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Opening extract from

The Raven Boys

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ONE

It was freezing in the churchyard, even before the dead arrived.

Every year, Blue and her mother, Maura, had come to the same place, and every year it was chilly. But this year, without Maura here with her, it felt colder.

It was April 24, St Mark's Eve. For most people, St Mark's Day came and went without note. It wasn't a school holiday. No presents were exchanged. There were no costumes or festivals. There were no St Mark's Day sales, no St Mark's Day cards in the shops, no special television programmes that aired only once a year. No one marked April 25 on their calendar. In fact, most of the living were unaware that St Mark even had a day named in his honour.

But the dead remembered.

As Blue sat shivering on the stone wall, she reasoned that at least, at the *very* least, it wasn't raining this year.

Every St Mark's Eve, this was where Maura and Blue came: an isolated church so old that its name had been forgotten. The ruin was cupped in the densely wooded hills outside of Henrietta, still several miles from the

mountains proper. Only the exterior walls remained; the roof and floors had long ago collapsed inside. What hadn't rotted away was hidden under hungry vines and rancid-smelling saplings. The church was surrounded by a stone wall, broken only by a lychgate just large enough for a coffin and its bearers. A stubborn path that seemed impervious to weeds led through to the old church door.

"Ah," hissed Neeve, plump but strangely elegant as she sat beside Blue on the wall. Blue was struck again, as she had been struck the first time she'd met Neeve, by her oddly lovely hands. Chubby wrists led to soft, child-like palms and slender fingers with oval nails.

"Ah," Neeve murmured again. "Tonight is a night."

She said it like this: "Tonight is a *night*" and when she did, Blue felt her skin creep a little. Blue had sat watch with her mother for the past ten St Mark's Eves, but tonight felt different.

Tonight was a *night*.

This year, for the first time, and for reasons Blue didn't understand, Maura had sent Neeve to do the church watch in her place. Her mother had asked Blue if she would go along as usual, but it wasn't really a question. Blue had always gone; she would go this time. It was not as if she had made plans for St Mark's Eve. But she had to be asked. Maura had decided sometime before Blue's birth that it was barbaric to order children about, and so Blue had grown up surrounded by imperative question marks.

Blue opened and closed her chilly fists. The top edges of her fingerless gloves were fraying; she'd done a bad job knitting them last year, but they had a certain trashy chic to them. If she hadn't been so vain, Blue could've worn the boring but functional gloves she'd been given for Christmas. But she *was* vain, so instead she had her fraying fingerless gloves, infinitely cooler though also colder, and no one to see them but Neeve and the dead.

April days in Henrietta were quite often fair, tender things, coaxing sleeping trees to bud and love-mad ladybirds to beat against windowpanes. But not tonight. It felt like winter.

Blue glanced at her watch. A few minutes until eleven. The old legends recommended the church watch be kept at midnight, but the dead kept poor time, especially when there wasn't a moon.

Unlike Blue, who didn't tend towards patience, Neeve was a regal statue on the old church wall: hands folded, ankles crossed beneath a long wool skirt. Blue, huddled, shorter and thinner, was a restless, sightless gargoyle. It wasn't a night for her ordinary eyes. It was a night for seers and psychics, witches and mediums.

In other words, the rest of her family.

Out of the silence, Neeve asked, "Do you hear anything?" Her eyes glittered in the black.

"No," Blue answered, because she didn't. Then she wondered if Neeve had asked because Neeve *did*.

Neeve was looking at her with the same gaze that

she wore in all of her photos on the website – the deliberately unnerving, otherworldly stare that lasted several more seconds than was comfortable. A few days after Neeve had arrived, Blue had been distressed enough to mention it to Maura. They had both been crammed into the single bathroom, Blue getting ready for school, Maura for work.

Blue, trying to clip all of the various bits of her dark hair back into a vestigial ponytail, had asked, "Does she have to stare like that?"

In the shower, her mother drew patterns in the steamed glass door. She had paused to laugh, a flash of her skin visible through the long intersecting lines she had drawn. "Oh, that's just Neeve's trademark."

Blue thought there were probably better things to be known for.

In the churchyard, Neeve said enigmatically, "There is a lot to hear."

The thing was, there wasn't. In the summer, the foothills were alive with insects buzzing, mockingbirds whistling back and forth, ravens yelling at cars. But it was too cool, tonight, for anything to be awake yet.

"I don't hear things like that," Blue said, a little surprised Neeve wasn't already aware. In Blue's intensely clairvoyant family, she was a fluke, an outsider to the vibrant conversation her mother and aunts and cousins held with a world hidden to most people. The only thing that was special about her was something that she herself couldn't experience. "I hear as much of the

conversation as the telephone. I just make things louder for everyone else."

