

TALE OF THE LOST DAUGHTER

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She Changes Everything chant, by Starhawk. Used by permission.

The Inanna/Ereshkigal myth in Chapter 3, *Darkest Night*, is based on The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature translation of *Inanna's Descent to the Nether World*. Black, J.A., Cunningham, G., Fluckiger-Hawker, E., Robson, E., and Zólyomi, G., The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (<http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/>), Oxford 1998- .

This book is a work of fiction. Names and characters are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, are entirely coincidental. Salt Spring Island is a real place but the events described are fictional.

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SOUL ACHE



The winter twilight sky edged into my corner office on the twenty-eighth floor of a glass and steel tower in the heart of Toronto's financial district. She appeared as if out of thin air, a jet black raven staring at me through the plate-glass window, with small, dark, intelligent eyes that sparkled with tiny, star-like flecks of light.

I blinked several times to make sure this wasn't a hallucination induced by the excesses of my earlier corporate luncheon. No such luck, she was the real thing, bigger and more regal than a common crow, with a sleek beauty and slight luminescent sheen to her inky feathers. Her harsh, lonely cries seemed to come from some other place, echoing and insistent, three and then two calls repeating slowly, as if she waited for a reply.

Normally I wouldn't have spared those eyes a second glance. I don't do nature. I do shopping. I do restaurants. I do all-inclusive resorts. I do personal trainer and power yoga. Mostly I do work, sixty to seventy hours a week. But not birds or beasts or green growing things. Yet on that evening, at that particular moment, a chasm opened in me that I could not deny, and this feathered ally arrived to point my way home.

How else can I even begin to explain what propelled me on this strange adventure? Three short days ago, December 17 to

be exact, I was leading a perfectly normal life, and now, in the waning daylight hours of December 20, I'm bouncing about in a flimsy, six-seat floatplane, with spindly metal supports and cigar-shaped pontoons for landing gear. My destination is a barely populated, forest-covered rock on the Canadian West Coast, a place I didn't even know existed last week.

A wild, glorious panorama surrounds me — craggy, charcoaled mountains, mist-shrouded islands and the undulating expanse of a dark green sea. The passenger beside me, a balding man in a bedraggled, navy blue overcoat, stares out the window with a dewy-eyed expression of Zen-like bliss. But I can't sit still; I cross and uncross my legs, bumping up against icy steel on one side and my neighbor on the other.

Maybe this place is more beautiful than the grumpy, gray wintertime of Toronto, but the winds holding up this insubstantial plane seem to have taken on a predatory howl, and that frigid, bottomless ocean doesn't look too welcoming either. Of course the cute pilot with the charming French accent, just one seat in front of me, is a nice bit of distraction, but good looks don't guarantee talent behind the wheel.

"We are hitting a small patch of turbulence," the pilot says, "Nothing to worry about. There's a bit of blustery weather moving through, and it's always squally when we pass over Galiano Island."

An involuntary gasp slips through my pursed lips as the plane suddenly jostles from side to side, like a tinkertoy in the rough hands of a giant. Acrid sweat pools in my armpits. I grip the armrests and will myself to stay calm. No one else is freaking out, only me. I breathe slowly and deeply, in and out through my nose, just like in yoga class. Do people die in these things? No, no, otherwise there would have been some kind of legal disclaimer on the website or at least a few life insurance

ads. An old John Denver song pops into my head, one my Opa Kass used to play for me when I was a kid. For a few moments, John's crooning about a Rocky Mountain high soothes me, and then I remember that he crashed into the ocean in a plane as small as this one.

A steady, shaking change in altitude marks the beginning of our descent, and the floatplane, miraculously, is still in one piece. I peer through the window, my burgundy-painted nails carving half circles into my tender palms. White-tipped waves reach hungrily toward us, threatening and then delivering a bone-rattling, graceless landing. We smack through the chop, bumping our way to a stop alongside a weathered dock shared by a collection of rain-drenched watercraft, ranging from luxury yachts to sturdy fishing boats, but bereft of human occupation.

Welcome to the middle of nowhere. No work, no friends, no night life and no Starbucks coffee. Really, why did I come to this off-the-grid place? No, damn it, no! I won't go down that road. I'm here and I need to trust myself. Some primal instinct has drawn me to this island, like a parched camel to an oasis. But at least a camel knows it thirsts for water. Me, I haven't the faintest idea what I'm after. Only that I ache for something missing from my life, somehow linked to my soul — a noun only recently, and uncomfortably, activated in my vocabulary. Yet, undeniably, I sense that whatever nourishment I crave exists in this unlikely place so far from the world that I know. Whether or not this is sheer madness or trusting myself, here I am, following the directives of the peculiar, inky raven that visited me last Friday at the turning of day into nightfall.



Lunch had indeed been a foray into excessive indulgence on that fateful Friday, at least for most of my fellow revelers. Frosted rays of sunshine poured in from large bay windows that framed a snow-dusted, downtown Toronto skyline, further brightening the lacquered, crimson surfaces of the restaurant's Asian décor. The event was our senior management Christmas festivity and an early celebration of our best financial performance in TechStar's ten-year history — not the happiest time for our company but definitely the most lucrative.

Last year, TechStar bought out a rival investment firm, Lead Digital, with a plan of capitalizing on the companies' differing strategies for investing in promising internet technologies. TechStar provided venture capital in the early stages of a new company, whereas Lead Digital purchased shares of emerging top players in the global marketplace. On the surface, the merger appeared to offer complimentary approaches, but on the ground it was like forcing two wolf packs to live in the same territory, with the requisite snarling and displays of supremacy en route to establishing a new alpha order.

