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About the Author

Clare Sager writes darkly addictive romantasy full of slow-burn steam, gut-wrenching conflict and morally grey *everyone*. Dubbed the Queen of Edging by readers, she takes no responsibility for lost sleep or therapy bills.

When she's not breaking hearts with her *Shadows of the Tenebris Court* series, Clare can usually be found drinking coffee, lifting weights or impulse-buying stationery. She lives in Nottingham, Robin Hood country, so it's no surprise she writes about characters who don't always play by the rules.

Find out about the latest news, events and how to keep in touch at www.claresager.com or follow her on Instagram @claresager!

KING OF RAVENS

CLARE SAGER



I



SUNSHINE. SEA AIR. The fresh scent of peppermint as I harvest its leaves from within the safety of our garden walls. Life is good.

Except, that is, for the part where I'm slowly but surely dying.
No pity, please.

It's just a fact of nature, like the tides or the start of spring, which is happening all around me, clear in the nodding hellebore blooms and the buds stuffed full of furled petals on the cusp of bursting open.

Besides, it's not as though I'll die today or tomorrow. This creeping sickness has been my companion for a long time, and deep in my aching bones, I know it's winning. I hold on from a sort of cheerful stubbornness, but it would take a miracle for me to get well.

In fact, tomorrow marks what I call the tipping point. The moment when I go from having been healthy for more years of my life than I've been ill to . . . well, the opposite.

Happy thirty-third birthday, Rhiannon.

I dislodge a weed and throw it over the wall that surrounds my

family's cottage. The sun warms my skin, white winter honey-suckle scents the air with lemony sweetness, and these small pleasures are reason enough to smile. With a little luck, we'll have a good crop of peas in the summer, with a surplus for drying, and tonight we'll eat leafy chard alongside the catch my father will bring home.

With a nod, I throw another spindly weed into the wind.

Beyond the wall, the sea roars against the cliffs encircling our home. Every so often a great wave hits, and I swear I feel it vibrating through the ground I'm sitting on. I once read a book that said the sea eroded headlands over time, forming natural archways like the one leading to our cottage on its rock. The sea just might be more determined than I am.

I drag myself to my feet, using the drystone wall for support, careful not to dislodge any of the rocks, even though my head spins. The sea stretches before me, wide, endless, churning blue-grey and capped with white waves. Down in the bay, a small boat approaches the village docks. A quick squint confirms it – yes, my father's.

But my head doesn't stop spinning. Long seconds open up between heartbeats, feeling like eons.

'Oh, shit.' Another episode.

I clutch the trug of mint and set my gaze on the glinting hatchet Pa uses to cut firewood, sitting on a log by the oak door of our little stone cottage. Eyes fixed, I focus the rest of my being on placing one foot in front of the other in front of the other. I need to get inside. Walking should be a simple thing, but I weave and stumble.

Still, as I make it inside, I spread a smile on my face for my mother – my annem – even though my vision narrows to the kettle that's already on the stove.

'You look pale, sweetheart.' Her voice cuts through the foggi-ness following me. 'Did you take your pills this morning?' The

bottle of red tablets rattles – I guess she's shaking it, but I'm too focused on the kettle to turn and look.

The pills leave a bitter taste in my mouth, but the medicine keeps me alive, so each morning, I swallow it down gratefully.

Nodding, I grope for a cup. 'Tea.' It clatters on the side as the world dims, forcing me to catch the counter top.

'Oh, Annon!' Annem rushes in and takes over, ushering me to a chair at the worn old table before pouring me a tea. 'You should've said you weren't feeling well. I could've done that.'

'I'm fine.' I smile up at her as I fish for the deep blue bottle I keep in my pocket and unscrew the lid, revealing a tiny scoop. 'You already do enough.'

When I first started taking it, I'd told her it was just a mixture of herbs to give me energy. Technically, that is true. But the main ingredient in the powder I carefully measure out and stir into my tea is belladonna leaves. Grown in the garden and dried in the rafters of my attic bedroom, then crushed and sifted.

The tea scalds my mouth, but I gulp it down, and soon the belladonna numbs my tongue.

Poisonous – deadly, if you take too much – but just the right dose . . .

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

My heart surges; no more long gaps between each beat. A fresh wave of dizziness washes over me, but this is more akin to giddy excitement than my body slowly shutting down. It warms me, spreading, thrilling, and I feel like laughing for no reason at all.

