

WARRIOR QUEEN AT SIXTEEN

CHAPTER 1

August 15<sup>th</sup> 11:00 P.M.

My name is Morgan Anne O'Connell and I'm the seventh daughter of a seventh son. Seven kids. Geeze, I mean, how does that kind of thing happen in the age of birth control?

The thing is... apparently, my fate and the fate of the whole world are somehow tied to the fact that I was the product of two generations of bad family planning and some really whacked out X and Y chromosomes.

Yeah, I knew I was a seventh daughter, but since my father skipped out on us and Mom refuses to talk about him, I didn't know he was a seventh son.

Today was my sixteenth birthday and it will go down in my journal as the weirdest day ever in the history of, well...ever. It's not bad enough that my birthday falls on the same day that I started at a new school, but it appears that I have this big, fat whopping destiny that no one bothered to tell me about. As far as destinies go, I'm talking really big. As in gynormous-uber-big.

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August 15<sup>th</sup> 6:30 A.M. (the start of my 16th birthday)

My cell phone alarm chirped out the synthetic bugle tones of Reveille, programmed by me in honor of my mom and her current tour of duty in Iraq. The overly perky tune of Reveille startled me more than usual. I woke up disoriented, not sure why I was in a huge, unfamiliar bed. Sitting up, the fog began to clear from my head as I stared through blurry eyes at the massive bedroom decorated in shades of antique gold and Wedgwood blue. The opulent colors and furniture brought to my mind the kind of décor I imagined would be in an English castle, thankfully minus the cherub-covered ceilings.

Some mornings I forgot I was staying with my very eccentric and mega-rich Aunt Mattie. Matilda Marsh, widow of billionaire inventor, Bartholomew Jefferson Marsh - God rest his soul - as my aunt always said in the same breath.

"Happy Birthday to you!" And speaking of Aunt Mattie...

I turned my head at the sound of her shrill but exuberant voice singing the birthday song. She tiptoed into the doorway. I wanted to say, Aunt Mattie - no need to tiptoe - you're not exactly in stealth mode when you're belting out a song. But who was I to spoil her fun?

"Happy Birthday to you, Happy Birthday dear Morgan, Happy

Birthday to you!"

Dramatically marching into the bedroom, she waved in her stately butler, Edmond, who was everything a butler should be and more. Towering well over six foot in height, he was slim, and dignified with neat gray hair, gray suit, crisp white shirt, black tie, perfectly polished black shoes and incongruently, but with complete ease, he sported a bright yellow and heavily ruffled apron. Edmond, ever practical, no doubt knew that cook's apron would protect his expensive suit from the contents of the breakfast tray he carried. But I didn't miss the fact that piled high on top of the breakfast tray was my new favorite breakfast - Aunt Mattie's blueberry pancakes. It was one of the few things my aunt could cook, but what she lacked in the way of culinary variety, she more than made up for in top-shelf execution.

I took a few seconds to appreciate the scene in front of me and couldn't help but smile. Practically bursting with excitement, my aunt wore a vibrant red, Chinese silk robe on her short, pleasantly rounded five-foot-three frame. She stood next to the very tall, yellow frilly apron-wearing Edmond. I found the sight somewhere between laugh-out-loud funny and knot-in-my-throat touching.

For a moment, I stared transfixed at the sixteen birthday candles twinkling cheerily atop the stack of pancakes.

Later, I'd think back on this moment and wish Aunt Mattie and Edmond had added the ever-important one-to-grow-on birthday candle. It might have helped stack things in my favor. In general, I think it's a widely held view that most people prefer to survive until their next birthday and I was no exception.

I watched, blinking the last of the sleep from my eyes as my aunt followed behind Edmond's long, steady strides across the large bedroom to my bed. She took two skipping steps to each one of his.

Edmond set down the footed tray over my lap as I tried to sit up straighter. He fluffed and propped pillows behind my back.

"Is that comfortable, Miss O'Connell?" he asked in his deep, uber-professional butler voice.

