

DEBORAH HARKNESS

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Discovery of Witches*

T H E
BLACK

BIRD

ORACLE

A N O V E L



By Deborah Harkness

A Discovery of Witches

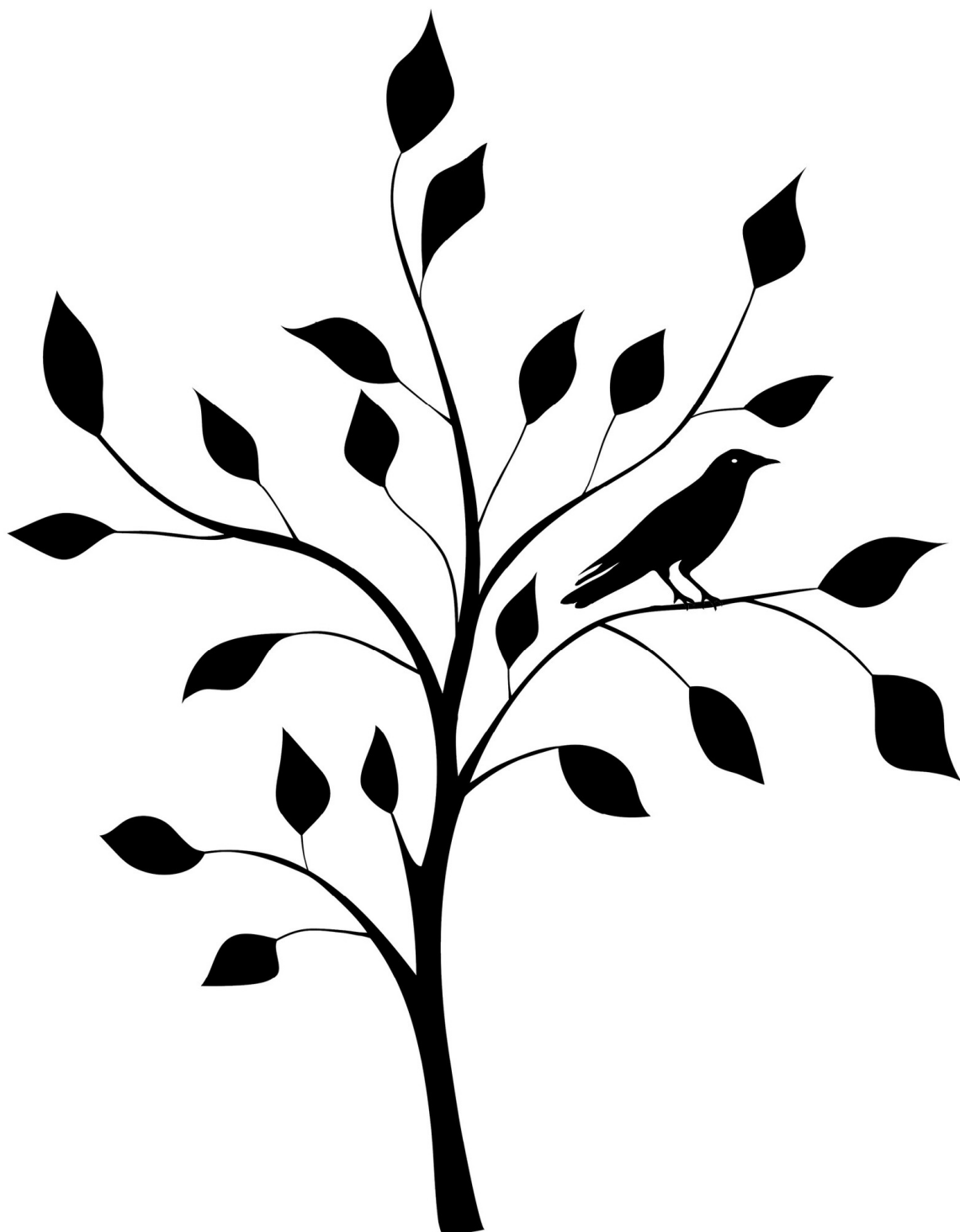
Shadow of Night

The Book of Life

The World of All Souls

Time's Convert

The Black Bird Oracle



THE
BLACK BIRD
ORACLE

A Novel



Deborah Harkness



Ballantine Books
New York

The Black Bird Oracle is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical persons appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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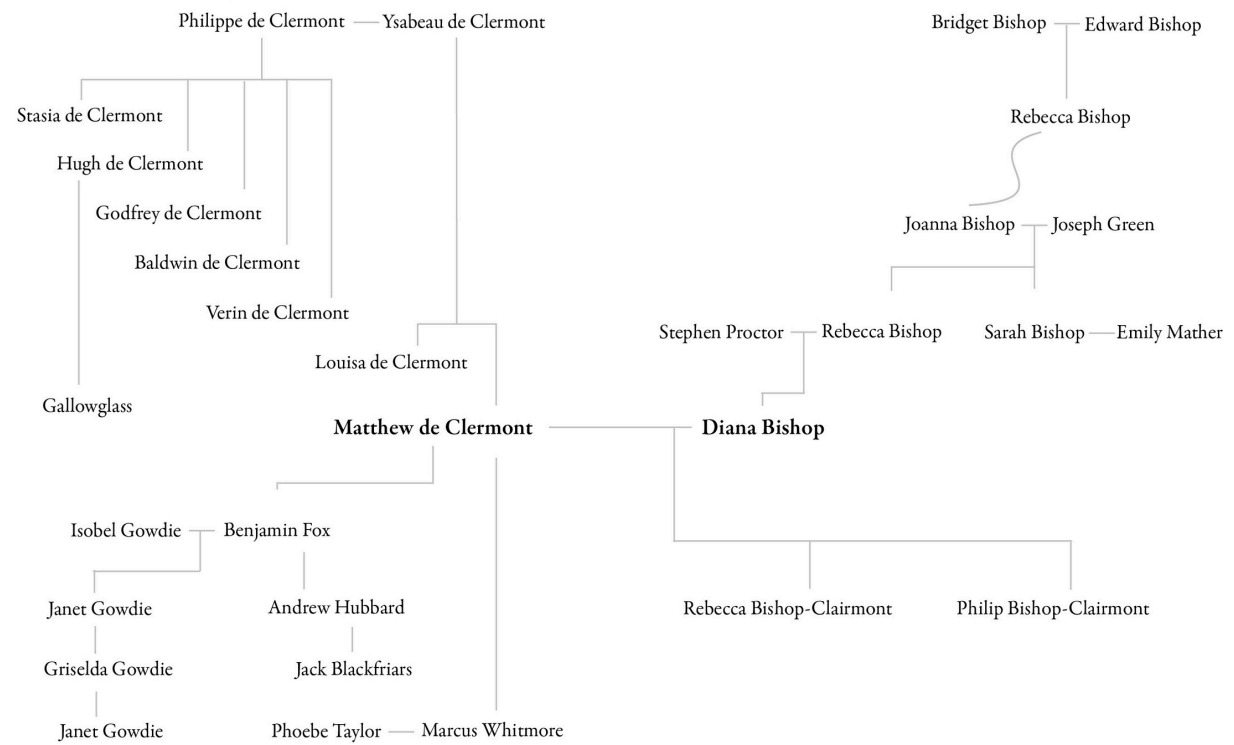
