

**Excerpt from Chapter One**  
**“An October’s Journey: Poe’s Final Gift”**  
**By James McKenna**

As I was but a youth in those days, I hadn’t the least understanding of my mother’s adverse reaction to Poe, particularly when I, in immeasurable ways, found him to be enormously interesting and marvelously mesmerizing, most especially on those singularly extraordinary evenings after dinner when we would all gather in the parlor, and he would graciously acquaint us with one or two or more of his astonishing poems and stories. In all honesty, the more fantastic and profound his tales grew as he recited them, the larger grew my regard for him. Time after time, as he offered us his very much requested recitations, I found his uniquely impassive manner of delivery to be so mysteriously compelling that I had a great deal of difficulty discerning fact from fancy, palpable substance from the frail and ethereal flights of imagination to which so many have, both publicly and privately, lauded to be the very summit of his genius.

Oftentimes, and much to my alarm, latent echoes of the more menacing elements of his tales of mystery and horror would haunt me long into the night, keeping me awake much later than customary with such high degrees of frightful apprehension that I could not avoid drawing the covers over my head and listen with all of my might for any vagrant and unaccountable sounds in both my bed chamber and elsewhere about the house. Frequently, on those occasions, I would find myself irresistibly succumbing to a most awkward and restless sleep, thoroughly and irretrievably lost in a shadowy and foreboding world of depressing dreams wrought by the dark and aberrant elements of his morbid plots and grim eccentric characters.

I can recall one evening in particular when Poe recited for us his latest work, a poem so beautiful, so compelling, and so utterly obsessive, that my mother, who would ordinarily excuse herself from what she had termed ‘the Poe ordeal,’ remained through the entire recitation. He called his new poem *The Raven*, and ever since hearing it, and true to form, each night afterwards, my imagination would run wild and unchecked and supplied my semi-darkened bed chamber with the eerie echoes of flapping wings and unearthly corvine screeches that I was certain were generated by the selfsame ghostly raven of his hauntingly evocative poem. And believe me, being haunted by that stately ebon herald of gloomy providence was no small, undemanding burden to bear. For, although no such bust of Pallas ever graced the ledge above my chamber door, nothing could convince me to the contrary that the mysterious bird of

Poe's most celebrated poem was not lurking somewhere in the darkness like an astute and rapacious avian predator poised to suddenly sweep down and seize me in its talons at some vagrant, unguarded moment and bear my soul off in a swift and clandestine flight to some shadowy and foreboding netherworld never again to be seen in the realm of the living. I used to shudder at the thought of it.

How could I possibly have known then that the harrowingly haunting raven of Poe's remarkable poem was not, in actuality, based on a raven at all, but was, in fact, an ingeniously contrived poetic representation of something else entirely; something that was first to subtly congeal and then, soon after, thrust me without sensible recourse into the astonishing adventure, of which I do now—most happily—invite you to experience.