"It's Morgan and yes sir, that's good." Who was I kidding, it was perfect. A girl could get really used to this kind of treatment. Being the youngest of seven military brats meant I usually didn't get much one-on-one attention. Heck, back at home, I was lucky to get a piece of toast in the morning, but things were different at Aunt Mattie's house - make that Aunt Mattie's gigantic mansion.

"Make a wish," Aunt Mattie trilled with childlike enthusiasm sparkling in her green eyes.

I cheated. I made two wishes. First that my mom would stay safe (and I figured that wish wouldn't count against me). And second that I wouldn't make a total fool of myself on my first day at Ulster Fine Arts Academy. Then I blew out my candles.

"I'll go now so you can enjoy your breakfast and get ready for school, but before you leave for the day," Aunt Mattie's eyes twinkled as she paused for effect. "I want to give you your birthday present." Her wide smile and wagging eyebrows appeared to say wait until you see your present!

Part of me leapt with excitement and then years of my mom's training kicked in. "Aunt Mattie, you've already done enough by letting me live with you while Mom's in Iraq, not to mention paying for a private school we could never afford. Please, you don't need to do anything else."

She paused, turning back around to look at me. The morning sun caught her bright red hair, making it practically glow. Her hair matched mine almost identically. We were the only two redheads in the family. I put a brown rinse on mine so it looked more like a soft brown auburn, but Aunt Mattie had no such hesitation. She loved nothing more than being utterly dramatic. Her lips parted in a wide, warm smile, making her round face look even more round.

"I'm enjoying doting over my great niece so you'll just have to indulge me. I know your mother struggles to provide for you girls. I've decided to help out and, luckily, I can. So it looks like you'll just have to grin and bear it."

With that, Edmond opened the bedroom door for Aunt Mattie and she sauntered out of the room. Edmond followed in her wake, closing the door behind him and leaving me to eat my pancakes in bed.

I thought about my aunt lavishing me with attention and gifts. And I felt a twinge of guilt. In the next instant I decided that was a wasted emotion. I shouldn't feel so guilty about it. When we were all shipped out to stay with various relatives, none of my siblings had wanted to stay with Aunt Mattie. The rest of the family lived by a code of no-nonsense practicality and became totally weirded out if they spent too much time in the company of our flighty and even whimsical aunt. She had been known to fly off on a whim to Istanbul for shopping or decide she wanted to learn skydiving or swim with sharks and one time, she'd even held a séance.

But I liked spending time with my aunt. She was fun and I enjoyed the challenge of keeping up with her eclectic interests and almost A.D.D. habit of sporadically changing topics.

Aunt Mattie had been lonely ever since Uncle Bart, God rest his soul, died five years ago. He'd suffered a massive stroke

when he and Aunt Mattie were climbing Mount Everest and the doctors concurred he'd died instantly. That provided solace to Aunt Mattie because she said he'd passed away painlessly, having fun on one of their grand adventures. Now, Aunt Mattie had lots of time on her hands and with her usual boundless determination and enthusiasm, she decided to focus all of her attention on... moi.

As I stuffed overlarge, fluffy bites of syrup-drenched blueberry pancakes into my mouth, my contented sigh was interrupted by a rapping on the window behind me and the headboard. My bedroom was on the third and top floor, with only the attic above it. In a hurry and focused on scarfing down my breakfast, I didn't even turn to check out the noise, assuming it was a tree branch brushing against the window.

Tap, tap, tap. The rapping grew louder and more persistent.

"Hey. Let me in," a gravelly voice insistently called from outside of my window, right behind my head. I gasped, jerking hard and narrowly catching my breakfast tray before it spilled onto the raw silk bedding.

"I don't have all day. Let me in." The rapping grew more forceful until I worried the glass would break.

Slowly and carefully, I picked up the tray and scooted over to set it on the floor, but I didn't turn around - couldn't turn around - yet. That window was three stories up and there wasn't a balcony. Nobody could be standing by my bedroom window. Nobody! And that voice wasn't like any voice I'd ever heard. It was as if each word coughed out at me. It didn't even sound human. I tried to swallow, but my mouth went dry.