Like most corporate environments, everything simmered beneath the surface and played out in backroom politics — a pretty façade with plastic smiles that disguised cutthroat dynamics and deadly fangs. This lunch was a prime example: a fat-cat feast of fusion dim sum, where overflowing trays of Christmas-themed cocktails and vast quantities of miniature bamboo baskets spoke of our shared good fortune and God-granted right to spend and gorge as we pleased. I soon lost track of the exotic dishes, puffing out garlic- and ginger-scented steam clouds, that made their journey from linen-draped trolleys to the indiscriminate palates of my blue-suited cohorts: Peking duck ravioli, crab and taro spring rolls, lemongrass-infused scallop dumplings, hoisin barbeque ribs

and numerous other elaborate concoctions that didn't reach my end of the table.

Matt, Techstar's CEO, founder and principle shareholder, reigned over us at the head of the table. As usual, Matt stood out as the jewel in the crowd, not only because of his turquoise shirt and tie, and exquisitely tailored, charcoal suit, but because he rose above the corporate politics, beaming his sparkling, green eyes and boyish grin on each of us in turn. But then again, as the big boss with a brilliant financial track record, Matt no longer had to fight for territory with the rest of us.

At the other end of the table, not-so-subtly positioning himself as second-in-command, Trent, the partner from Lead Digital, surveyed our group with steel gray, rapacious eyes. A corpulent, ruddy-skinned man with a voracious appetite for anything that crossed his path, Trent wolfed his way through a loaded plate of these delicacies in the time it took me to finish a small serving of dumplings. Every time his glance happened in my direction, his pink tongue slowly passed over his thin lips. Despite my overwhelming urge to slap that smug, predatory look off his face, I did not lose my smile or look away.

The rest of our party lined up along the sides of the table, roughly clustered in TechStar and Lead Digital groupings. In total there were eight men and me, the lone, but definitely not token, woman. Not that there weren't other women in our outfit, but only I had made it into the rarified, testosterone-laced air of upper management. My closest female competition, Marsha, our Human Resource Director, was inherited from the Lead Digital ranks. But she wasn't high enough in the pecking order to be invited to the Christmas luncheon.

Marsha seemed to hate me from our very first encounter at a meet-and-greet between our two firms prior to the merger. I noticed her checking me out with a scathing stare from across

the room. She shifted to an insipid smile and offered me a limp, perfunctory handshake when Matt introduced us. Shortly afterwards, we were thrown together in the near-impossible task of reorganizing our joined, incompatible companies.

As the last of the dim sum dishes were cleared away, and yet another round of cranberry red and neon green drinks were delivered to our table, Matt rose to address us. After the compulsory congratulations on our fiscal performance, Matt sprung his surprise announcement. Steve, my boss and Matt's long-time partner and financial guru, was retiring and moving to Costa Rica.

At first there was stunned silence and then a round of loud, boisterous applause. I took the measure of the crowd and sensed the odd mix of blind admiration and greedy jealousy. Steve had made more money in his twenties than most of these guys would make in their lifetime. He was leaving behind miserable winters, rush-hour traffic, ten-hour days and week-ends at the office, and watching his hairline recede with every passing year. Now Steve could write his own ticket, whiling away his days in luxury and dabbling in Costa Rica's budding tech sector.

But Matt and I knew the whole story. The double whammy of his second divorce shortly after his forty-third birthday and the unrelenting stress of sharing the firm's leadership with Trent had seriously compromised Steve's health. High blood pressure, insomnia, depression and a steady diet of antacids — Steve's doctor had warned him to make some serious changes or he'd be sleeping on the underside of the grass before he was fifty. This wasn't self-chosen, retirement bliss. Steve was the first casualty of our merger: a high-level, painful loss for TechStar and a clear victory for Trent.

Steve stood up, steadied himself against the table and took

a sip of water before speaking. I was probably the only one who noticed the dark circles under his eyes, the extra gray in his hair and his pasty, clammy complexion. No, not true. Trent never missed a thing; his self-congratulatory smirk told me that he knew exactly why Steve was stepping down. He had hunted his prey for twelve months and now he had felled him, annihilating Matt's favorite and his closest competition.

"Matt has given me the honor of announcing my replacement," Steve said, "It shouldn't surprise any of you that Sarah Ashby will be assuming my partner role as TechStar's Chief Financial Officer." Then turning in my direction, he continued, "Sarah, it's been one of my greatest pleasures to work with you these past six years. You have given your all to this company. There is no one better suited to take my place and help lead TechStar into its next phase. Not only do you know our side of the business inside and out, through your central role in the reorganization you also understand where our merged company is heading. To your success, Sarah, I know you will continue to be a star!"

My throat tightened and I blinked back a few tears. The pride in Steve's voice and the steady way he looked at me were genuine; he meant every word he said. He had recruited me, a fellow Harvard MBA and native New Yorker, enticing me to seek my fortune on Canadian soil with the promise that neither gender nor age would stand in the way of my quick rise to success. I'd kept my part of the bargain, leaving behind my beloved New York and giving most of my waking hours to TechStar. And so had Steve, championing and mentoring me from the get-go for the top management team.

Steve shifted to face the rest of the group and then said, "Let's drink to our new partner, Sarah. Don't let her youth and beauty deceive you. She has more brains, drive and killer

instinct than the rest of us put together. And more good grace and class as well. To Sarah!”

I raised my glass demurely in response to my companions’ obligatory applause and canned laughter, but I took only a small, measured sip of my drink while everyone else downed their glasses.

Thirty-three, female and a partner in a multi-million dollar company, I sat still and straight as a statue, once again assessing the reaction of the group. I glanced at Trent; there was no surprise on his face. He already knew why I occupied the seat of honor between Matt and Steve; Matt had confirmed Steve’s retirement and my promotion with him earlier this morning. Trent locked his eyes on mine and by the nasty curl at the corners of his mouth I understood that he’d be after me next. There was no way he was going to knock me off my corporate throne this early in the game. I tipped my head, smiled sweetly and then stood to address the group, willing my body to relax and my voice to come out steady and strong.