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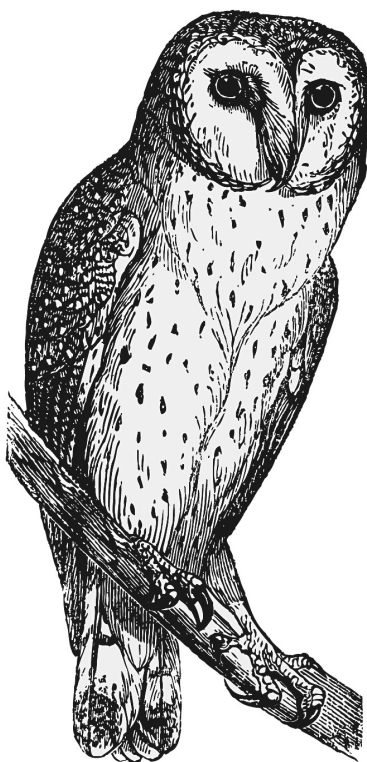
*For Tonya and Tracy,
who understand the magic of twins*

CLERMONT & BISHOPS FAMILY TREE



*With heron's bone and owl's wing,
Through vulture's silence, the ravens sing.
Through absence and desire, blood and fear,
A discovery of witches will carry them here.
Four drops of blood on an altar stone,
Foretold this moment before you were born.
Three families joined in joy and in struggle,
Will each bear witness to the black bird oracle.
Two children, bright as Moon and Sun,
Will Darkness, Light, and Shadow make one.*

PART ONE



Chapter 1



In every soul, there is a place reserved for Shadow.