The world opens back up, with bright sunlight spilling through the kitchen windows and the door I've left open. Gulls wheel outside, their cries jarring but lively.

Annem bumps the back door shut with the basket of washing on her hip, giving me a worried look as she rubs her head. 'Are you sure—?'

'You've got a headache?' After another beat of my body and

brain catching up, I'm on my feet, dizziness fading as I grab the jar of willow bark from the shelf. I harvested it earlier in the month from the stalks we keep coppiced in one corner of the garden. Along with our apple tree, they're the only things that grow straight around here – all the shrubs and trees clinging to this rock and the rest of the coast are stunted and bent, whipped into submission by the sea wind and salty air.

'Don't you worry about me.' She shakes her head with a faint laugh, though this light shows new lines in her deep olive-brown skin and she wrings her hands before easing me back into my seat. 'That's my job, especially when you work too hard in that garden.'

She fusses around me until it's clear I'm not about to collapse and comments that I'm looking a healthier colour – thank you, belladonna – before finally taking the basket of washing outside.

Only once I'm alone do I let myself slump over the table. When I read about belladonna years ago, I'd noted that it could increase the heart rate and thought it could be a solution for my fainting spells. I'd written down all the information I could find about it and started an experiment to find an effective dose – cautiously, of course, since its other name, deadly nightshade, is no exaggeration.

I was careful, so I hadn't been too concerned. But that was when I'd only taken it once every couple of weeks.

Now I need it every other day. And despite my search, none of the books have told me anything about the long-term effects or whether it can accumulate in the system, a slow creeping death.

Just as I tuck away the blue bottle, the door flies open and in sweeps my brother. Tall and dark-haired, he takes after Annem, while my hair is blond like Pa's. He pants, beaming at me as though he's run all the way across the stone arch, between the spiky gorse bushes that line the path and through the garden gate.

'I've got something for you,' he huffs like he can't wait to get the words out.

I sit up. He promised to bring me another book borrowed from his employer's library, so I can add to my notes.

If anyone asks, my notebook is a collection of information on medicinal herbs, but there's another section at the back, compiled from Lowen smuggling me books on anatomy and disease.

Annem and Pa told me there was no cure for my illness, but in all my years of research I still haven't found a name for it. I've written to professors at universities and visited a doctor in the village. Herbalists have examined my tongue and prodded my cheeks. Once I even threw logic to the wind and went to a travelling fortune teller passing through the area. He'd turned over a strange card that showed a woman bound, blindfolded and hemmed in by swords. From that one image, he'd spoken for a long while but explained nothing of my illness. As I tried to leave, wearing a polite smile despite my frustration, he'd grabbed my hand, pointed at a line across my palm and declared I would never find love in this world. Superstition and nonsense – nothing of use.

No one has been able to give me a proper diagnosis. And in that unknown, I guard a tiny flicker of hope.

So I trawl through the medical books Lowen borrows for me, searching for a diagnosis . . . and a cure.

Everything I discover goes in that notebook, carefully copied out in sharp pencil. It hasn't saved me yet, and time is running out, but as long as I breathe, there's a chance.

When Lowen's caught his breath, he goes on, 'I know it isn't your birthday quite yet, but no harm, right?' His cheeks are flushed, his eyes bright.

Not the book, then. But either the belladonna is still buzzing through my system or his feverish excitement is infectious. Probably both. I can't help laughing as he checks the door is shut and hurries to the table, carrying something under his jacket.

Gifts could definitely soften the blow of this tipping-point

birthday. 'Do I get to guess what it is that has you so excited?' I crane to look at him as he circles behind me.

'Fraid not. I haven't had a chance to wrap it, so . . . ' With one hand, he covers my eyes, and something clunks on to the table, a finality to the sound. 'Ready?'

The bright world cuts back in, revealing a round mirror. Birds and moths cover its gilded frame, their wings layering over each other and punctuated by pointed spears. The birds have fierce, thick beaks, ruffed throats, and wing feathers like the slash of a blade. Ravens.

It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. Certainly more beautiful than anything I've ever owned . . . or that he can afford.

'Lowen. No.' I shake my head, burning eyes stuck on the mirror even though I want to look up at him. 'This is too much. You can't afford something like—'

'Well . . . ' There's a rueful tone to his voice as he takes the seat next to mine, still half bent over the table like he's also fascinated by the mirror. 'I didn't actually buy it.' He raises his hands as soon as I suck in a breath. 'And no, I didn't "acquire" it, either! I found it. I had this urge to go for a walk on the beach. It's such a nice day — feels like it hasn't been sunny for months.'