“Thank you, Matt and Steve, for this fabulous opportunity,” I said, “We’ll miss you, Steve. I won’t pretend that I can fill your shoes, but I’ll work my hardest to ensure our continued success. And though I wish you all the happiness you deserve in your new life, don’t think you can slip from our grasp so easily. I see our next Christmas lunch amidst swaying palms with you briefing us on Costa Rica’s investment opportunities.”

More obligatory applause and laughter followed my remarks as I took my seat. Only Matt’s and Steve’s enthusiasm seemed genuine as they beamed their unconditional approval at me. There was something else in Matt’s look, a momentary blaze of heat that made my heart race and my cheeks flush, and then, just as quick, it was gone.

The other male faces froze in tight-lipped smiles, while they

looked me up and down, taking in the not-too-revealing cut of my white linen shirt, the half-empty, lipstick-rimmed cocktail glass at my place setting, and Steve’s hand resting paternally on my shoulder. I didn’t serve them coffee at office functions. I ran boardroom meetings where they weren’t invited. I smelled good, walked nice, looked pretty, but talked smart and produced moneyed results, and never uncrossed my legs for anyone in the office. My mother, a successful business woman in her own right, taught me early on that sexual allure in the workplace was like expensive perfume: a dab will do and never let a co-worker dip into your bottle.

But office gossip didn’t deal in reality, only speculation. Although I knew that a few people suspected that I was sleeping with Matt or Steve, or both, no one ever dared to say this out loud until Marsha arrived on the scene. I knew Marsha had been spreading rumors by making off-handed, insinuating comments to the support staff that spread through the ranks like wildfire. Not that anyone said anything to me directly, but I sensed that my co-workers looked at me differently; nothing I could pinpoint, other than a touch of disrespect from the women and a subtle, sexual come-on from the men. Through a few well-placed innuendos, Marsha had tarnished my reputation and hard-won accomplishments in the eyes of these men, with no apparent damage to her own character.

I continued through the rest of the lunch, drinking, joking and accepting firm-handshake congratulations from this pack of alpha wolves, with my facial muscles locked in a mask-like smile. All the while, my senses registered the over-spiced, over-hyped food, unnaturally vivid drinks, and the palpable envy that hung in the air like suspended drops of acid, wanting nothing more than to slip into my cocktail and burn me dead from the inside out. Although Marsha was physically absent,

my thoughts couldn't help but turn to her. Matt hadn't advised her of my rise to partner status and she was going to freak out when she heard the news secondhand. What new heights of backstabbing and troublemaking would my promotion drive her to?

Trent approached me as we all rose to leave. Under the gentleman-like guise of helping me on with my coat, he leaned in, his breath stinking of garlic and gin, and whispered in my ear, "Let's see how you stand up in the big-boy's league, little Sarah, with no more Steve to baby you."

And then, taking a leisurely look down my shirtfront, he said, "But I'm sure working with you has its perks — at least that's what I've heard."

The bastard! The god-damned bastard! Acid boiled in my guts as I scrambled for a scathing response. But he had planned his attack perfectly and slipped amongst the departing Lead Digital crowd before I could utter a word. And in the next moment, Matt had sidled up beside me.

"I want you to take some time off before the new year," Matt said as we stepped from the overheated restaurant into a cold blast of winter wind.

"You're kidding?" I said, stopping mid-sidewalk to confront him, "You've just promoted me and you want me to take a leisurely Christmas break? What about the reorganization project with Marsha? What about getting my replacement sorted out before January?"

"All of that can wait. I want you fresh and well rested before you move into Steve's office," Matt said, "He's clearing up any remaining issues on his plate and I know you don't have anything pressing on yours. Besides, if you hang around I'll insist you trade places with Elsa and wear that velvet elf outfit to hand out presents at the office party."

"Yeah right, as if you could?" I said as we started walking again, weaving our way through the afternoon crowd.

"Think about it, okay?" Matt pushed, "You could use a break and it would make me feel better to know you had a nice, pleasant holiday before pulling up a chair with Trent and me."

Matt didn't say anything else; maybe he couldn't give voice to his real concerns about my new working relationship with Trent. I was a big girl after all and I'd accepted this promotion with no illusions about corporate dynamics. I didn't say anything either, not a word about my Marsha misgivings nor Trent's aggressive moves on me. But I did agree to think about his vacation offer and to let him know before Monday. I didn't have substantive plans for the holidays, other than my traditional Christmas brunch with Opa Kass at his senior home and my best friend Jules's New Year's party. My mother's idea of Christmas was sending me a postcard from somewhere hot. This year she was off to Belize to bake in the sun with her latest boyfriend. Maybe a bit of downtime wouldn't be so bad.

Back in my office, with a slow-building MSG headache for company, I spent a few hours tidying up my work and dealing with outstanding issues, just in case I took Matt up on his holiday offer. When I was done, I leaned back in my chair and smoothed my hands over the bare expanse of my desk, drinking in that curious sense of wellbeing that an ordered space always seemed to engender. Outside my door the place was silent, except for the hum of the florescent lighting; everyone else had fled the corporate nest for the weekend.

From my top drawer, I pulled out the single sheet of paper with my job offer and hefty remuneration package — salary, bonus and stock options — printed in bold font. I read and then re-read the letter, three or four times, and then stared at the page expectantly, patiently, waiting. For what, I didn't

know — a flutter of excitement, a sigh of satisfaction, maybe even an uncharacteristic victory bellow, anything to mark this long-anticipated moment of success? But it did not come.