Neeve still hadn't looked away. "So that's why Maura was so eager for you to come along. Does she have you at all her readings as well?"

Blue shuddered at the thought. A fair number of the clients who entered 300 Fox Way were miserable women hoping Maura would see love and money in their future. The idea of being trapped in the house with that all day was excruciating. Blue knew it had to be very tempting for her mother to have Blue present, making her psychic powers stronger. When she was younger, she'd never appreciated how little Maura called on her to join in a reading, but now that Blue understood how well she honed other people's talents, she was impressed at Maura's restraint.

"Not unless it's a very important one," she replied.

Neeve's gaze had edged over the subtle line between discomfiting and creepy. She said, "It's something to be proud of, you know. To make someone else's psychic gift stronger is a rare and valuable thing."

"Oh, *pshaw*," Blue said, but not cruelly. She meant to be funny. She'd had sixteen years to get used to the idea that she wasn't privy to the supernatural. She didn't want Neeve to think she was experiencing an identity crisis over it. She tugged a string on her glove.

"And you have plenty of time to grow into your own intuitive talents," Neeve added. Her gaze seemed hungry.

Blue didn't reply. She wasn't interested in telling other people's futures. She was interested in going out and finding her own.

Neeve finally dropped her eyes. Tracing an idle finger through the dirt on the stones between them, she said, "I passed by a school on the way into town. Aglionby Academy. Is that where you go?"

Blue's eyes widened with humour. But of course Neeve, an outsider, couldn't know. Still, surely she could have guessed from the massive stone great hall and the car park full of cars that spoke German that it wasn't the sort of school that they could afford.

"It's an all-boys school. For politicians' sons and oil barons' sons and for" – Blue struggled the think of who else might be rich enough to send their kids to Aglionby – "the sons of mistresses living off hush money."

Neeve raised an eyebrow without looking up.

"No, really, they're awful," Blue said. April was a bad time for the Aglionby boys; as it warmed up, the convertibles appeared, bearing boys in shorts so tacky that only the rich would dare to wear them. During the school week, they all wore the Aglionby uniform: khaki trousers and a V-neck jumper with a raven emblem. It was an easy way to identify the advancing army. Raven boys.

Blue continued. "They think they're better than us and that we're all falling all over ourselves for them, and they drink themselves senseless every weekend and spray-paint the Henrietta exit sign."

Aglionby Academy was the number one reason Blue had developed her two rules: one, stay away from boys, because they were trouble. And two, stay away from Aglionby boys, because they were bastards.

"You seem like a very sensible teen," Neeve said, which annoyed Blue, because she already knew she was a very sensible teen. When you had as little money as the Sargents did, sensibility in all matters was ingrained young.

In the ambient light from the nearly full moon, Blue caught sight of what Neeve had drawn in the dirt. She asked, "What is that? Mom drew that."

"Did she?" Neeve asked. They studied the pattern. It was three curving, intersecting lines, making a long sort of triangle. "Did she say what it was?"

"She was drawing it on the shower door. I didn't ask."

"I dreamt it," Neeve said, in a flat voice that sent an unpleasant shudder along the back of Blue's neck. "I wanted to see what it looked like drawn out." She rubbed her palm through the pattern, then abruptly held up a beautiful hand.

She said, "I think they're coming."

This was why Blue and Neeve were here. Every year, Maura sat on the wall, knees pulled up to her chin, staring at nothing, and recited names to Blue. To Blue, the churchyard remained empty, but to Maura, it was full of the dead. Not the currently dead, but the spirits of those who would die in the next twelve months. For Blue, it had always been like hearing one half of a

conversation. Sometimes her mother would recognize the spirits, but often she would have to lean forward to ask them their names. Maura had once explained that if Blue wasn't there, she couldn't convince them to answer her – the dead couldn't see Maura without Blue's presence.

Blue never grew tired of feeling particularly needed, but sometimes she wished *needed* felt less like a synonym for *useful*.

The church watch was critical for one of Maura's most unusual services. So long as clients lived in the area, she guaranteed to let them know if they or a local loved one was bound to die in the next twelve months. Who wouldn't pay for that? Well, the true answer was: most of the world, as most people didn't believe in psychics.

"Can you see anything?" Blue asked. She gave her numb hands a bracing rub before snatching up a notebook and pen from the wall.

Neeve was very still. "Something just touched my hair."

Again, a shiver thrilled up Blue's arms. "One of them?"

In a husky voice, Neeve said, "The future dead have to follow the corpse road through the gate. This is probably another . . . spirit called by your energy. I didn't realize what an effect you would have."

