

At the other extreme from the factual, research tome, *Twirling Jennies, A History of Social Dance in the City of Spindles 1820–1920*, is Ms. Evans' novel, a fantasy written under the pen name, Christina Briley.

The Raven Coronet takes Ms. Evans' knack for storytelling and uses it to create an imaginary world filled with interesting characters and intriguing situations. Sex, swordplay, and magic combine to offer grand adventure and an unconventional romance, one both bawdy and sweet.

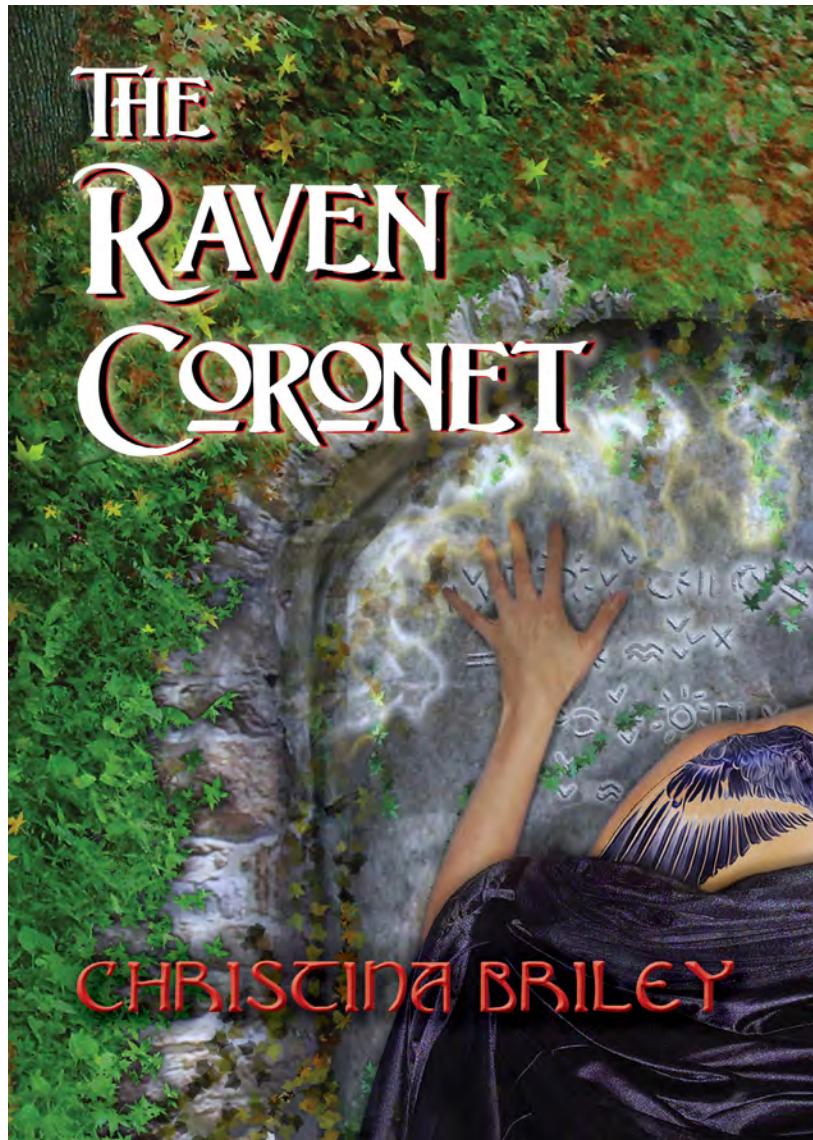
The Raven Coronet, by Christina Briley, is available online in e-book and in print (softcover) via the usual suspects. A preview appears on the following pages.



Even the youngest child in the United Lands knew the legend of The Raven Coronet—the crown of charisma that had united the world under one ruler—but no one believed that it still existed.

Or almost no one.

Young Thaedra's difficult childhood becomes an even more trying womanhood when her stepfather marries her off as part of a scheme to obtain the storied artifact.



