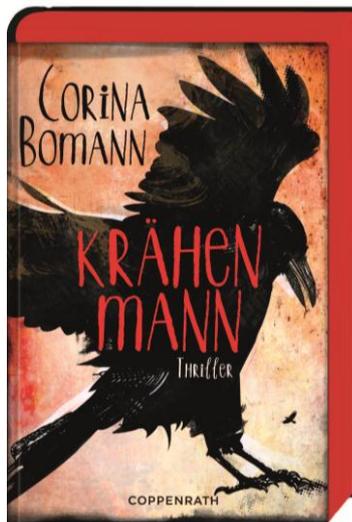


Raven Man

By Corina Bomann



COPPENRATH VERLAG



*A dead girl.  
A pit full of ravens.  
Don't look back.*

## Prologue

She woke with a long, drawn-out sigh and blinked woozily in the darkness. It took her a while to realise that something wasn't right.

Then the thought flashed through her mind: *Where am I?*

*How did I get here?*

"Hello?" Her voice echoed dully off the walls. Panic made her chest tight. "Hello, can anyone hear me?"

For a moment, she held her breath and listened. Nothing. The silence was like a stone on her chest. She gasped for air, and tears welled up in her eyes. *This can't be happening!*

She tried to recall what had happened in the past few hours, but there was just a big black hole in her memory. The only thing she could remember was that she had been going to meet her friend at the chalk cliffs. She had obviously never got there. Had she fallen off her bike? She knew she couldn't have slipped over the edge of the cliff: the high bank had been closed off for a while now.

When she tried to move, she found that her wrists were tied together painfully, and her legs were held together, too. She was tied up. No accident. She hadn't had an accident. Something hard was chafing her knees and elbows. The room was much too narrow – she could hardly move her arms away from her body.

Suddenly her mouth went dry. She tried to call for help, but nothing more than a croak would come out. Somebody had shut her in. Her stomach tied itself in a knot, and she tasted bile. She pulled at the ties around her wrists, but soon stopped as the pain became sharper. A warm liquid trickled over her skin. Blood. *This is crazy*, she thought, and let out a panicked laugh.

"He-e-e-elp!" There was that dull echo again.

Her fear grew, along with the bitter taste of bile in her mouth. A sound above her head made her flinch. Stone scraped against stone, and a few clumps of earth fell onto her hair, her forehead and shoulders. The finer particles stuck to the sweat that covered her skin. Then the light poured in. It hit her like a knife. Everything that had been black blurred into white. She

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screwed up her eyes, until she could see a shadow outlined against the painful light. She slowly opened her eyes again, frightened of what she would see. But perhaps it was somebody who had come to rescue her.

“Help! Help me!” she begged again.

The figure was just a silhouette above her. She tried to call for help again, but her voice failed her. She could still taste the bile in her mouth, and suddenly the knowledge hit her hard: there was no escape. This was the end for her.

A rough voice rang out: “So then, little bird, are you awake?”

Now she could see the narrow pipe she was in: a sewage outflow, which had been disused for some time. The cement was cracked and blackened with age. But among the black there was something else. Red. Various shades of red, from gleaming bright to reddish-brown. Blood, she realised with a jolt. She tried to scream, but no sound came. Behind the black figure, at the edges of the hole, she could see the tops of trees. A forest. Nobody was going to hear her.

“Good,” said the man above her. “Then it’s time for you to learn to fly.”

What did he mean, fly? Was he going to throw her off the cliff? She let out a desperate sob.

A moment later, the man disappeared from view, and something tightened around her middle. A rope rasped across the concrete. Little by little, she was hoisted up. Her throat hurt as if the rope was tied around it. How many minutes did she have left?

No, this couldn’t be the end, she told herself. There had to be a chance for her to run away. *Maybe I can persuade him to untie me. Maybe somebody will stumble across us and catch him.*

When she was out of the hole, she spotted a long knife, lying next to the cement lid of her prison. The grey sky was reflected in the blade – and next to it was something black that filled her with even more horror. She recognised it at once. A raven. A raven with its neck snapped.

Her fear suddenly blocked out all thought. Her last hope vanished.

Nothing meant anything now.

The man pulled her towards him over the sun-browned grass. He released her from the rope. Much as she wanted to, she couldn’t scream. All she could do was look at the raven, the dead raven with its lustreless eyes. Her eyes would soon look like that too, like worn buttons.