Clenching my fists at my sides and closing my eyes, I willed my racing heart to calm down. In seconds, I reviewed the facts. First, I had no idea what was outside that window. Second, it was doubtful anyone could reach me fast enough in a house as large as a hotel complex, so a timely rescue was out of the question. Third, my mom, being both a feminist and career military, made absolutely sure each and every one of her daughters knew self-defense. I had my black belt in two different martial arts and was about to earn my third. Fourth and final point - I could do this. I centered myself, said a silent prayer, and found the courage to turn around and face whatever was out there. I swiveled around fast on my knees, shifting to a crouch on the mattress, hands ready for a block, and prepared to launch away from danger if needed.

I had to blink several times. My brain couldn't connect the rapping and the deep, impatient voice with what my eyes saw outside the window.

A huge black bird, at least two feet tall, stood perched on

the windowsill.

Tap, Tap, Tap. He pecked his black beak hard against the window pane.

"Well, are you going to let me in or not?" The crow's beak opened and closed in time to the insistent words, ringing in my ears, warring against the denial in my head.

"O-M-G! This can't be happening." And even though his last few words weren't the first he'd said, they were the first words I watched coming from his mouth or more accurately, from his beak. I shook my head back and forth in jerky movements. "Crows can't talk!" I argued more at myself than at the bird. My balance faltered. I almost fell from my crouch onto my butt, righting myself at the last second.

The bird cocked his head. "I can indeed talk and even converse. And I'll have you know I'm definitely no dimwitted crow, thank you very much. Now, if it isn't too much trouble your majesty, please let me in!" He flapped his black wings as if to accentuate his adamant demand.

I had to be delusional. I knew that my mother's side of the family didn't have a history of mental problems, but who knew what was on my father's side of the family. I knew zip about them.

I felt pretty sure that at a minimum, I could take down a crow if I had to. So I walked on my knees over the mattress to the window. Each windowpane had separate hinges and latches. Luckily for the crow or unluckily for me, there were no screens on the window. I flipped open the two latches and pulled the horizontal pane open, making the old, stiff hinges groan and squeal in protest. When it finally opened, the crow hopped up from the windowsill to settle on the top of the intricately burlwood of the headboard.

I immediately had visions of bird poop on the bed. How exactly would I explain that to Edmond or to Janice, the housekeeper? But it didn't seem like the right way to start a conversation with a talking crow. Talking crow? I shook my head one more time, trying to clear the hallucination away, but it, the bird that is, didn't cooperate like a good little figment of my imagination and fly away.

Instead his beady black eyes followed my movements as I scooted off the bed and stood beside it, legs bent at the knees, ready to move fast if needed.

"What the heck do you want?" I asked the big jet black bird. "I really need to get ready for school." Did I really just try to make excuses to a crow about why I didn't have time to talk to him? "I can't even believe I'm talking to a crow," I muttered under my breath. "I'm losing it."

The crow began pacing across my headboard, his head moving

up and down in choppy movements as if he was one pissed off bird.

"I don't know what you're losing, but I hope this is the last time I have to say this. I am not, and I repeat, not a crow," he punctuated each word with a loud click of his beak.

"Then what are you if you aren't a crow?" I put my hands on my hips, waiting as I tapped one foot against the carpet.

With a flap of his blue-black wings, the bird turned to peer at me with his small intense eyes, which reminded me of two flint-black marbles.

"I am the harbinger of the coming apocalypse. I am a member of the black cloud that comes before the war. I am one of the scavengers and the tricksters. I am raven."

In spite of the shivers of dread that ran up my spine at his words, not to mention his non-human voice of gravel scraping over glass, I didn't want him to know he'd just spooked me in a major way. "Oooooou... I guess if you're going to go all Edgar Allen Poe on me then, I've really got to be getting ready for school. So, bye now." I shot him a brittle smile and a little wave. "Oh, and by the way, you can come back um...oh yeah, that would be - never more!"