PROLOGUE

High upon a parapet stood the gaunt and aged wizard. Around him the wind danced and surged, as if pleased to be part of what was to come. The old man raised his arms, and the gale caught the sleeves of his ebony robe until the fabric billowed and flapped like the wings of a great bird. At his summons, black specks appeared on the horizon. These could soon be recognized as ravens, each of them carrying a dark, silver-flecked feather in its beak, and each moving to take its place in the living torrent of feather and sinew that now began to circle the magician. When a hundred coal-black wings flapped overhead, the wizard spoke again. The birds opened their beaks and let go their offerings, but the loosed feathers sank only slightly before gathering speed in a tightening ring of their own. Faster and faster this magical construct spun as both circlet and plumes contracted. When at last the apparition stopped spinning, a shimmering wreath the size of a man's head dropped gently into the wizard's outstretched hands.

CHAPTER 1

CIRCUS

“Now, girls,” Calista called out as she strode calmly through the commotion in the upstairs hallway, “you obviously can’t go out in just corsets and panties, and time off is time off, but that doesn’t mean you can’t do a bit of advertising for future business.”

A traveling carnival had come to town, and Calista had decided to close the house for the afternoon to let the girls take in the show. Even under normal circumstances afternoons were slow; today would be even slower with most of their potential clients out at the far edge of town. There seemed no harm in letting the women have some fun. Besides, Calista knew that a bit of fresh air and time off for the girls would result in a livelier, more cheerful group of women to pleasure the customers that evening. The women hurried about as they searched their closets for clothes that would cover a touch more skin than their usual working attire.

Calista stopped a girl rushing past and placed her hands on either side of the young woman’s ribcage. In an abrupt and well-practiced motion, Calista brought her palms up and in, thus unceremoniously hoisting the girl’s breasts upwards so that several more inches of flesh towered above the neckline.

“Cleavage, everyone! If this afternoon is going to be ‘Look, don’t touch!’ time, let’s give the gentlemen plenty to look at!”

Overhead, Thaedra could hear Calista’s voice clearly through the floorboards of her attic bedroom.

“Oh, Callie,” Thaedra muttered to herself. “Everything you do is about how many coins it will bring in!”

Thaedra sat on the edge of her bed wearily and pulled on one of her boots. It had been a bad night. Scenes from her past had filled her sleep, disturbing scenes made more grotesque by a dream-world mix of real life trauma and make-believe legend.

“Thaedra! Are you coming?” Calista’s pounding on the bedroom door put a welcome end to thoughts of the nightmare. “Hurry along now! I can’t have my girls parading around town without their bodyguard. And those carnies – who knows what that motley band of gypsies might try to do to my sweet charges!”

Now shod, the house bodyguard snorted and stood up. “Hah! ‘Sweet charges’ indeed! I wonder who’s more likely to take advantage of whom!” Thaedra strode over to the dresser mirror to splash some water on her face before yanking open the door.

“Good morn, Calista. You may stop pounding now; my head aches quite enough already, thank you.”

The madam caught herself just in time to avoid accidentally rapping on Thaedra’s oft-broken nose. Calista lowered her arm and chided snippily: “Well, I’m sorry about

your headache, but the day's half over, and you do have a job to do."

Calista turned on her heel and headed for the stairs with the younger, more-muscled woman close behind. The other occupants of the house were already gathered out front on the veranda, chattering eagerly about the circus.

Upon spotting Thaedra, one of the courtesans smiled and sidled over. "Why such a sour face, sleepyhead?" Artella threaded her arm through Thaedra's and leaned close. "The weather is beautiful, and we're off on an outing!"

Thaedra grinned reluctantly at Artella's eagerness. She still would rather have spent the day at home nursing her headache than attending some ragtag carnival, but she was truly fond of the girls. Perhaps the distraction would do her some good.

Although the walk across town was a long one, the late spring day was pleasant and sunny, and the girls chattered and laughed along the way. By the time the group reached the field where the tents had been hoisted, even Thaedra's dour nature had brightened a bit. Her headache had eased, and she began to look forward to seeing the show.

"Ooh, look!" cried out one of Thaedra's charges. "They have a magician!"

Thaedra looked, and in a nearby, roped-off area, spotted a man in a long, deep blue robe. The robe was covered with garish gold trim, as well as large, gold moons and stars, and the whole thing struck Thaedra as being somewhat clichéd. The robe had obviously seen better days, and the frayed hem was caked with the mud of a hundred fields.