Drip, one tear slid down my cheek, splashing on the page in my trembling hands and smudging the ink imprint of my seven-figure income into black streaks. Drip, drip, one followed another and another, wet, raw, inexplicable. And then a floodgate opened within me, pouring out of my constricted throat and pounding through my flesh in a torrent of noisy, heaving anguish. Waves of sobs rose and fell in sharp jags of keening — sounds my body couldn't possibly make — had never made before. I held back nothing, howling myself empty and limp, like someone had pulled out all my bones and left a jellied puddle on my desk. Absolute, impenetrable silence followed, as if the whole world waited with bated breath for what would come next.

From a still, calm place somewhere within the secret folds of my heart, a gentle voice arose saying, "Sarah, slow down, open to the in and out movement of your body with breath. Look inside, below the below of what you know, into the depth of who you are. What you seek waits for you there."

My spine straightened of its own accord, sitting me up tall, alert, enervated. I rubbed away my tears and carelessly wiped my sniffling nose on the dark sleeve of my best Prada suit. My consciousness expanded, as if a light had been turned on, and I peered, for the first time, into the vastness of my inner landscape. A nameless, formless hunger rose up and sucked me into its vortex, squeezing all the air from my lungs and thoughts from my mind, leaving me gasping like a beached fish, yet also wonderfully open and empty.

A gift of pure, crystal-clear awareness bubbled up into this emptiness that spoke to me in simple, strange words, but with a

power I couldn't deny, "You can no longer hide from me. I am your soul ache, come to guide you home."

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap. I turned to the tinted panel of glass that covered one wall of my office. A web of ice crystals had spread across its surface, painted by the chilled exhalation of a December wind. An enormous, jet black raven perched on the narrow, metal ledge outside my window, haloed by the neon glow of a waking urban nightscape. Her hot breath melted a portal through the icy web into my world. She looked crafty, purposeful, as she called insistently and shifted from one leathery foot to the other, dancing her darkling shadow across the polished sheen of my desk. In my expanded state of awareness, the raven's arrival seemed commonplace, expected.

I slowed my breath and opened to the fathomless depth of the raven's twinkling, obsidian eyes. As if by magic, her rasping cries melted a portal into the icy interior of my heart, frosted over by the chilled exhalation of my unrelenting drive, and other deeper, hidden hurts that I could sense but not name. And in this melting, a secret desire awoke within me, a yearning for something essential missing from my life, connected to my soul. An understanding passed between us, a promise that I would follow whatever path this raven and my soul laid before me.

With a nod of her feathered brow, the raven extended her wings and leapt from the ledge, catching an updraft and vanishing, in the blink of a moment, into the spreading cobalt blue of the evening sky.



Early the next morning, I dreamt that I bent to pick up a black feather. As I touched its stiff, hollow quill, I heard

the distant, raucous cry of a raven, enticing me forward and deeper into the dreamscape. I clutched three more feathers in my other fist — magic trail markers that guided me, Hansel and Gretel like, toward some destined place. And that was it; I woke up and the dreamscape, with its salient details of the fated location, crumbled into dust. I had a fleeting vision of me desperately chasing after the dissipating mists of the dream, my hungry hands trying to catch hold of the ephemeral vapors. But it was no use; the dream was gone. All that remained was the tickling, teasing sensation of my fingertips touching that final feather.

Damn, what did this mystery bird want of me? First a flesh and blood raven dropped by for a twilight visit outside my office window, communing with me somehow and extracting a promise that I would follow where she led. And now this dream raven showed up to entice me on a journey, but didn't have the common decency to reveal the destination.

On impulse, I jumped out of bed and dressed myself from head to foot in midnight black, in honor of my newfound raven acquaintance. In reckless abandonment of standard practice, I managed to compress my beautification routine into a miraculous ten minutes, applying a bare minimum of makeup and skipping my hair styling entirely. Then I stepped out of the cherry red door of my red-brick Victorian townhouse, my breath billowing in rapid, little vents of steam, into the crystalline brilliance of a sun-crisped winter morning.

I traipsed through the tree-lined streets of my tony neighborhood — the historic, downtown enclave called the Annex — with the vague notion of following the trail of those black feathers in the dream. Christmas lights still twinkled in multicolored hues from rooflines and window frames, waiting for waking homeowners to turn them off for the day. Tiny, brown

birds flittered between gray, winter-bare branches, shaking loose miniature dustings of snow as they fluffed up their feathers against the press of winter. I walked at a leisurely pace, the ice-crusting sidewalks crunching beneath my boot heels, all the while scanning the sky and the ground for signs of my raven dream. When I reached Bloor Street, a distance of three good-sized city blocks from my home, nothing had shown up to direct my travels — no raven, no black feather and no flash of intuition.

So where to next? Nothing came to me. I stopped in my tracks, my face crunched up in concentration. A blast of wind nipped at my exposed skin and pierced the finely woven fabric of my pants. Didn't I have something more constructive to do with my time? Maybe some presents to wrap? Laundry to iron? Nails to paint? Anything other than this ridiculous nonsense? What was I doing wandering about aimlessly in the dead of winter, dressed for fashion not the elements? And where indeed was I headed with all of this?

My belly grumbled loudly and I laughed out loud. Here was the answer of where to go next. I turned west on Bloor Street toward the tantalizing fresh-baked goods and dark-roasted coffee of my favorite breakfast stop only two blocks away.

Those two blocks felt like an eternity, with each step strained, like pushing through an invisible barrier stretched tight between opposing forces. One force held me back, determined to resist these strange, new notions. The other urged me forward toward the secret desires awakening in me, for what I really didn't know, other than I was on the trail of something to do with my soul. But even these impulses grated on me. I mean really, since when did I indulge in this kind of new age mumbo jumbo? Spiritual matters had never really made it onto my list of worldly concerns and held about as much sway in my life as

the politics of Karl Marx.

As my brain began to throb, threatening a full-blown tension headache, I reached a compromise. I gave this dream adventure until the end of breakfast to come up with some bit of evidence that I hadn't lost my mind — no feather, then no more listening to ravens.