A spike of envy pierces me. I used to love walking along the shore. I'd pull off my shoes and socks and enjoy the crumbly feel of the dry sand beneath my feet, observing how it became more claggy and solid as I approached the lapping waves, until at last it squelched between my toes and the sea came washing in. It's years since I've had the strength to tackle the steep path down to the beach and the village.

But my envy isn't fair on Lowen. My illness isn't his fault. And here he is giving me a gift for my birthday.

That's when it hits me — a pang in my chest that's nothing to do with my heart rate.

Our brothers had all married by the time they were his age. Yet here he is, twenty-five years old, helping Annem and Pa care for me, where once, as the eldest child, I'd been the one to look after him and the others.

Oh, I've been a fool to not see it before. The link. The horrible, inextricable link.

I've been blaming other things for years. Our mother's clinginess. That he hasn't found someone yet — he's special, sensitive, artistic, and this town is too small to provide him with the right person.

But really . . . he stays for me.

The thought steals my breath.

My brother has put his life on hold, refused to live it because of me.

I should be waxing lyrical about this gift. Yet I can't get a word out through this terrible tightness.

Instead, I fold down my guilt like a neat handkerchief I can hide away and spread my cheerful smile wider.

He seems lost in the mirror, though, and as I tilt my head, I notice how its reflection seems . . . off.

The mirror is whole and smooth, but it fractures the room around us. It doesn't show me the ceiling, like it should from this angle, instead I see shards of the kitchen, and in one section, I'm sure I catch a glimpse of an ornate bed made of dark reddish wood and covered in heavy velvet drapes. But when I blink, it's gone, replaced by the stove.

'And . . . you found this on the beach?'

'What? Hmm? Oh, yes! I had to dig through some seaweed and shells to get to it. It must've washed up this morning. I can't believe it isn't broken — what luck is that? As soon as I saw it, I just felt that you needed to have it, so I raced back here.'

Part of me understands that I should be concerned by this. Shouldn't he be at work? But the mirror is here and its wholeness is a little miracle. There isn't so much as a dent in its frame.

There has to be something special about it. And if that's possible, then maybe anything is. Maybe even the thing I've been working on all these years.

I expect to feel something when I pick the mirror up. A zap, a tingle, a sign that it's magical or supposed to be mine – that the gods have sent it to give me hope.

But there's nothing.

I bite back my disappointment, fully aware of how silly it is, and instead I tilt the mirror, searching for my reflection.

I find it. And instantly regret it.

A few years ago, all the mirrors in the house slowly ... disappeared. It was so gradual, I didn't notice until I fainted and knocked my head. When I went to check if I had a cut or bruise, I couldn't find a single mirror. Annem found me searching, and hustled me into a chair by the window so she could examine me. She'd put witch hazel on the bruise, and that had been that.

Once, I'd been proud of my thick, shiny hair – a little vain about it, to be honest. My skin had been a slightly lighter version of mother's olive brown, which contrasted with my golden-blond hair and brown eyes. Some said I was beautiful, others that I was exotic, which always made me roll my eyes.

But the woman whose fractured reflection looks back at me is none of those things.

Flat, dull hair has been tied into a neat braid, fastened with a bow, but the braid is much thinner than it once was. Purplish hollows beneath her eyes contrast with the pale, sallow skin clinging to her gaunt cheeks. The only colour is the lurid pink flush from the belladonna, but even that looks unnatural, like I'm a child who's found her mother's rouge.

I almost don't believe it's me, but when I swallow, her throat bobs. No wonder Annem hid all the mirrors.

I've felt the changes. The eroding of my body. The coarseness of

my hair. The sharpness of my cheekbones. But seeing it spelled out in a looking glass is a different matter entirely.

But if this one survived the sea, perhaps there is some magic to it. Fae are no mere legends – they are real and negotiated with our queen not so long ago. I've heard of magic mirrors and some say they're not just stories, but ways to speak to ancient fae in distant realms. What kind of wisdom might such a creature have? What knowledge of the world – of medicine? What cures might they possess?

Then I could walk down to the beach and the village. I could meet the friends Lowen tells me about. I could be the woman I once was.

I could have a life.

It's tissue-paper-thin hope. But that's better than none at all.

The woman in the mirror smiles.

I touch the hopeful line of her lips, then hug the mirror to my chest, ignoring the way the spears prick through my dress. 'Thank you, Lowen. This is ... it's truly special.'