Had somebody said that to her? No the voice was only in her head. The man, who was busy turning her around, said nothing. She could see his face. No mask. Then she knew for sure that he wasn’t going to let her live. She had seen him, and would be able to identify him at any time. And there was something else. His face: she recognised it! This wasn’t some madman who had strayed into this part of the world. He had always been there. A shadow from years ago; somebody she thought she had left behind her.

Now she was ready to scream, but before she could, his hands were pushing a rolled-up rag into her mouth, back behind her teeth. Her body rebelled, trying to defend itself against suffocation – then a stab to the heart suddenly silenced her fear.

The body beneath his hands slackened at once. It twitched a few more times, and then stopped. The girl’s eyes stared into space, like those of a doll. He hadn’t thought killing would be so easy. Over the last few weeks, he had often imagined what it would be like. But in his imagination it had been a lot crueller. He had hoped she would have to bear more pain. That she would defend herself, and suffer the most terrible torment. But then he would have had to strangle her with his own hands. That would have taken time, and spoiled his work of art. Did people recognise what he was reconstructing here? The image had been with him ever since he had first seen it. For a long time, he had wondered how he should take his revenge, and no plan had ever seemed good enough to him – until he had seen the photo.

He looked at the lifeless body in front of him. Maybe he should have allowed himself more time. Maybe he should have experienced the killing more consciously. But this wasn’t about satisfying some perverse desire. It was about much more than that. And it wasn’t over yet. The greater part of the work still lay ahead of him.



Slowly, he pulled the sharpened file out of her chest. A merciful death, he thought with a little smile. She had deserved to die in much more pain. But one way or another, he would get his revenge. Perhaps not straight away, but at some point, they would realise what this meant.

He rolled her body onto its front before reaching for the knife. Beautiful shoulder blades, he thought. So beautiful that wings might grow out of them. And then he got to work on completing his piece.

### 1. Thursday

Sometimes I imagined that things were how they might have been if fate hadn't intervened. Today was another one of those moments. On this sunny September day, my parents would have driven me here. Dad would have helped me with my luggage, and on the way he would have told me to behave myself. Mum would have pressed me to her, kissed me, even though I was already 16, and told me how much she'd miss me.

But that wasn't going to happen – it couldn't happen. I was standing alone in front of the big gate of the Red Sands Grammar School. A taxi had brought me there from Saßnitz. I'd already sent on most of my things by post. And anyway, I didn't own all that much stuff.

When I had moved into the home, I had hardly taken anything with me. Not because I didn't want to remember my old life. No, the memories and the images were always there. They were the fuel for my "what if..." games. These games were useless, ineffectual. But I kept playing them anyway. It was my way of keeping alive those people who weren't there anymore.

The wheeled suitcase rocked from side to side as I pulled it along the pavement. The red walls of the boarding school shone in the light of the afternoon sun.

It had once been a manor house, and then Red Sands had been used as an orphanage. The last lord of the manor had had neither wife nor children, and because philanthropy had been the "in" thing, he had donated the house to give poor children a home. Children had still been housed here when this area was part of East Germany, but after reunification, Red Sands became an elite boarding school that only wealthy families could afford.

I wasn't wealthy, and nor did I have a family. My fortune was an academic scholarship. I had wanted to come here because I knew that graduating from Red Sands would make the world my oyster. The fact that the school had once been an orphanage just made me like the place more. I found it fitting, somehow, after eight years living in a children's home.

I was supposed to report to the rector in the main building. The first pupils were already back from the summer holidays. A few of them were standing together in the courtyard, smoking. That wasn't allowed, if you believed the school brochures. But clearly a blind eye was being turned here.

The door to the main house was ajar. A man was sweeping the steps that led up from the lobby. "Excuse me?" I lifted my suitcase over the threshold. There was a hollow worn into the wide stone. Thousands of feet must have stepped on it over the course of time.

"Hmm?" murmured the man, without looking up from his work.

"Where can I find the rector's office?"

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"I'm Claudius Sontheim, the rector of this beautiful school." The man shook my hand and gestured towards the chair in front of his desk. He sized me up for a moment before taking out a folder. My name was written in fat letters on the cardboard cover. A file? I actually had a file of some kind here! That was something I had only seen in American television series. In my old school, the class teacher had just kept a book of his students' transgressions. Everything else was noted in the class book.

