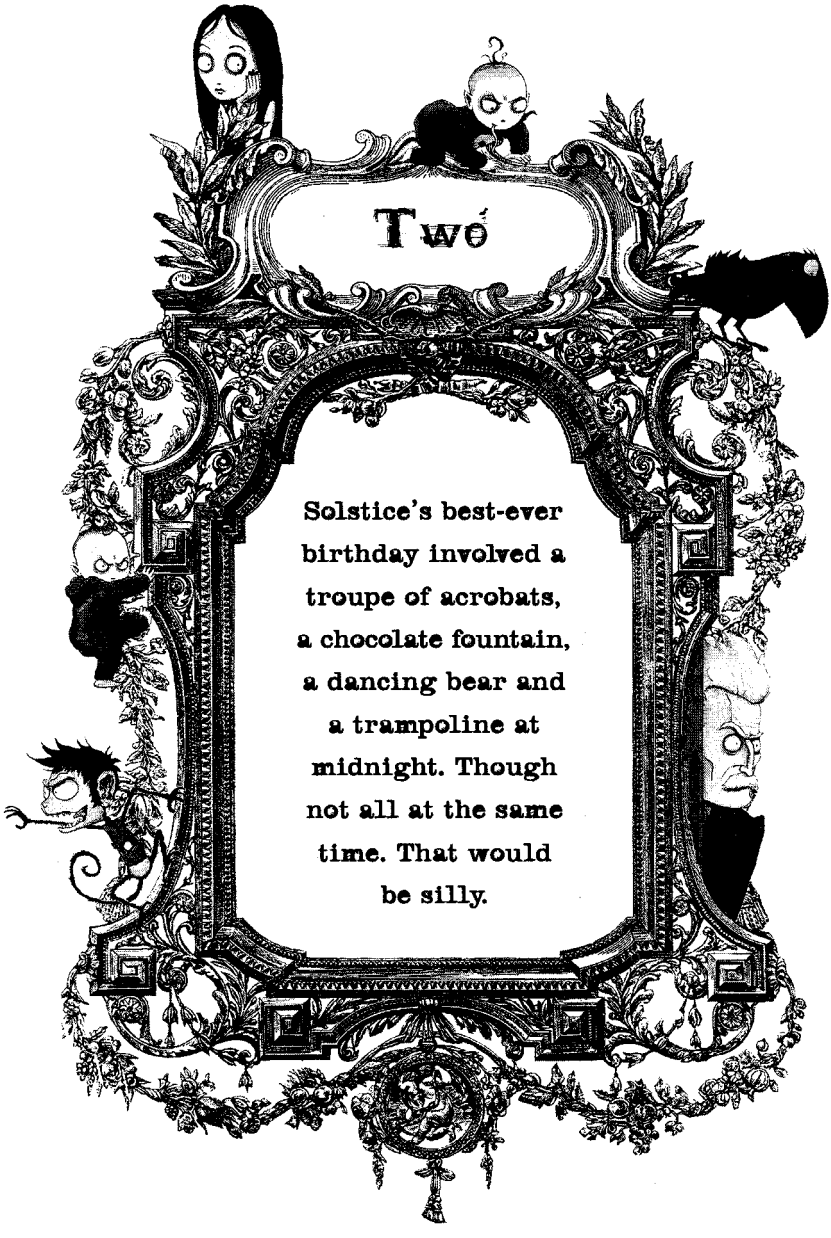
The monkey was hopping and lolloping back across the rooftops, heading for home in Cudweed's room.

I should have known there and then that



something was wrong, but at the time I just thought it odd that the idiotic primate was using only three of his limbs to skip along. I think I dimly hoped he had hurt himself, but that was it.

Little did I know then that I had just witnessed the start of all the weirdness.


Two
Solstice's best-ever birthday involved a troupe of acrobats, a chocolate fountain, a dancing bear and a trampoline at midnight. Though not all at the same time. That would be silly.

'Whaaaaaaaaat?' roared Valevine.

He was in quite the worst mood I had seen him in for a very long time. This was because, of all the parts of the castle that had been damaged by the earthquake, his laboratory high in the East Tower seemed to have fared the worst.

He and Flinch had been engaged in quite the most desperate battle for knowledge ever undertaken by the human mind, or so he said. They'd been conducting experiments into why chocolate ice cream is quite so scrummy, but when the wobbling began, all nine bowls of the stuff had been sent crashing to the floor, where they were now seeping stickily down between the cracks in the flags.

'Everything is ruined!' Valevine had declared, storming down the spiral staircase. He had called an emergency assembly of the entire family in the Small Hall, and had just asked Cudweed to explain the cause of earthquakes.

The small and wretched child had mumbled something so inaudible as to be positively annoying.

'What?' repeated Valevine, again at full

terrifying volume. 'What did you say, boy?'

Cudweed gulped.

'I wondered if it's to do with the moon. Most things are, aren't they? Aren't they?'