The crow - no, make that raven - covered his head with one of his wings. I guess Aunt Mattie wasn't the only drama queen in the house today.

"Why in the name of my noble-feathered ancestors did I compete for the right to serve you?"

"Serve me?" I gave him my best scrunched up, confused expression. "What do you mean, serve me?" Visions of an old Twilight Zone episode flashed through my mind - the one that has this book on Serving Mankind which was really a recipe book for cooking people and serving them up as dinner.

"I actually participated in a dual to the death for the right to be at your side, little queen."

"Little queen?" I slapped my hand against my forehead. "What do you mean little queen?"

"Today is your sixteenth birthday and it heralds the coming of your powers. I am to teach you and guide you in the coming days and months to prepare you for the impending battles which have been foretold. Your triad must prevent the apocalypse to come."

I couldn't help it. I just laughed. Well it was more like a quasi-hysterical, barking, you've-got-to-be-kidding-me kind of laugh.

The raven sighed.

I didn't know a raven could sigh. What was I thinking? I was talking to a raven, so then why should a sigh be so much harder to believe?

I stood, giving up entirely on my defensive stance, and started pacing back and forth by the bed. "Okay, first, what powers? And second, why did you call me little queen?"

"I am unsure of the full spectrum of your powers, especially as you have an extremely rare and mystically powerful birth order, being the seventh daughter of a seventh son. Your abilities will grow and build over time. In your previous incarnation, you had the gifts of prophecy, the skills of a great warrior, the ability to turn the tide of battle; some limited abilities to create illusions that strike terror into the hearts of your enemies, and you could shape-shift into other forms."

I didn't know what to ask first - so many questions swirled in my head, leaving the whole talking bird thing at the bottom of my list.

I decided to save the birth order topic for a Skype conversation with my mom. "What other forms can I shift into?" I focused on my own question, letting my overall incredulity at my situation take a backseat to consideration of the whole shape-shifting thing. After all, I'd watched my share of TV and movies on the topic. It might be kind of cool to be able to shift my own body parts like increase my cup size one or two notches to a "C" or a "D." That might be handy.

"As I said, we will know more over time." The raven's voice cut through my thoughts, "But as one of the ancient Raven Women reborn and the High Queen of the Triad of Warrior Queens, you had the greatest number of alternate forms you could take. Of course, your favorite was the raven and then the wolf, but you could also take the form of the red heifer."

"Red heifer?" Ignoring the Warrior Queen Triad thing and the other stuff, I narrowed in on the whole bovine topic. For some reason, it freaked me out the most - go figure. "Do you mean I could shift into a cow? As in a small brained, huge, cud-chewing, multiple stomached, methane gas machine with udders?" I shuddered at the image.

"Yes, but this may be a form that you cannot take until you are mature and breeding. Your milk will have magical healing properties in the heifer form."

"Yuk!" I slapped my cheeks with the palms of my hands. "Big humongous, gigantic uber-yuk! That would mean someone would have to actually milk me?" And forget about the breeding thing. A tremor of revulsion shook my body. Utterly creeped out, I did a complete 360 on the whole changing my boob size idea. Reflexively I hugged my arms across my chest, trying to protect them from future udder-ness. Something about the idea of numerous large udder-boobs made me want to keep my two regular-sized ones just the way they were.

"Oh and also," he added with a pause. "You can change into a snake."

A chill of fear slithered up my spine at even the thought of a snake. I sputtered, gasping for breath. This was just getting worse and worse. I loathed snakes. It wasn't enough that I was talking to a bird and he was talking back, no, he had to throw in the whole snake thing. Nothing in the world scared me more than a snake. I mean, I'm supposed to be tough with the martial arts training and all, but show me even the tiniest garden snake and I totally freaked out.

"No way!" I found my voice, yelling louder than I intended. "Just no friggin' way! I want to vote for different forms like an eagle or a tiger or something cool as opposed to a snake or a cow. I think I could possibly live with the wolf or the raven." What was I saying? I didn't want to shift into some kind of animal - make that any kind of animal. What if I couldn't control it and I shifted unexpectedly or got stuck in some animal form? Would my new school decide I'd make a good mascot and put me in the cage and cart me around the football field on game night? No way was that happening!