"Good," said Sontheim, opening the folder. There wasn't much in it yet. A copy of my results lay on top. "You're from Potsdam, is that right?"



“Yes.” The journey in the airless regional train had been a disaster. A student sitting near me had decided he had to take off his trainers, and practically shoved his stinking feet in my face.

“This must be quite a change for you. From the city to the countryside.”

The sweaty feet disappeared back into the depths of my memory.

“I don’t mind that,” I said hurriedly. “I grew up in the countryside, and lived there until...the accident.”

Sontheim looked concerned. I would have liked to have told him to leave it. I didn’t expect sympathy from other people. The accident was too long ago, and the rector hadn’t known my parents.

“I’m sure your parents would have been proud that you’re starting at our school this summer.”

I nodded. I didn’t want to talk about my parents. Not with a stranger.

“I’ve had a look at your grades and am very satisfied with them. I think you will cope well with our high standards.”

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“Please report to the secretary’s office – somebody there will give you all the necessary documents and your room key. You’ll be sharing a room with another girl. We don’t have single rooms here; most of the rooms are shared between two or three pupils, to encourage social interaction.”

That sounded as if the children of rich parents were unsociable by nature. I hoped that wasn’t true. I put on a smile, said goodbye to Rector Sontheim, and left the office.

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“So then, my girl, did you find everything?” asked the man who was still busy in the hall.

“Yes I did, thank you.”

He gave a little laugh that I couldn’t interpret.

“Er, did I say something wrong?” I asked.

The caretaker put his head on one side. “No, no. But it always strikes me how polite everyone is here. As if they were thirty already, not sixteen.” There was nothing I could say to that. What was wrong with being polite? Adults liked it, didn’t they? Our old caretaker always complained about what cheeky brats we were.

“Well, sorry not to be smoking a joint or hanging around drunk in bus shelters like other people my age. I’ve always been the odd one out.”

He laughed for real: “You’re alright, my girl.”

Then he turned back to his work.

## 2.

The accommodation block, which, like the rest of the school, had been built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was furnished in the same modern style as the rector’s office. Everything there was quiet, too.

Room number seven was exactly halfway along the left-hand corridor. There were six doors off to the left, and six to the right. Thirteen rooms on a corridor.

The key slid into the lock and the door sprang open. The fresh smell of lavender cleaning products streamed out. It looked like nobody had been in there since the start of the holidays.

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I emptied my holdall and sorted my clothes into piles on the bed. Black, blacker, blackest. Here and there a band print or a funny slogan. And a pile of jeans.

In the children’s home, people used to ask me if I wore black because I still hadn’t got over the death of my parents.



The right answer was: I wore black because I'd got used to it.

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My gaze was magically drawn to the windows of the west wing, where, as it said in one of the brochures, there were still clear traces of the former orphanage to be found. When the sun was in a particular corner, the windowpanes seemed to glow. I looked at them for a while, wondering what must be hidden behind them. It wouldn't have surprised me if there were rumours about a house ghost doing the rounds.

Not that I believed in ghosts. But I had read about places that were so saturated with people's histories and fates that even in the loveliest weather it was impossible to create a cheerful atmosphere in the rooms.

At that moment, the door to the room was flung open. A girl came rushing in, laughing - and froze for a moment as soon as she saw me. She had long, dark brown hair the colour of chocolate cake, which tumbled over her shoulders. She was wearing skin-tight jeans and a t-shirt that said "Rolling Stones forever" on it. Those shirts hadn't been cool in Potsdam for quite a while, but here in Rügen things seemed to move at a different pace.

"Hi!" I said. Brownie didn't reply. Was she surprised to have a roommate?

I tried again: "I...I'm Clara. Clara Hansen. I arrived today."

These words didn't break the ice, but they did make my future roommate start moving again.

With a casual movement, she threw her bag onto the free bed.

"Where's Camilla?"

"No idea."

Living with Miss Anonymous was going to be interesting. Was it compulsory to look so arrogant and disdainful when you went to an elite boarding school?

"I'm Susanne. Susanne Bruns."

Finally! "Nice to meet you." I held out my hand.

"So you're the new girl, right?"

The unknown girl scanned me. What did she see? No brand-name clothes. Hardly any make-up. I was from Potsdam, yes, but that didn't mean we went around looking like clowns. Loose blonde hair, medium length. Glasses. And not those hipster nerd glasses that only people who want to look cool wear. My glasses were hardly visible. I've hated them since the moment the optician prescribed them.