Jazz strains of Christmas standards and a blanket of pastry-scented, warm air enveloped me as I opened the door. A big chalkboard listed the daily coffee and breakfast specials, and woven baskets filled with sweet and savory baked treats lined the polished wood shelves. The place was already bustling, with three staff rushing about to serve a long line of patrons at the front counter. I looked around, despairing of finding a seat, when a pair of friendly eyes and a broad smile snagged my attention from a sunlit table close to the windows.

"I was wondering how long it would take you to notice me," Jules said, "I've been here for a half-hour, hoping you'd walk through that door. Saturday morning and cinnamon buns — when it comes to food you're pretty predictable!"

Though it had taken me a few minutes to notice Jules, she had clearly already captured the attention of two twenty-something young men. They sat backwards on their window-front stools, smiling invitingly in her direction, apparently oblivious, or uncaring, that she was a good decade their senior. But Jules only had eyes for me. I slipped between the tables to join her and she wrapped me in a big hug, as soothing and welcoming as the sweet aromas radiating from the bakery ovens.

Jules worked as an executive assistant for Lead Digital's management team and joined our company as part of the merger. Not long after, she showed up at my yoga class and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Neither could anyone else in the room, men and women alike. Her skintight, fire red outfit

had something to do with it, clearly distinguishing her from the black-yoga-wear conformity of the rest of us. The outfit accentuated her flawless, creamy white skin, thick, auburn mane of hair and toned, long-limbed form. But even more captivating was the intensity and beauty of her poses. This woman completely inhabited her body and moved with a sensual, cat-like grace, all liquid muscles and quivering power. Yet Jules never seemed to notice others' attention. This morning was no different.

With barely a pause for breath, she said, "I wanted to cross paths with you this morning so I could treat you to a victory breakfast. Congratulations! Wow, Matt made you a partner! Marsha was in a complete snit. She was fuming about being the Human Resource Director and not even being consulted. Ha! Serves her right for being so nasty to you!"

Among the many things we bonded over, like our shared love of food and art, our mutual disdain for Marsha was high on the list. Jules was as compelling and colorful with words as she was with her appearance. Her favorite, most vivid description of Marsha was a zombie from the realm of the walking dead, with a pasty complexion, tight-lipped slash of blood red lipstick, and a smell of wood rot with musty, floral overtones. Actually I saw Marsha as more toad-like, with her short, squat body, strangely flattened features and eyes that bulged ominously when she was driving home her point. Because of the Marsha factor, we kept our friendship private from the office.

"Marsha started up again with the Matt and Sarah love-affair storyline," Jules said, scrapping her chair legs across the polished concrete floor so as to fully face me, "She was going on about how this promotion proves that you've been fooling around with him. A gorgeous bachelor, no current girlfriend, your obvious mooning whenever he is in the room — easy

enough to put the pieces together in Marsha's warped mind. I mean, you couldn't have been made partner because you're brilliant, Steve's right-hand person and a key player at Tech-Star."

"I don't moon over Matt," I said with a slight frown.

"Come on, Sarah," Jules countered with a good-natured poke to my arm, "You do have a wee crush on the man. And so does every other woman in the office, even zombie-face Marsha."

A vision of the blazing flash in Matt's green eyes at yesterday's lunch came back to me. My heart once again quickened its beat and a delicious, tingling sensation spread through my thighs. Had I been secretly lusting over Matt? Is that why I never kept a boyfriend for longer than three months? And why I hadn't even mustered up a date for Jules's New Year's party? The guys I dated were never smart enough, good looking enough, charismatic enough or ambitious enough. Perhaps not Matt-like enough? Come to think about it, Matt never seemed to keep a girlfriend for more than three months either. What if Marsha was partially right? Maybe there was a mutual attraction between Matt and me, though we had never acted upon it. Rather than dwell on these uncomfortable thoughts, I changed the subject.

"Oh, Jules," I said, rubbing the creases in my brow, "I'm really sorry I didn't let you know sooner, but Steve's retirement was top secret. And I've had a lot on my mind since the announcement, so I forgot to call or text you."

Jules squeezed my hands in hers and for a silent moment stared into my eyes.

"Is something wrong?" she asked gently, "You don't look well. If you don't mind me saying, your grooming isn't up to standard. Since when do you leave the house without combing

your hair?"

I didn't laugh or make a grab for my mirror, and Jules quickly turned serious again.

"I've never seen you like this," she said, reaching to brush back a stray lock of hair, "I hope this isn't about me. I was thrilled to hear your news, regardless of who told me. Or about Marsha, she can't touch you now you're a partner. Anything she says will sound like sour grapes."

My stomach grumbled and churned uncomfortably. For most of my life, I'd hoarded my secrets and kept the sharing of personal, private information to a minimum. But Jules was by far the best friend I'd ever had, with the exception of my Opa Kass. If I could trust anyone with my current angst, it was her. I looked around the room, fidgeting with my hands in my lap. The place was still busy, but everyone close to us seemed caught up in their own world. Jules's two admirers had left. The young lovers at the next table were feeding each other tidbits of apple tart. A gray-haired man across from us, in a camel-colored sweater that had seen better days, had his face buried in the Saturday paper.

I took a deep breath and then said, "This isn't about either of those things. It's a bit of an odd story. Could we order breakfast and then I will fill you in?"

Between mouthfuls of fresh berries, yogurt and warm cinnamon buns, I blurted out the whole story: my unexpected, emotional meltdown, the encounter with the raven outside my office window, and the subsequent raven dream with its seductive images of way-showing feathers and an undisclosed destination. Jules didn't interrupt me once, though I saw questions flash in her eyes and rise to her lips.