Valevine's face was terrible to see.

'The moon? Pah!'

He whirled round and, still furious about the melting ice cream, accosted Solstice.

'You, oh daughter of mine, what do you have to say for yourself? What are the causes of the phenomenon we know as the earthquake?'

Solstice fiddled with her necklace, a charming thing with death heads and whatnot.

'Erm, well,' she said. 'I think it's something to do with plate tectonics, isn't it?'

I put my head under my wing, dreading Valevine's reaction. So I didn't see his face, but I heard him explode.

'Plates! Plates? Are you trying to be funny?'

'No!' cried poor Solstice. 'I just read something about the Earth's crust rubbing against itself, and...'

'Enough! You're only making it worse for yourself, Daughter!' Valevine cried. He stomped

about the Small Hall for a bit, kicking a few polar bear rugs in the backside as he did, while everyone else stared at their shoes and coughed quietly.

'Right!' he cried. 'That's it! I have made a decision. No! I've made two decisions!'

Now at this point there was a bit of fuss. The coughing stopped and turned into muttering, because one thing that Valevine is infamous for is his decisions. The castle tends to run in fear of him actually deciding something, rather than just muddling along in the usual way.

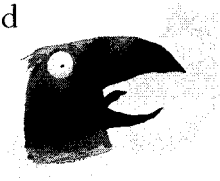
For example, there was the time Valevine decided that wings were unnecessary for flight, and that determination would do. I could have told him. Fortunately he also decided to try his experiment over water, so when he'd dog-paddled back to the shore of the lake, it was only his pride that was hurt, as he seemed to have missed the mysterious creature that lurks in the lake's murky depths.

Then there was the time he decided that everyone in the castle should stay awake for as long as they could, 'to see what happens'. What happened was that everyone got very tired, then

very grumpy, then started thinking they were made of cheese, or that they were the Queen of Cyprus, or an elephant in pyjamas. Then everyone fell asleep for a week and woke up chewing the carpets where they lay.

And there was the time that he decided ravens were evil birds that shouldn't live in people's homes. His worst idea ever, and one I soon set him straight on when the entire rest of the family sided with me in trying to have him thrown out of the castle instead.

So when Valevine announced he had made not one but two decisions, there was understandable commotion.



'Decision number one!' Valevine announced, his eyebrows twitching wildly. 'It is obvious to me, as never before, that we live in perilous times. At any moment, the castle could come crashing down around our ears as a result of earthquake, tidal wave, or all the rabbits in the meadow jumping at exactly the same time as all the lambs. We cannot live with this uncertainty, and therefore, as much as it pains me to do so, I am going to put aside my research into ice cream, in order to build a machine to predict the future!'

There was a moment's silence, and then, surprisingly, a huge round of applause. It took me a minute to work out why. Everyone had simultaneously realised that this decision of Lord Otherhand's would affect precisely no one but himself. And Flinch of course, who was indeed the only one in the room not cheering with relief.

But then!

Oh, then came Valevine's second decision, and it was terrible indeed, even though once again it only affected two people in the castle.

Those two people were Cudweed and Solstice.

'I have also decided,' he belted out into the air with menace and determination, 'that my children's education is shabby, appallingly sketchy and, dash it all, non-existent. I am therefore going to place an advertisement in the paper for a private tutor in order that they may receive some decent and proper instruction.'

'No! Father, no!' wailed Solstice and Cudweed as one.

'Yes! Children, yes! You are going to have a schoolmaster, and you will learn something, by golly, or I'll want to know why not!'

Now once again, everyone else in the room was secretly rather relieved that the pronouncement had nothing to do with them, but I must say I felt rather sorry and a touch cross for the children. Education is a simply awful business, I recall from my dim and distant youth, and as always, I felt a touch of horror at someone new entering the castle.

But while I was contemplating these matters, and Cudweed and Solstice were clinging to each other for moral support, and everyone else was slinking away hoping that Valevine wasn't about to add a third decision, something most odd occurred.

A coin, from out of nowhere it seemed, bounced down the main stairs and landed between the rugs in the Small Hall. It hit a table leg and began to spin around as coins like to do, and it was such an odd thing that everyone stopped and watched.

Then the coin did something odder, because rather than fall on one side or the other, heads or tails, if you see what I mean, it stopped spinning and remained standing on its edge.

'Coo,' said Cudweed. 'That's weird. You



couldn't do that if you tried. I bet,' he went on, getting quite excited, 'if you lived to be a thousand years old, and did that a hundred times a day till you dropped dead, you'd never manage to do that again.'

Which was an interesting thing to say, because just then another coin appeared, also as if from nowhere, and bounced down the steps, and hit a table leg, and spun around. And then stayed standing on its edge.

'Coo.'

That was Cudweed again, and his voice was no more than a whisper.

'That's ... weird,' said Solstice.

And so it was.

But it was nothing compared to the weirdness that was to follow.