"Yes, I'm the new girl."

My roommate looked at me as though "new girl" meant something like "infectious disease" or "rash".

"Ok, well, I'll be back," she said. And with that, the conversation was over before it had properly begun. I nodded and watched Susanne slam the door shut behind her.

### 3.

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When I got back to my room, I immediately noticed that my bed looked more untidy than I had left it. Had somebody been lounging on it? Suspicious, I went closer. A bad feeling spread through me. Of course I could have ignored it, but as if of its own accord my hand reached out to the duvet and pulled it back.

Oh my God - this couldn't be happening! I clapped my hand to my mouth in shock. My stomach tied itself in a knot. Who on earth could have come up with something that sick? Reflexively, tears sprang into my eyes. There were some things I was used to from the children's home, but nobody there would ever have thought to put a dead bird on somebody's pillow.



I wasn't any kind of expert on birds, but I was sure this was a sparrow. Its eyes were half-closed, its head hung slackly to one side, and its legs were tucked into its body. The feathers were ragged. Something that looked suspiciously like blood had soaked into the pillow and dried there.

It made me gag. I quickly closed my eyes: I could already feel saliva gathering in my mouth. I took a deep breath and tried to concentrate. Just don't throw up! Pull yourself together, you can do this!

Gradually the nausea receded, and the practical part of me kicked in.

The bird. You have to take it outside. It can't stay in your bed. And if you find the bastard who put it there, you're going to kick him. The last remnants of nausea were driven out by the rage that was rising up in me. How could somebody be so cruel as to kill an animal and then lay it on my pillow? When I opened my eyes again, they were burning – but not with tears this time. The sight of the bird still hit me hard, but I was finally able to do something about it. Of course, I could have gone running to the rector, but I knew this was a test. I didn't have a cardboard box to use as a coffin for the bird, so I fetched some tissues and used them to lift it off the pillow. The feathers were already stuck to the material. I shuddered with disgust.

I was soon carrying the bird outside, to bury it in the rose beds.

"What are you up to there?"

I flinched as the caretaker suddenly appeared beside me. I looked at him guiltily. "There was no way I could hide the dead sparrow, which I had already laid on the earth. "I...I found him," I replied. "I was going to bury him."

The caretaker looked at me in surprise, and shook his head. "Those brats! That looks like their work."

"I...don't know," I stammered.

"And you really want to bury it?" he asked, hesitantly.

I could guess what was going on behind his furrowed brow. He was thinking I was a sensitive type. He probably would have thrown the bird on the compost heap.

I just nodded. The sparrow didn't deserve to become fertilizer.

"Wait a minute then, I'll get a spade." The caretaker sighed, and plodded off.

I looked at the dead bird. And at once, all the images were there again.

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## 5.

He loved the evening: the time when silence descended and darkness enveloped the world, blotting out everything ugly in it.

Then he would sit on the broad stone, get out his packet of cigarettes and have a smoke. And that was exactly what he was doing today.

It was just that this time, the usual sense of calm didn't come over him. He couldn't stop wondering whether he had really understood his sign.

The dark shapes of the old walls loomed in front of him. The boarding school was fairly well secured, but he knew plenty of hidden paths. Like everything else that had happened at that time, they had remained firmly in his memory. Sometimes he would steal into the grounds, just to see if he still could. And now, he saw this as practice for emergencies. The thought that he could gain entry to the grounds at any time to kill a girl there pleased him more and more. Of course it was dangerous. It was nothing like what he had done in the woods. That had been a happy coincidence, which had played into his hands.

Soon they would know what had happened. They had probably already received the message. And everything else would follow.

But then, that was the point. He wanted them to know. And he wanted those who were guilty to live in fear from this moment on. Of course they would be more on their guard, but they'd still realise too late how hopeless their situation was.

## Raven Man

Reading excerpts



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He ground the cigarette out under his shoe, and walked towards the hedge. He slipped through it without any great effort, and skirted around the large, empty building that would probably never have a proper use. He had finally reached his goal. The scene was sunk in darkness. He stopped, melted into the shadows, and looked up at one of the brightly lit windows.

They thought they were safe. And today, they still were. He wouldn't begin a second work of art before his first had been discovered. But he already knew who he was going to choose for it. Soon.

*Translation from German © Ruth Martin 2015*