"Mud?" Thaedra wondered out loud, for the weather had been dry, and the walk across town, dusty. Then she saw that the ring in which the man stood had clearly been drenched with water, and several half-full buckets still stood along the perimeter. A moment later the reason became obvious.

Regardless of what she might think of his attire, she had to admit that the shower of sparks that suddenly shot from the magician's fingertips was impressive. At first, he merely held one hand out in front of him while thousands of tiny gold sparks cascaded from the ends of his fingers to fall harmlessly on the wet ground. After the first wave of "Ooohs" and "Ahhs" had died down, he brought up his other arm. Now the murmurs began anew; the size of the golden waterfall had doubled with all ten fingers streaming bits of fire.

The wind changed abruptly, and some of the sparks flew into the man's face causing him to wince.

"Ouch," Thaedra muttered in sympathy, but the magician's pain seemed to have gone unnoticed by most of the crowd, mesmerized as they were by the ongoing, fiery shower. The man shrugged off the discomfort and regained his composure. Gradually, the crowd again grew silent, and again the magician changed the composition of the torrent. Now each finger poured out sparks of a different color. Red from the index fingers, then orange, yellow, and blue moving outward. This time the crowd's cries of amazement were even louder.

Soon, though, the rainbow of fire began to die out, and Thaedra could see that the magician was struggling to stay on his feet. As the last spark faded, he held up his shaking hands dramatically so that everyone could see the wisps of smoke that rose

from his fingers. The audience applauded wildly while the man made one exaggerated bow after another until finally he excused himself to collapse on a nearby stool. A pretty, young colleague, with long, blond hair and a revealing outfit, circulated among the crowd holding out a hat and suggesting that perhaps the crowd might wish to show their enthusiasm in a somewhat more concrete manner.

“One trick pony,” Thaedra said to no one in particular. But when she looked around her, she realized that everyone else was enthralled by what they’d just witnessed. She caught snatches of conversation:

“That was wonderful! I couldn’t take my eyes off of him!” exclaimed one of the girls.

“Did you see how the sparks just *poured* out of his hands? They just kept going and going...” chimed in another.

“...And the finery he wore, and his courage to stand amid those burning embers!”

The comments went on. Thaedra resisted the urge to point out that his finery wasn’t all that fine anymore, and that it was a pretty useless trick other than looking pretty, and that there was enough water around to make it a fairly low risk stunt at that. But the girls were the only family she had, and she couldn’t bring herself to spoil their fun.

A twinge of jealousy struck her. Here was a group of women who made their living flat on their backs, a despicable occupation that Thaedra had literally fought her way out of – for she preferred being bouncer to being whore – yet these courtesans could still have enthusiasm for life. Was her own soul so hardened that she could have enthusiasm for absolutely nothing?

After a bit, the crowd moved along, and Thaedra and her housemates went with it. The next roped off area they came to had a muscular man some years older than Thaedra pacing about it and taunting the crowd.

“Does no one dare to fight me?” he called out. “Younger men, stronger men, hardy farm boys who plow alongside their oxen – *none* of you? Surely now, one of you must have the courage to face Falmund the Fearless!” He slapped his chest with his fist.

“Why should we?” yelled out one of the onlookers. “If you break my arm the way someone broke that nose of yours, I’ll not only be useless for the plowing, but I’ll hardly be fit to pass time with the wenches either!” The man gestured toward Thaedra’s little group. Several people in the crowd chuckled and nodded – though a few of the more righteous turned up their noses at the prostitutes’ presence.

“Why fight me? Why, to prove you’re a man, of course!” replied Falmund. “I’m sure there are plenty of women with the imagination to make you forget about a broken arm,” he went on with a smirk, “and I’m sure they’d rather tend to a man than a mouse! Fight me, and you’ll have your pick of this lovely lot over here!

“Besides,” he added slyly, “somebody managed to break this nose before; perhaps you’ll be the one to do it again!”

“Promising my ladies without asking me?” cried out Calista indignantly from the back of the crowd. Thaedra watched as the irate madam pushed her way through the spectators to stand at Thaedra’s shoulder near the ring. “How *dare* you?”