Mine was safely hidden, tucked in a blind spot at the corners of my memory, under a hollow bruise that I thought had healed long ago.

Then the ravens came to New Haven, carrying an invitation that neither Shadow nor I could refuse.

—

It was a Friday in late May when the invitation arrived.

“Hey, Professor Bishop! I just put your last mail delivery through the slot!”

I’d been woolgathering on the familiar route home from my office at Yale, listening with half of my attention to Becca’s excited chatter while the rest of my mind drifted. I hadn’t noticed that we’d arrived at the ornate iron gate that guarded our house on Orange Street, or that our regular mail carrier, Brenda, was just leaving the property.

“Thanks, Brenda,” I said, giving her a limp smile. The heat was withering. It was always like this in New Haven around graduation time, which led to frazzled tempers, damp academic regalia, and long lines for iced lattes at the city’s many coffee shops.

“You must be excited about getting back to England, Becca,” Brenda said. She was already wearing her USPS bucket hat and shorts, prepared for

New Haven's warmer temperatures and sky-high humidity.

"I am." Becca hopped from one foot to the next to prove it. "It's Tamsy's first trip and I get to show her *everything*."

Tamsy was a recent addition to the family: one of the historical dolls that were all the rage among the thirteen-and-under set. Marcus and his mate, Phoebe, had chosen the colonial era doll for Becca because of her fondness for Marcus's house in Hadley, and her delight in the stories he told about growing up there in the 1760s and 1770s. Though she had been given a different name by the manufacturer, Becca had rebaptized her the moment she had seen the doll's green eyes and red hair peeking out from the box's clear, round window.

Since receiving the doll, Becca's active imagination had been fully engaged with Tamsy and her world. She came with a variety of outfits and accessories that helped Becca bring her to life, including a horse named Penny. Tamsy was well supplied with home furnishings, too. Matthew added to them with a small replica of the Windsor chair at Marcus's house that had once belonged to Grand-père Philippe and a Tamsy-sized version of a painted Hadley chest like the one Phoebe used to store household linens. It was fitted with a tiny lock, and Becca had already packed Tamsy's clothes, her schoolbooks, her quill pen and ink pot, and her collection of hats for the journey to England.

Brenda gave Tamsy, who was hanging from Becca's hand, a wave. She turned to me. "You must be excited to get back to your research, too."

At the end of every school year, Matthew and I would take the children to England, where we spent the summer months at our house in Woodstock. It was only a few miles outside Oxford, which put me within easy reach of the Bodleian Library and made it possible for Matthew to work in his quiet Oxford University laboratory, with no colleagues or graduate students to interrupt him. Becca and her brother, Pip, had acres of land to roam, hundreds of trees to climb, and a house filled with curious treasures and books to occupy them during the inevitable summer downpours. There were trips to France to see Matthew's mother, Ysabeau, over long, lazy

weekends, and a chance to see more of Marcus and Phoebe, who would spend part of their summer in London.

I couldn't wait to get on the plane and put Yale, New Haven, and the spring semester behind me. The prospect of a new research project focused on the wives and sisters of early Royal Society members beckoned, and I was eager to get my hands on rare books and manuscripts.

"I expect you have lots to do before tomorrow," Brenda said.

She had no idea how much. We weren't packed, the houseplants were still inside and not neatly arrayed on the back porch so the neighbors could water them, and I had at least three loads of laundry that needed doing before we could leave for the summer.

"I double-checked your mail hold. You're ready for takeoff as far as the New Haven post office is concerned," Brenda said, drawing our conversation to a close.

"Thank you," I said, removing Tamsy from Becca's grip and sticking her, legs first, in the top of my tote along with the campus mail.

"You and Pip have fun, Becca, and I'll see you in August," Brenda said, adjusting the thick strap of her mailbag.

"Bye!" Becca said, waving at Brenda's retreating form.

I stroked her shiny hair, blue-black and iridescent as a crow's wing. Becca resembled Matthew so closely—all long lines and contrasts, with pale skin and heavy brows. They were alike in temperament, too, with their confident reserve that could erupt into strong emotions in a heartbeat. It was Pip who resembled me. Comfortable with expressing his feelings, and quick to cry, he had my sturdy build, fair hair glinting with strands of copper, and smattering of freckles across his nose.

"We *do* have lots to do, peanut," I said. "Starting with taking care of Ardwinna and Apollo and sorting all this mail."