"I'm losing it, Jules," I said, welling up with tears, "I've sacrificed most of my adult years to my career, following in

my dad's footsteps and working like a dog. And now that I've made it and landed a job that would even make that critical bastard proud, I'm blubbering on about my soul and listening to self-help advice from a raven. These can't be the actions of a sane person."

Jules got up to refill our coffee and perhaps to gather her thoughts before responding to me. When she returned, her earlier exuberance had stilled to a quiet, steady calm.

"Your dad may have been the president of an engineering firm, with a big salary, big house and all the right social connections," she said, wiping away a glistening tear from my cheek, "but he barely paid attention to you when you were growing up and then he dropped dead of a heart attack when you were only sixteen. Maybe a part of you knows better than to follow blindly in his footsteps."

"But where can this possibly lead?" I said, my voice coming out in a squeaky croak, "What if I do find these feathers? What then? God, Jules, I've just taken on a huge job. Now is not the time to be setting off on a spiritual adventure that is sure to mess with my head. You know as well as I do that Marsha is not the only one hoping I'll make a mistake. Trent has already made it perfectly clear that he is after my blood. You should've seen how he looked at me at the senior management lunch. He wants my head on a platter. One slipup or sign of vulnerability and I'm dead meat."

"I know you live for your career," Jules said, "But there are things that matter more than goose-stepping to the rules made by the likes of Trent and Marsha. Life can't be ordered by category and color, like your closets and cupboards. I love you dearly, but I worry that you're a wee bit too uptight and in control for your own good. Sometimes things have to get messy. Sometimes you have to get a little wild, a little crazy, to

really be alive."

Out of my peripheral vision, I saw the woman seated beside us get up to leave. She had silver hair, the color of moonlight, and ageless, sienna-toned skin. It was odd that I hadn't noticed her in my earlier scan of the room. We turned to each other for a brief moment; the sparkle in her amethyst eyes and the hint of mischief in the upturn of her lips instantly entranced me. My heart opened and my inner turmoil stopped.

Without a word, she dropped a brochure on our table and then headed out into the frosty winter air. It was from one of my favorite Toronto hangouts, the Art Gallery of Ontario, or the AGO in local lingo. The front page featured a traveling exhibit from the Vancouver Art Gallery. Even with my limited knowledge of Canada's geo-cultural map, I knew Vancouver was a West Coast, urban destination for the spiritually minded and most certainly a raven hangout. I felt a faint, downward fluttering sensation in my gut and then a soft, tingling touch, as if something as light as a feather had come to rest inside me.

"The first feather," I said to Jules, pushing the AGO brochure in front of her.

Jules turned to the door but the woman had vanished. Then she gingerly ran her fingertips over the brochure.

"How do you know?" she asked with a wide-eyed look that mirrored my own disconcertion at this sudden turn of events.

"I don't know," I said, "Something in the woman's look when she left the brochure on our table told me it was a clue. And then I had an odd sensation in my belly when I saw the visiting exhibit from Vancouver."

"Things just got a little wilder," Jules said with a quick grin, "Are you going to go?"

"Yes. I have to. Can you come with me?" I asked as I pulled on my coat and grabbed my purse.

"I can't. I'm so sorry," Jules said as she also stood up to leave, "I promised my Aunt Lily a month ago that we would have a Christmas shopping day together. It would break her heart for me to cancel. Besides, I think you need to figure this one out on your own."

Thirty minutes later I stood, my whole body rigid and alert, before a riveting, modernist canvas entitled "Big Raven" in which the artist, Emily Carr, depicted a larger-than-life raven gracefully awaiting its death and return to Mother Earth. In that moment an alternative reality, one where ravens talk, direct your dreams and show up in breathtaking paintings, truly kicked in. This stuff was not a fantasy game I'd cooked up for my entertainment; it was real, scary real.

I stared at this oil-painted masterpiece of the West Coast mythos, absorbing the vibrant, bold strokes of the down-flowing radiance of sky and the swirling, momentary embrace of flesh and forest, with the raven, earth-anchored and heaven-reaching, suspended between the two. My own flesh hummed with these big, untamed, primal forces that danced my heart to an erratic, cacophonous beat. My hands clenched and unclenched at my sides. Terror and delight, equally present, equally powerful, coursed through me, leaving me paralyzed in doubt and confusion. One part of me fumed and sputtered that this was utter nonsense, spiritual pap for the weak minded, and that I should squeeze my eyes shut until it all went away. The other, breathing heavy, legs spread wide and fingers reaching out hungrily, knew good food when she saw it — soul food that she had been waiting for her whole life.

Emily Carr was a passionate, free-spirited woman who refused to be domesticated by the Victorian strictures of her early years, or to let her spirit and magnificent originality be broken by the backwater isolation of her Canadian West Coast

home and the misogynist ethos of her times. All around me her masterworks spoke of her feral, ardent communion with the forest and the earth-rooted aboriginal culture in a language that I have always innately understood: the capturing of energy, color and beauty in art form.

"Fuck your tidy ways," I heard her whisper through the palpable, wild otherness reaching out from her canvases, "Fuck your fears. Be bold. Be brave. Be free."

Feather number two, this one plucked from the oil-painted back of Big Raven, fluttered down into my belly and rested beside its ebony sister.

Feather number one had pointed me in the direction of the West Coast. Feather number two suggested a location closer to Victoria, Emily Carr's hometown located on Vancouver Island, a large island off the British Columbia mainland. A slow, delicious smile spread across my face, melting the tension in my jaw, as my thoughts turned to feather number three and the possibility that it held the secret destination of my raven dream.

After a few hours of hanging out with Emily Carr, I visited yet another of my favorite foodie spots: a small vegetarian restaurant not far from the AGO that served the best split pea soup I've ever tasted, along with thick slices of dark rye. As always, I ordered the soup and nestled into my preferred seat, a russet leather chair and walnut table tucked beside a street-level window. The tasty food set before me calmed my buzzing speculation about the next feather.