He blinks up, brow creasing as he looks at me, then at the mirror in my arms. 'Oh. Right. Yes. Your gift.' He shakes his head as though shaking off a rogue thought and kisses my temple. 'Nothing's too special for my big sister.'

'You need to put that sweet-talking to use.' I ruffle his hair, this close to reminding him that he should be married and in a home of his own by now – living his life rather than stuck here with me.

'Though ...' Leaving the mirror on the table, I rise and start towards the cabinet of medicinal herbs I keep separate from the cooking ones. 'I wouldn't mind if you did me a favour and took these to Mrs Davy down in the village. Annem mentioned her new baby was colicky and that she was still sore after the birth.' I pluck out two small jars and press them into Lowen's hands. 'Lemon balm, vervain, and chamomile tincture for the baby – one

drop under the tongue before he feeds. Chamomile and daisy tea for mother. Oh, and putting a rolled blanket under the baby's feet when he's sleeping will help. At least that's what I read somewhere.'

His eyes twinkle with amusement as he looks up from the jars. 'Of course you did. But you're in luck. I'm actually going back down to the pub tonight.' The corner of his mouth quirks as he looks away. 'I can drop these off on my way.'

That secret smile. Maybe there is hope for him. 'You know ...' I nudge my hip into his. 'If you wanted to take some flowers with you, I'm more than happy to make a bouquet from the garden.'

His head snaps around. 'Flowers? Why would I want to take flowers to Mrs Davy? Her husband would clobber me.'

'Not for *her*. For whoever it is that makes you smile like that.'

He pales, sucking in a quick breath as his gaze skims away again.

So he does have a sweetheart but is shy about it still. 'I won't pry. But whenever you're ready to talk about this mystery person, I'll be right here. It's not like I go anywhere else.' I grin as I lift my shoulders.

Pulling a face as though it pains him, he half laughs. 'This isn't for ever, Annon.'

I pat his jaw, which has turned stiff with this suddenly grave expression that doesn't suit him at all. 'I know.'

He means I'll get better. I mean I won't be here for ever thanks to the whole business of dying. But my gaze slides over to the mirror sitting on the table.

The mirror that shouldn't exist. That shouldn't be whole. But that maybe, just maybe heralds something more.

2



I DON'T KNOW where I am. In these dreams the location is always different and never somewhere I know from real life.

There's a lake, flat and black. The air is too misty for any reflection. I can barely see the trees stretching upward, black and leafless in the depths of winter. The caw of crows cuts through the thick silence, the sound passing overhead, but they're shrouded in mist.

One thing that remains the same each time is here, though.

A dark figure lurks at the lake's edge.

Every hair on my body strains to attention. I know who he is, though he's never spoken, never mind told me his name.

It's the kind of thing you just know in your bones, and his name is an aching voice in mine.

Death.

I've dreamt about him for years. He started off far, far away, but over time he's come closer.

Normally he's little more than a shadow, but now he seems solid and is perhaps twenty feet from where I stand.

The closest he's ever been.

*Cold closes around me. I want to turn and run.
But there's something else in me, too. A warring want that draws me
to him.
I never move in these dreams, but maybe one day I will run
towards him.
Maybe now.
Just as I gather myself, there's a whispered voice in my ear.
"The hour is near."*

Gasping, I wake to firelight and a warm touch on my brow.
'Oh dear,' Pa chuckles, pulling back from kissing my forehead.
'Didn't mean to wake you.' He crouches and tucks the blanket
around my lap.

I rub my face, trying to clear the cold fog from my dream and
the scattered lines of an old nursery rhyme from my head.

Death upon the water . . .

The fire helps, as does Pa's familiar scent. He smells of the sea,
salty and fresh, mixed with the soap he always uses before coming
home so he doesn't bring the stink of fish guts into the house.
'You're back. How long have I been asleep?'

'Not sure how long, but aye, I'm home, safe and sound,' he says
with a reassuring smile.

That isn't a given in his line of work. Annem had begun to tell
me that once, before I was born, his boat had almost gone down in
a storm, but Pa had arrived home, cutting her story short. 'Speak-
ing of it tempts *her* back,' he'd said in the sternest voice I've ever
heard him use, and I heard nothing more about the storm that had
nearly taken him away.

He never admitted it, but I know he was afraid of *her* – not
Annem, another storm. He even went to the trouble of moving us
to the other side of the country, which I suspected was to escape
the memories.