After that, the house would need to be put in apple-pie order—a daunting task. My little house on Court Street had been far too small to contain a vampire, a witch, two Bright Born children, a griffin, and a deerhound. Matthew's son Marcus had offered us his palatial home on Orange Street instead. He'd bought it just before the Civil War, when he

was first studying medicine at Yale and mahogany and formal entertaining were very much in fashion. Every surface in the house was polished, carved, or both. It was a nightmare to keep clean and the spacious rooms filled all too quickly with the clutter of modern living.

Despite its vast size and formal appearance, the house had proved to be surprisingly well suited to family living, with expansive covered porches that provided a place for the children to play in rainy weather; a private backyard where Philip's griffin familiar, Apollo, and my Scottish deerhound, Ardwinna, could join in the twins' games; and numerous downstairs rooms that had once been allocated to residents according to gender and function. At first, Marcus's house seemed too grand for our small clutch of vampires and witches, but families have a way of expanding to fit the space allotted to them. What we thought would be a temporary stay had turned into years of permanent residence.

Becca, who was attuned to my changing moods, felt my anxiety rise.

"Don't worry, Mom. I'll help you." Out of her hip pocket, Becca pulled a Yale-blue kazoo that she'd found in the office, hoping to rally my flagging spirits by piping us the last few feet home. The kazoo's strange, bleating squawk disturbed the birds settled in the nearby trees. They took flight with an irritated flutter of wings, the murmur of dark shapes and raucous cries protesting this interruption in their sleepy afternoon routine.

I shielded my eyes, mesmerized by the swirling, attenuated black cloud of birds that rose and fell on the damp currents of air. Becca was also rapt at the sight, her eyes wide and filled with wonder.

A single bird broke from the formation, its shadow falling over our clasped hands. The outline of the bird's head and curved beak extended onto the walkway, pointing the way to the front door.

A sudden chill fell, and I shivered. Curious as to what had caused the drop in temperature, I looked up, expecting to see clouds blotting out the bright sun.

Instead, all the color had leached out of the world. The mellow stucco of the house, the green canopy of the trees, the splashes of blue from tall stalks of delphinium and bearded iris in the perennial borders—everything was

reduced to gray scale like a washed-out photograph of foggy London taken in the 1940s. My perspective was altered, too, the house looking too tall and wide, and the trees too short. The clear tang of petrichor replaced the usual green scents of summer, along with a sulfurous note of brimstone. The usual sounds of the neighborhood—traffic, the call of the birds, the hum of lawn mowers—were all too loud, as was the drumming of my heart when a wave of the uncanny crashed over me.

Power, prickling and ominous, flooded my veins in response to the surge of magical energy that held us in its colorless shroud. I drew Becca toward me, sheltering her with my body.

The solitary bird that had been gliding overhead plummeted to the ground in front of us, wings outstretched and its head bent to the side at an angle that told me its neck had snapped on impact. Its curved, ebony beak and the ruffle of feathers at the neck told me this was a raven.

A rustle of birds' wings filled my ears as the raven's companions settled on the branches of the nearby tree, dark spots in the ghostly world that stood out in sharp relief like a string of silhouettes cut from black paper. There were not just a few ravens, but dozens.

Everything I knew about the significance of ravens—magical, mythical, and alchemical—raced through my mind. Messengers between the dead and the living, ravens often symbolized the first step in the alchemical transformation that led to the philosopher's stone.

Some traditions linked ravens to the power of prophecy. What it meant to have one fall dead before you, I couldn't imagine—but it couldn't be a sign of good fortune.

A pool of blood, crimson and thick, spread out on the pavement underneath the raven's body. With the release of the bird's life force, the color bled slowly back into our surroundings. Becca's denim shorts were blue once more. The floral sprigs on my blouse turned a rosy pink and bright yellow. The irises returned to their usual indigo.

"That bird is dead, isn't it?" Becca peered out from my arms at the raven lying motionless before us, its eyes open and staring. Her nostrils flared at the scent of the raven's blood and an expression of hunger passed over

Becca's face, making her look every inch a vampire. Becca had demanded blood as an infant, and though her avidity had waned over time, its coppery smell still roused her need for it.

"Yes." The outpouring of blood confirmed it, and there was no point in avoiding the truth.

"When the bird died, why did the colors die, too?" Becca's eyes were as wide as those of the dead bird. In their depths was a dark spark I had not seen before.

"What do you mean?" I asked carefully, not wanting to dilute her response with my own reactions to this afternoon's events.

"Everything went gray, like the ashes in the fireplace," Becca explained. "Didn't you see it?"