When I finished my lunch, I dug out the New York Times Sunday edition from the bottom of the pile of international newspapers that this restaurant stocked to entice customers to linger over a cappuccino and one of their plate-sized gingersnap cookies. No matter that it was Saturday and this

was last week's paper, I enjoyed connecting with my New York hometown.

I reached the travel section on my final bite of ginger cookie, brushing off the sugar crystals clinging to my thumb and forefinger, and then smoothed out the paper to peruse enticing foreign locales. The week's travel column, "36 Hours," featured Salt Spring Island: "A forest and ocean-bound paradise not far from Victoria, British Columbia, with a Saturday market, kayaking, hiking and a thriving, local cultural scene."

For the third time that day, a woman acted as intermediary for the dream raven and her black feather directives.

"Oh my God," my server burst out, pointing a black-polished fingernail at the article I'd just finished, "I'd give a year's worth of tips to visit that place. My boyfriend cycled there last summer and said he'd never seen bigger, smarter birds than the local ravens — not like our city crows always pecking away in the trash — these are real, wild beasts, fearless enough to steal a sausage right off your plate."

As she reached to clear away my dishes, her bicep crossed my field of vision, along with its muscled tattoo of a blue-black raven, and, without thinking, I ran my fingertips slowly, tenderly, across this inked, feathered form. Rather than take offense at my boldness, the young woman smiled at me and pulled up her short sleeve to give me an unobstructed view of her raven body art.

"Magic," I said, more to myself than to her.

"Trickster," she added, "Sure to lead you down paths you wouldn't choose for yourself; ravens can see things that you can't and know things that you don't."

A cawing, mischievous burst of laughter echoed in my inner ear as my server moved on to the next table.

This third feather didn't even have time to twirl down and

join the other two in my sated belly before I pulled out my iPad and started making travel arrangements: a Monday morning flight from Toronto to Vancouver; a late afternoon floatplane from Vancouver to Ganges Harbor on Salt Spring Island; a deluxe holiday package at a waterfront specialty hotel called the Hastings House; and my return travel arrangements four days later to get me home in time for my Christmas date with Opa Kass. All the while my neural impulses moved faster than my mind and I deliberately blocked my internal tsunami of naysaying shrieks of, "What the hell are you doing? Have you totally gone mad? You can't do this!" I hit the last key, confirming the credit card data for my hotel reservation and sealing my fate, and then released my pent-up breath in a long, loud exhale. Jules was right — sometimes things have to get a little wild, a little crazy.

A few e-mails tidied up the remaining details: one to Matt accepting his offer of an extended Christmas break, telling him I'd be out of town until December 24 and asking him to let me know if anything important came up in my absence; another to my Opa Kass's senior home asking them to let him know I'd be away and providing them with contact information in case of an emergency; and a final one to Jules with the cryptic text, "The raven feathers have spoken. I'm off to the Wild West — Salt Spring Island — the Hastings House. Hope I return with my sanity intact. Thanks for being you."

Perhaps I should have called and spoken to each of them in person, especially Opa Kass, but I didn't dare. Maybe it was superstition; you're not supposed to speak your wishes out loud, and my dearest wish was to make this trip. In my gut I knew this to be a once-in-a-lifetime invitation that I could not, would not, shut down. Because if I did, I was certain that something precious and irreplaceable would be lost forever.

For better or for worse, I was headed west to Salt Spring Island.

My fourth and final feather was waiting for me on my stone-slab doorstep when I arrived home — nine inches long, with a rounded tip and an olive green sheen where it caught the fading afternoon light along its glossy, ebony surface. I picked it up and pressed it to my lips as warm, silver tears descended down my cheeks and splashed onto the hard, frozen earth.



The pilot hops onto the dock and secures the floatplane as the other passengers gather up their belongings. For the umpteenth time, I stroke the silky, flat surface of the black feather that I've kept within touching distance since I found it on my doorstep on Saturday afternoon. It's the only hard, physical proof that I didn't imagine all the wacky events that have landed me on Salt Spring, a place as far off the beaten track as I've ever been before. I brush the feather once more for good luck and then tuck it into my leather notepad holder.

The plane, dock, pilot and passengers sway and rock between the forces of wind and wave. I grip the pilot's outstretched hand as he guides me down the narrow metal steps. When my feet make contact with the slippery, wooden planks, he ushers me to one side with a nod and a friendly, dare I say flirty, wink. I smile in return but not with the poised certainty I usually display with the opposite sex. Somehow I can't pull it off, between my wobbly legs and overpowering urge to drop to my knees and kiss the green-tinged dock in gratitude for our safe arrival. I murmur apologies as he lugs my two stuffed-to-the-brim suitcases from the minute storage space behind the seats. I've most definitely surpassed the twenty-five pound baggage limit — a fine-print detail I overlooked on the

floatplane website in an uncharacteristic display of sloppiness. My bags got to accompany me after I paid a hefty fee for my excess.

I pause for a few moments, taking in the surrounding sea, landscape and Ganges town center which abuts against the docks. Within the stretch of those brief moments, I find myself alone as the other passengers confidently stride off and the pilot revs up the engine and quickly disappears into the blustery skies. The silence presses in on me, well not exactly silence because the blowing wind and lapping whitecaps make their own kind of music, but I detect barely a trace of the ever-present bustle of people and traffic that usually comes with human occupation, nor the stink. I suck air through my nose in boisterous, noisy sniffs and my lungs greedily expand as if they can't get enough of this briny, earthy, oxygen-rich concoction. No yellow smog, no industrial squalor and no dog crap-stained snow; actually no snow at all or biting drafts or stripped-bare branches. A bald eagle, with wide-spread wings, circles overhead and then lands in the olive green finery of a fir tree. Where do they hide the Disney crew who remake this place for the arrival of tourists?

