



CHAPTER I

THE THREE RAVENS

There was once a kingdom where all was happy, where flowers grew, where songs were sung. And in this kingdom a good King reigned and loved and was cherished. What he gave he got back tenfold, for there were rich harvests, golden days, and children.

And his Queen was a woman of wit and majesty, of great grace. Her smile was passed from mouth to mouth in the country like a gift. Which it was. Her smile blessed the land and what it touched grew, what it touched was healed.

Then, one bleak day in November, the Queen died. Outside the palace, the leaves fell lamenting, reds and golds, falling. Inside, at the end of the Great Hall, in the long shadows, the King, his three sons, and his daughter stood weeping. And the people filed slowly by, hour after hour, to shed their own tears for the dear Queen.

But there was one among the mourners whose eyes were dry, whose brain raced ahead to the day when the King would want to ease his loneliness. And the Witch, for Witch she was, swept her cold gaze across the solemn faces, the sorrow and the sadness, lingered icily on



the Princess and her three brothers, then fixed her dry eyes on the King. And schemed. A simple, terrible scheme. She groaned for power, for majesty over all things, for the cold ring of gold around her head. She wanted this until the want ate away her heart and soul. So she set to work on the King. As the days passed on their slow march, she inched her way into his life.

At first the King didn't even see the Witch, didn't feel the sun on his face, or the rain. Just the tug of the past, all day, all night, memories tugging on his sleeve. His poor heart was broken. But the Witch could charm the skin from a snake, the leaves from the trees, and she turned all her power on the King. She wound him in, the past tugging him one way, she patiently pulling him the other.

One day she crept upon him, hunched and broken over his wife's tomb, flowers in his hand, flowers on the grave. As he shivered, he felt a cloak surround him. And, pulling it to his breast, he turned and saw the Witch standing before him, all concern, all kindness. How strange he felt. And shaken. Because for an instant when he looked at her he thought he saw his wife's darling face. And indeed he did. For the Witch had enchanted him. Her own hard beauty blurred into the soothing features of the lamented Queen. It was a spell. And it worked. "You're back," he kept saying. And the Witch replied, "Our little secret."

So it began, the King wanting to feast forever on the Witch, the Witch reeling him in. One day they walked together, one day he held her hand, one day he kissed her. How happy he imagined he was! He called together his children, their eyes still red from weeping. The Witch was with him. He introduced her. His eyes could not leave her as he spoke. "Children, I have something wonderful to tell you. I'm going to be married. We're going to be happy again." The Witch smiled



at them. “I hope you’ll think of me as your friend,” she said, “and then—in time—as your mother.”

“Our mother’s dead,” they said, huddling together. “New mother,” said the King quickly. “I think we mean as a new mother.” “That’s right,” said the Witch. “In time.” Then she went, sweeping out. Behind her, in the room, the four children stood, threatened and bewildered, while their father hugged them to him, hugged and hugged, begging them to try, begging them to understand. And as they hugged, they nodded somberly, promising to try. All hugs, all family, but the Witch watched from outside—and cursed them. They were her rivals and her enemies. Because she would not share. She wanted it all. She married the King and darkened the smile on the land to a scowl where shadows set and nothing would grow in them.

And the Witch sowed a seed of fear in the children’s lives. Stairs gave way, horses bucked wild, balconies crumbled. The world was dangerous... One day, a toy box was full of snakes, hissing and writhing. Another day, the Princess put on the necklace that had been her mother’s and felt it tighten and tighten around her neck. Terror whispered its threat through the palace. Of course the Witch herself was all honey, always honey, but sometimes the King caught her chill look and worried she was also the bee. And could sting. Whenever he did, the sharp features would soften and beguile him. But now each time it took longer. Poor man, then. Torn in half. Enchanted by his new Queen, frightened for his children. What could he do?

The King had a magic ball of twine. It knew its way through the forests. Roll it into the trees and it would pick the path, this way and that, to where a secret cottage lay, pink and perfect. Here were streams and sanctuary. The King lay awake one dark night beside the Witch, watched her thin cold sleep, and decided. Next morning, he slipped



from the bed, roused the children, and took them quickly to the edge of the forest. From his cloak he fetched the magic twine and set it rolling. For an hour they followed its marvelous journey, saying nothing, past glade and glen, this way and that, until they came to a clearing and saw before them the cottage. Sorrow slipped from their shoulders, for their mother's smile lived here still and warmed them.

"It's perfect," they agreed, and embraced each other, clapping backs, delighted. The boys larked and larruped as if a great weight had lifted off them. And the Princess, their sister, sat by the stream and dipped her toes and missed her mother, which she always did when she was happy.

"This is our secret place," said the King gently, sitting down beside her, taking her hand in his. "Secret from all the world. No one can find you here." The Princess gazed at the stream, not looking at her father. "You've brought us here because of her, haven't you?" she said. "Our stepmother." And though the King protested, and though he would not admit it, she was right. He had.

As they spoke, the Witch, her stepmother, sat in her gray tower and studied horrible spells. The children were obstacles between her and power, growing, daily growing like clouds over her. Now she would catch these clouds, and puff them clean away. All night she brewed, all night she recited, all night she cursed her dark curses. When, next day, the King returned to the palace and sought her out, he found her spinning at the wheel, sending black threads of silk to and fro, her scowl stretched into a smile as sharp as a bee's sting.

"Where've you been?" she inquired, all honey. And as the King explained he'd taken the children on a holiday, she nodded; as he said "special," she nodded. Oh yes, she understood everything. Did he like her sewing? she wondered. She was sewing shirts, she said, sewing them all little shirts. The King felt terrible. He'd misjudged his new Queen.