I nodded, surprised that my daughter had noticed it, too. Becca's powers of observation were second only to Matthew's but, unlike Pip, she was not usually attuned to the magical forces that swirled around her.

"Was it magic?" Becca wondered. "It didn't feel like your magic, Mommy."

"Yes, sweetie, I think it was," I replied.

Whatever magic had visited our New Haven neighborhood, it had retreated now. Even so, I wanted to be safely in the house, away from the dead bird and the dark shadow it had cast over me and my daughter.

Before I could move Becca in that direction, the unkindness of ravens perched in the trees started a mournful chorus. Their song was made up of screams of pain, gurgling croaks, throaty chuckles, and raspy cries. One particularly large raven took flight. The slow, heavy motion of its wings quieted the other birds. The raven opened its beak and out poured the sound of bells, high and chiming, to replace the previous cries of grief and despair.

The sizable raven landed safely on the pavement before us, light and sure-footed. The bird's feathers shone deeply black with a hint of darkest blue that reminded me of Becca's hair, and its neck swelled so that it looked as though the raven had donned a black ruff. With a snap of its formidable beak, the raven cocked its head.

Becca returned the gesture. Cautiously, she approached the bird.

“Careful,” I murmured, unsure of its intentions.

The ravens in the trees cried out with loud *kra kras*, indignant that anyone would think they would harm a child.

Becca crouched by the dead bird. Its lively companion took a few two-footed hops to narrow the distance between them, and strutted back and forth, emitting a bubbling stream of chatter. It picked something out of the dead raven’s beak and dropped it before her.

It didn’t clatter like metal, but the round hoop suggested it was a ring—albeit one that would have fit only a very slender finger.

“Don’t touch it!” I cried. My aunt Sarah Bishop had taught me never to touch an unidentified magical object, and for the most part I obeyed her rules.

Our daughter was made of more independent stuff.

“Thank you,” Becca told the raven, slipping the ring over her knuckles. It left streaks of the bird’s blood as it traveled down her finger.

The raven chirruped a reply and Becca listened attentively, nodding as though she understood what it was saying. Tamsy stared at the raven from my tote bag, blinking slowly every now and again like she was clearing the sleep from her eyes.

As Becca and the raven conversed, a prickling sensation in my left thumb and the pucker between my eyebrows told me that the strange magic had not retreated after all. It had simply shifted to something else that was equally unfamiliar. I tried to probe the nature of the magic, sending out inquisitive feelers in the hope of identifying it, but it was smoky and murky, without clear intentions or any discernible knotted structure. It had a strange scent, too: sea salt, pine, barberries, and brimstone all garbled together.

“I’m sorry your friend died,” Becca said, when the raven at last fell silent. “You must be sad.”

The raven’s head rose and fell in time with guttural chirps that sent its throat feathers sticking out even farther, like a porcupine’s quills.

“We’ll bury her in the backyard.” Becca crossed her heart just as Matthew had taught her to do. “I promise.”

Becca's solemn oath was a large commitment for such a young person. Given the enchantment unfolding around us, the ravens had not come to Orange Street by accident.

Someone had sent them, and they had come bearing a gift for my daughter. I had learned the hard way that magical gifts always came with strings attached.

"Let's go inside, and give the birds a moment with their friend," I suggested gently, still wanting to be behind closed doors rather than outside and vulnerable to whatever complicated spell was unraveling. I held out my hand and Becca took it.

"We can't! We have to stay until her friends sing her on her last flight, Mommy," Becca explained, rising.

On cue, the ravens sitting on the branches began another haunting dirge, this one rattling like bones against wood and full of grief and longing. It was a privilege to listen to the inner life of these magnificent birds. Emotion filled my throat as I, too, felt their loss.

Becca gripped my hand tighter as the birds sang. Heavy tears fell from her eyes, and though she tried to sniff them away, they mingled with the dead raven's blood, forming clear, saline puddles in the darkening stain around the bird.

The ravens took flight, their song of grief turning to one of hope as the sound of bells once more filled the air. The birds soared and tumbled over their fallen sister, their feathers shimmering with otherworldly brilliance.

"Thanks for delivering her message," Becca told the lone raven who remained. "I won't forget."

With a few powerful strokes of its wings, the raven joined the rest of his unkindness—though that seemed like a collective misnomer based on what I'd just witnessed. Together, the birds rose higher and higher until they were nothing more than black specks against the sky.

"What was the bird's message, Becca?" I asked, eyeing the dead raven with concern.

"He told me it was time to come home and gave me this." Becca held out her left index finger.