The raven sighed, again, sounding very long-suffering at this point. Well I wasn't about to feel sorry for him, especially when I was feeling sorry for myself, when I was holding out hope this entire scenario was a whopping strange figment of my own imagination. Maybe at sixteen - and I knew I was stretching it - there was some little-known condition which flooded your brain with hormones, maybe the teenage girl's version of menopause. Or...not.

I plopped on the bed, sitting cross-legged, facing the raven where he sat on the headboard. Cautiously, I reached up to touch him. My hand didn't move through him as I'd expected. Instead my fingers rested against soft, sleek feathers. He felt real.

I let myself, for the moment, believe he was real. And if he was real, that meant I might not be crazy so therefore maybe his words were true or at least, he thought them to be true.

My mind whirled with questions. What was I the queen of? And what did he mean by my mystically powerful birth order, not to mention the mysterious coming battles and the whole triad thing? Were there two other girls my age like me, who were also supposedly coming into some mystical powers?

My brain felt ready to explode into a trillion fragments. I just did not have time to deal with this right now. I needed to go on autopilot, do something normal like get ready for school and hopefully avoid being late on my first day.

For a moment, my mind drifted to A Christmas Carol and the scene where Ebenezer Scrooge thinks his supernatural encounter

with spirits is caused by a bad piece of mutton. Could it be that I ate some super-bad blueberries - so badly fermented or molded that they developed strong hallucinogenic properties?

I shifted my attention back to the big talking raven. "Thanks for the info and the whole dueling-to-the-death thing on my behalf." I didn't want to overlook that. I stood back up, preparing to find my new totally boring and personality-crushing school uniform. "I have to get ready for school. Now."

"Yes, we will have more time to discuss these important matters later." He nodded his black head. "But beware of your surroundings. Do not easily give your trust to those who would befriend you."

Well wasn't that just super advice for my first day at a new school? If I paid attention to that, I'd no doubt be the most popular girl in school in no time at all. I might as well dye my hair black with neon green stripes and wear ghost-white make-up with thick black eyeliner. Of course, that would probably violate the school dress code. I rubbed my neck where it was starting to ache.

"If you have need of me, just say the appropriate words and make the appropriate gestures."

Oh I had some gestures I wanted to try out, but thought better of it. "And those words would be...what?"

"Hark raven, my noble, ebony raven, harbinger of doom, come to me oh wise one. Give me your sage counsel. Then you turn three times in the direction of the setting sun and recite the poem of the apocalypse as first prophesied by the warrior queens..."

I rolled my eyes. "You have got to be kidding me."

"Actually, yes. I am." It looked almost as if his beak spread into a smirk, but knowing that wasn't possible, I guessed it was probably the angle of his head and the amused glint in his eyes. "They do not call me the trickster for nothing. Just picture me in your mind and I will come to you."

"What's your name?"

"Ralph."

"Ralph?" I couldn't help it. I know it wasn't nice, but I giggled and then giggled some more. "Really? Ralph? Ralph the raven?" I worked to hold back laughter because if I started, I wasn't sure I could stop. I think that's called hysterical laughter and I didn't have time for it right now.

"Yes, Ralph." His beady bird eyes glared back at me as the feathers on his head and neck ruffled. "Or more accurately, it is a complex series of sounds not audible or understandable to the inferior abilities of the human ear. So it's simpler to just call me Ralph."

I waved a hand toward the open window. "Goodbye, Ralph."

"I'll be close by, should you need me."

"Not too close, okay? I don't want the other students to think I have a pet raven."

"I have not ever been, nor shall I ever be, mistaken for a pet."

And with that, Ralph hopped down to the windowsill and jumped off. I watched him soar into the surrounding woods. The further he flew away, the harder I tried to convince myself that he'd been a strange figment of my imagination. But I'd never been very good at lying to myself.