The Disney fantasy evaporates as the squalling winds condense into fat, cold raindrops that run down the inside of my coat collar and plaster my hair to my head. A dense dampness creeps along my skin and roots itself in my bones. I totter along the slippery docks in four-inch heels and skinny jeans, destabilized by the laptop and purse strung around my neck, and my ungainly baggage. Cracks between the wooden boards open like small, gaping mouths ready to bite into my spiked footwear and send me toppling into the frigid sea that froths and splashes only two feet away on either side. I reach the end of the dock, short of breath but without calamity, and confront

my next insurmountable challenge. The street perches a good fifteen feet above my head, reachable only by a steep metal ramp. With these boots and that incline, it's just not going to happen.

I scan the street, hoping for assistance, but there is no one in sight. The weather must have driven everyone inside. A pitter, patter, pitter, patter of shuffling feet on a metal roof draws my gaze upward. A single raven, with a rain-slicked, feather coat, peers down at me from a fire-engine red rooftop — my welcome party braving these miserable weather conditions. Head tilted to the right, she stares at me with glistening, pebble eyes, seeming to size up my situation before taking wing.

Within a heartbeat, I hear a baritone voice from the top of the ramp say, "Are you looking for a cab?"

"Oh yes, yes please," I reply, hoping he won't notice my pitiable vulnerability and stiff me on the fare.

To my relief, the raven has delivered me into the hands of a gentle giant who effortlessly herds me to shelter in the worn backseat of a silver, 1990's-era Toyota cab, surprisingly free of the ravages of time and rust. Rain and a slow-rising fog obscure the view outside the car windows. The rattling heater warms my dripping, chilled exterior. Five minutes and six dollars later, we pull into the graveled drive of the Hastings House, with me mesmerized en route by the undulating, indigo star constellation tattooed on the muscled neck of my rescuer. I slip him a ten-dollar bill and tell him to keep the change.

My cab driver escorts me to a rustic, cedar building that houses the reception area. Bleary-eyed and desperate for a blow dryer, I tumble through the doorway and collapse onto a brown leather chair, with my luggage sprawled around me. A mascara-stained rivulet dribbles down my cheek and my shoulders give in to a slovenly bow.

A little girl, with a dark blonde ponytail and a sunshine yellow raincoat, turns and smiles at me; there's a wide gap where her two bottom front teeth should be. A shabby, damp teddy bear, missing one eye and small patches of brown fur, dangles from her left hand. With her other hand, she rubs the sodden nap of my tan suede coat, now morphed into a soggy shade of chestnut brown.

"You don't look so good," she says with an adorable lisp, "My mom says we have to dry my bear as soon as we get to our room or he is going to catch a cold. You better do that too."

"You're right," I say, "If I get a cold, I won't have much fun. I'm Sarah. What's your name?"

"I'm Emilie," she says, "My bear's name is Fredrick. He doesn't like Freddie, so don't call him that. That's my mom and dad. We live in Alberta, but my granny and grandpa live in Victoria. We're going to visit them for Christmas after we spend a few days in this fancy place. What are you up to?"

"You know, I'm really not sure," I say, "I guess I've come here for an adventure and then I'm going back to Toronto to be with my grandpa for Christmas Day."

"Oh Salt Spring is good for adventures," Emilie says, "My dad says there are fairies and treasure and all kinds of magic stuff here. But no ghosts or scary things."

Emilie's parents join us, both of them tall and slim with the same hue of dark blonde hair as their daughter, though the father's is liberally peppered with gray.

"I hope our Emilie isn't talking your ear off," the father says after introducing himself as Ted and his wife as Beth.

"Not at all," I say, "I needed a new friend today."

With my luggage in tow, the porter guides me along a gravel path to the Post Cottage, a quaint, two-room suite in its own ocean-view building, separate from the main guest accom-

modations in the Manor House. The rain has stopped and a dense fog parts as we move through, offering small glimpses of the emerald green, immaculate landscape on either side of the path.

Not more than thirty minutes later, I'm rosy-skinned from a steamy shower and snuggled into the luxuriant, snow white folds of a hotel robe. The gas fireplace fills the small sitting room with radiant warmth. The muted, lavender shades of early evening spill from the double French doors onto the West Coast feast spread out before me on fine linen and bone china. I reverently tuck into a bowl of saffron-tinted bouillabaisse. According to the waiter who delivered my room service, the chef makes the stew with halibut, scallops, shrimp, mussels and Dungeness crab caught from the ocean waters not far from my door; and with garlic, tomatoes, leeks, fennel and a touch of orange zest, or so my nose and tongue joyfully report after my first few spoonfuls. Between mouthfuls of stew and crunchy bites of French bread, I savor a fine Bordeaux, enjoying its rich, burgundy hue as I swirl it in my wine glass and letting its relaxing warmth settle my nerves.

I barely finish the last drop of broth and sip of wine before my eyelids begin to droop. Soon I slip under the starched sheets and a downy duvet. In a shadowy corner of my mind, a part of me wants to shake me awake for a few moments longer and remind me that one good meal doesn't make up for the weirdness of this place, nor the fact that I'm an urban fish out of water, floundering about like an idiot in this wet, green-tinted wonderland. But I don't rise for the bait; a meal as good as tonight's can make up for just about anything. And on that pleasant thought, I slip dreamily into the undertow of sleep.

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Karen Clark is an author, teacher and the founder of the Path of She, a journey of transformation with the sacred feminine. The Path of She synthesizes twenty-five years of spiritual and feminist studies, gender-based consulting, and dreaming and healing with the Dark Goddess.

ABOUT THE PATH OF SHE

The Path of She invites you on a spiritual journey to reclaim the lost beauty and powers of the sacred feminine. Rooted in pagan teachings and practices, the Path of She translates the ancient mysteries of the Dark Goddess to our modern needs and sensibilities.

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