

RAVEN

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CHAPTER 1

SNAKE

I tiptoed down the stairs, then took a moment to calm my breath before I went into the living room. This wasn't going to go well – I already knew that – so I might as well be ready for the row that was about to come.

I took a last moment to enjoy the peace and quiet, then I went inside.

Mum was sitting in her chair, sipping tea and reading the paper while some classical music nonsense played on the radio. There was no sign of Dad, which meant he was probably out in the shed, working on one of his wooden models.

My parents are so sensible they make me want to scream!

I slumped onto the couch, grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. It didn't matter which channel I picked, I would only get to watch a few seconds before my mum looked up...

She actually spat out a mouthful of tea!

“Poppy!” she cried.

“Raven,” I corrected. “People call me Raven now.”

“Not under my roof they don't!” Mum snapped. “What in the name of all that is holy have you done to your hair?”

I jumped up and examined my new shocking-pink tresses in the mirror. “Don't you like it?” I teased.

“Like it?” Mum bellowed. “I forbade it! I specifically said you were NOT to dye your hair.”

“No, you didn’t,” I said as calmly as I could. “You said I couldn’t dye my hair jet black. You didn’t say anything at all about Hollywood Candy!”

“Hollywood what?”

“That’s the name of the hair dye I used.”

“Well, whatever it’s called, you can go and wash it out right now!”

“Can’t,” I pointed out. “It’s permanent.”

“What!”

“Yep,” I smiled. “So, I guess the only way to make it look more – ooh, I dunno – sensible, would be to dye it again, but a darker colour this time.”

“You are not having black hair, young lady!”

“Then I guess we’re stuck with pink...”

Mum practically growled deep in her throat.
“Just wait until your father hears about this...”

“He already has,” I said. “He’s only at the bottom of the garden, and you’re making enough noise to be heard streets away. It’s no wonder Stephen ran away – he couldn’t stand listening to you any more.”

That was it; I’d gone too far, and I knew it. Mum leaped out of her chair and slapped my face. Hard. I felt my skin redden and burn, but I wasn’t going to cry. I wasn’t going to let her win.

“Don’t you dare bring your brother into this,” she snarled, fighting back her own tears. “This has nothing to do with him.”

“Of course it does!” I said. “Everything has to do with Stephen these days. Ever since he vanished, you won’t let me go out at night, you won’t let me stay over at my friends’ houses, nothing! You keep me in here like a prisoner!”

“It’s for your own good!” Mum replied through gritted teeth. She snatched up the newspaper and stabbed a finger at the article she had been reading. “Those weird people were seen in the

woods again last night – messing around. Some people say it’s black magic. Satanic rituals. That’s what could happen to you!”

I shook my head in disbelief. “What? I’m going to strip naked and dance for the devil just because I’ve dyed my hair?”

“That’s how these things start, Poppy!”

“Only in your head!” I turned away from her and focused on the single light burning in the shed at the far end of the garden. Dad spent almost all of his time down there these days, working on his models.

“You have to let me have a life, Mum,” I said.

“You have to stop smothering me. I’m not Stephen, OK? I’m not going to disappear just because you let me hang around with my friends after dark once in a while.”

I heard Mum sit back in her chair and the rustle of the newspaper as she tossed it aside. Then she

turned the volume on the radio up; she didn't want me to hear her crying.

Without looking round, I left the living room and hurried back upstairs. Once inside my bedroom, I grabbed a baby mouse from the box and dropped it into the glass tank to give Tonto, my pet snake, his dinner. Then I lay back on my bed, trying not to listen to the classical music echoing softly from downstairs.

I hadn't meant to upset Mum. I never did. I just wish she'd listen to me sometimes. But, since Stephen had upped and left in the middle of the night, she wouldn't let me do a thing.

If only there was a way I could talk to Stephen. To ask him to at least ring Mum and say he was OK. Maybe that way we'd all be able to stop worrying and get on with our lives. But, after seven months without so much as a postcard, that wasn't going to be easy. Or was it...?

I reached under my pillow to slide out a leather-bound book and flicked through its

delicately handwritten pages. Across the room, there were a few squeaks as Tonto tucked into his evening meal – then, silence.

I began to read.