I shove down the worries and give him a bright smile. 'Good
catch?'

'Fish caught, gutted and sold. I'll help your ma with a few jobs,
then you can tell me about your day.'

'I can't wait to tell you about the dragon I battled,' I call as he
turns away.

He pauses there, back to me, the stillness strange in a man who
is always busy, always working on the boat or around our home.
Then he heads to Annem in their bedroom at the back of the house.

As the grogginess of sleep fades, my fingers close around a
clothbound cover. Lowen had indeed brought me the book he'd
promised, and I'd fallen asleep going over it and adding to my notes.

I smooth my hand over the cover of *Causes of Diseases Investi-
gated by Anatomy* and peer next to the armchair. I must've knocked
my notebook to the floor as I slept. But there's no sign of it. I feel
down the side of the cushions – perhaps Pa tucked it down there
with the blanket. Nothing.

Stiff, I heave to my feet, pull the cushions off the chair, and
search all around it. In case it's been tidied away, I check Pa's
basket of nets that need repairing – the work we'll do by the fire
this evening. Frowning, I spread my search further, circling the
living space, glancing through the kitchen door, in case Annem
picked it up and left it on the table. Through the window, Lowen
stands at the garden wall working on something.

I call towards the back room, asking if Annem has seen it.

As I wait for a reply, my stomach knots at the thought of her
flicking through the pages. I keep quiet about how much I long
for the days before I was ill – I don't want my parents to feel bad
for my sake. She worries about me, and he . . . sometimes I get the
impression he feels *guilty* like it's all his fault. I don't want them to
know about the pain I'm in most days or quite how often I have
the dizzy spells. I don't want them to think I suffer. And I really

don't want them to know it's so bad that even after all these years, I still search for a cure.

Only Lowen understands.

No reply from Annem, but as I continue my search, footsteps approach from their room.

'I can't find it anywhere,' I call, returning to the armchair. I must've missed it. Maybe it fell underneath and—

I stop in my tracks. I blink, swaying.

There's something in the fireplace. Not a log. A flat oblong shape. Blackened. Flames leaping around it.

I lean on the mantelpiece, eyes burning as I stare and hope, hope, hope that I'm wrong. With the poker, I try to hook the object out of the fire, but the blackened shape flakes into ash. I drop to my knees, joints crying out.

One fragment comes out whole, landing on the sandstone hearth with its edges still glowing orange.

The spine of a book bound in green leather. An inch wide. No title or author name, just a single hellebore flower embossed and painted black.

My notebook.

A small sound escapes me. Not quite 'No.'

All that work. All these years. All those books borrowed from locals, from market towns inland when I was well enough to travel, from folk passing through the village. Observations from my own experiments with belladonna and foxgloves, willow and witch hazel. Speculation about how my illness is like one aspect of this disease but shares symptoms with this other, unrelated one.

All of it.

Ashes.

I stare. I blink. I wish it into something else — anything else. I need this not to be real.

Brown leather boots edge into view. 'Oh, sweetheart,' Pa sighs.

He isn't surprised. He did it or he knew about it and did nothing.

I choke on the shock. The betrayal. The crushing pain at the thought he could do this to *me*. His own daughter.

'You know there's no cure.' There's this gruff edge to his voice that scrapes my skin, my insides, leaving me raw. 'You're only torturing yourself.'

My heart tightens like a fist. Isn't it my business if I want to torture myself?

I'd take torture by hope over torture by despair any day. My hand shakes, fingers straining around the poker's handle.

For a moment, it's as though *I'm* the fire. And the heat of it terrifies me.

I want to explode. That dreadful potential quivers inside me, battling the stillness I try to cling on to.

I'm dimly aware of Annem's soft footsteps approaching. 'Your father's right.'

They did this. Together. Planned it, perhaps.

They looked through the pages I'd written. Understood my hopes. Saw what I'd been working for all this time.

I can't speak. There are too many things that are too big trying to get out through my throat.

All I can do is stare.

The fragmented pages twitch, settling and merging with the logs and kindling as the fire consumes them. It leaps as the back door opens, but my chest remains a clenched, hard thing, unable to unlock itself.

'What's going—?' Lowen gasps as his steps get closer. 'What happened?' I think he sees my frozen face, the tears gathering in my eyes and there's a shuffle as he turns to our father. 'Pa? Did you do this?' A harsh note of accusation cuts through his usually warm tone.

It cuts through *me*.

'Watch how you talk to your pa, lad,' our father says.