Maura had never mentioned *other* dead people being attracted by Blue. Perhaps she hadn't wanted to scare her. Or maybe Maura just hadn't seen them – maybe she was as blind to these other spirits as Blue was.

Blue became uncomfortably aware of the slightest breeze touching her face, lifting Neeve's curly hair. Invisible, orderly spirits of not yet truly dead people were one thing. Ghosts that weren't compelled to stay on the path were another.

"Are they—" Blue started.

"Who are you? Robert Neuhmann," Neeve interrupted. "What's your name? Ruth Vert. What's your name? Frances Powell."

Scratching quickly to catch up, Blue printed the names phonetically as Neeve solicited them. Every so often, she lifted her eyes to the path, trying to glimpse – *something*. But as always, there was only the overgrown crabgrass, the barely visible oak trees. The black mouth of the church, accepting invisible spirits.

Nothing to hear, nothing to see. No evidence of the dead except for their names written in the notebook in her hand.

Maybe Neeve was right. Maybe Blue was having a bit of an identity crisis. Some days it did seem a little unfair that all of the wonder and power that surrounded her family was passed to Blue in the form of paperwork.

At least I can still be a part of it, Blue thought grimly, although she felt about as included as a seeing eye dog. She held the notebook up to her face, close, close, close, so she could read it in the darkness. It was like a roster of names popular seventy and eighty years before: Dorothy, Ralph, Clarence, Esther, Herbert, Melvin.

A lot of the same last names, too. The valley was

heart was still ramming inside her ribcage. She asked, feeling a little foolish, "What's your name?"

He didn't seem to hear her. Without a twitch of acknowledgement, he began to move again, slow and bewildered, towards the church door.

Is this how we make our way to death? Blue wondered. *A stumbling fade-out instead of a self-aware finale?*

As Neeve began again to call out questions to the others, Blue made her way towards the wanderer.

"Who are you?" she called from a safe distance, as he dropped his forehead into his hands. His form had no outline at all, she saw now, and his face was truly featureless. There was nothing about him, really, that made him human shaped, but still, she saw a boy. There was something telling her mind what he was, even if it wasn't telling her eyes.

There was no thrill in seeing him, as she had thought there would be. All she could think was, *He will be dead within a year.* How did Maura bear it?

Blue stole closer. She was close enough to touch him as he began to walk again, but still he made no sign of seeing her.

This near to him, her hands were freezing. Her heart was freezing. Invisible spirits with no warmth of their own sucked at her energy, pulling goosebumps up her arms.

The young man stood on the threshold of the church and Blue knew, just *knew*, that if he stepped into the church, she would lose the chance to get his name.

"Please," Blue said, softer than before. She reached out a hand and touched the very edge of his not-there jumper. Cold flooded through her like dread. She tried to steady herself with what she'd always been told: spirits drew all their energy from their surroundings. All she was feeling was him using her to stay visible.

But it still felt a lot like dread.

She asked, "Will you tell me your name?"

He faced her and she realized with shock that he wore an Aglionby jumper.

"Gansey," he said. Though his voice was quiet, it wasn't a whisper. It was a real voice spoken from some place almost too far away to hear.

Blue couldn't stop staring at his mussed hair, the suggestion of staring eyes, the raven on his jumper. His shoulders were soaked, she saw, and the rest of his clothing rain spattered, from a storm that hadn't happened yet. This close, she could smell something minty that she wasn't sure was unique to him or unique to spirits.

He was so real. When it finally happened, when she finally saw him, it didn't feel like magic at all. It felt like looking into the grave and seeing it look back at her.

"Is that all?" she whispered.

Gansey closed his eyes. "That's all there is."

He fell to his knees – a soundless gesture for a boy with no real body. One hand splayed in the dirt, fingers pressed to the ground. Blue saw the blackness of the church more clearly than the curved shape of his shoulder.

"Neeve," Blue said. "Neeve, he's – dying."

Neeve had come to stand just behind her. She replied, "Not yet."

Gansey was nearly gone now, fading into the church, or the church fading into him.

Blue's voice was breathier than she would have liked. "Why – why can I see him?"

Neeve glanced over her shoulder, either because there were more spirits coming or because there weren't – Blue couldn't tell. By the time she looked back, Gansey had vanished entirely. Already Blue felt warmth returning to her skin, but something behind her lungs felt icy. A dangerous, sucking sadness seemed to be opening up inside her: grief or regret.

"There are only two reasons a non-seer would see a spirit on St Mark's Eve, Blue. Either you're his true love," Neeve said, "or you killed him."