

# 1

# JORDIE MAKES SOME FRIENDS

Jordie leaned out of the open window in the train door, his face sullen, his mood bleak. He held a cheese sandwich between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand as if it were contaminated with some lethal toxin.

All morning his mum had dragged him around the shops to buy school shoes. That always put her in a bad mood. It was as if she blamed him for growing. He didn't even want the boring school shoes. There were at least a thousand things he'd rather have.

One of those was the burger Mum had promised him as a reward for going on this stupid shopping trip. Junk food was reserved for special occasions, and the thought of the burger was all that had kept him going as they traipsed from shop to shop. Then, just as he was imagining the first soft, savoury bite, the burger and fries crammed into his gaping mouth, she'd said, "Oh, drat, is that the time? We'll miss the train."

"But I'm starving!"

"You're not starving. Hungry isn't the same as starving. You're just peckish. And I brought along a nice sandwich for you."

That was the last straw. His mum had *made* the sandwich. That meant she'd never had any intention of taking him for a burger. Or fries. She'd planned this whole thing.

It was evil. Pure evil.

Jordie knew that the best way to get back at Mum for the dastardly trick she had played would be to shun the sandwich. Just ignore it. Act like it didn't exist. In fact, he'd moved from the seat to the door with the firm purpose of throwing it out of the window.

No, not throwing, *casting*.

Yes, casting it out of the window.

Or maybe hurling it.

That would show her. That would show everyone.

The annoying thing was that he was hungry. So, for now, he kept his grip on the miserable sandwich.

The station was at the end of the line, and the train wasn't scheduled to leave for another five minutes. Jordie had been staring out of the window but not really looking. He was vaguely aware that in front of him there was the station platform, and then a wall, and then whatever it is that's behind a wall. A car park. Houses. Fields. Nothing fun.

But now he noticed something else. The platform was full of birds – strutting, fluttering, hopping.

Jordie knew about birds. He wasn't exactly a twitcher – someone who got excited about every indistinguishable little brown job seen flitting through the bushes. He was too cool for that these days. But he could identify most birds and always felt a little surge of pleasure when he saw something new or interesting: a kestrel hovering over a field, caressing the air with its wingtips; the heavy, effortful flight of a green woodpecker, looking like it had just gorged on a massive pie; a heron standing by a drainage ditch like some ancient, vaguely evil spectre.

So now he pondered the birds on the platform. Some were hulking great brutes, glossy black from their claws to the tips of their cruel beaks.

Carrion crows.

They looked like they'd been carved out of blocks of coal. No, not like coal, thought Jordie, who was always rewriting his thoughts in his head. They looked like broken shards of night. The night was black glass, smashed by a hammer. These birds were serious. They were the bosses of this mob.

Even safe inside the train, Jordie felt a little afraid of the crows. They were the kind of birds that, if you fell asleep, would peck out your eyes. Stab, stab, and that was it: darkness forever.

Then there were some smaller birds, at first glance similar to the crows, but not truly like them at all, with silvery feathers on their necks and shoulders, and bright eyes, sparkling with humour. These were jackdaws. The crows looked like they disapproved of everything, even as they were eating it. But the jackdaws found the world endlessly fascinating. Their beaks were shorter but still sharp and strong, and made to jab and spear. The crows were brooding and silent, but the jackdaws constantly chatted to each other in clacks and squawks.

Jordie was fond of the jackdaws. They looked like they wanted to play with you, not feast on your eyes.

And then there were pigeons, flapping here and

there, trying to avoid the crows. Jordie couldn't quite decide about pigeons. On one level, they were almost beautiful, with the shimmering rainbow colours on their necks. And no two pigeons ever looked alike. A few, it's true, were pigeon-coloured, a mottled grey, with lighter patches here and there. But others were black and white, like cows, and some pale brown like . . . well, like pale brown cows. Was that the secret? Was a pigeon really a miniature flying cow? Or was a cow a giant flightless pigeon? With udders.

Most of the birds were clustered near the other end of the train, where one of the passengers had emptied out the crumbs from a packet of crisps. The birds pecked at the crumbs and at each other. It was a war of all against all. Nature black in tooth and claw.

And then Jordie noticed three birds, quite separate from the others. They were standing right in front of him, looking up with more hope than expectation at the sandwich in his hand.

One was a crow,

one a jackdaw

and one a pigeon.

At first Jordie thought that they were just the same as the other birds on the platform. Tough street birds up for a squabble, a fight, a wild rumpus.

But then he looked more closely and saw that they were truly wretched.

It was the jackdaw that first caught his eye. There was something wrong with its beak. The top part was angled up in the middle almost like an elbow, as if some wicked person had deliberately bent it, the way you would a paperclip. It must make it very hard to eat anything, thought Jordie.

That would explain why the rest of the jackdaw was in such a sorry state. It was so thin it looked like a few sticks joined together with string. There were pale patches, the colour of ash, where the bird's skin showed through the scanty feathers. For a second this made Jordie think that the jackdaw was old, but when he looked more closely, he decided there was something youthful about the bird, something teenagery, with hope and hopelessness all mixed up together.

The jackdaw seemed to know that Jordie was looking at it, and it stared right back at him, its head at an angle. Jordie felt a sudden connection with the bird, an understanding, as if some secret communication had passed between them.

But it made Jordie sad to think of the jackdaw, with its twisted beak, its hunger and its loneliness, so he turned his gaze on the crow.

The crow at first looked to be in better shape than the jackdaw. True, it was quite skinny for a crow, its bones making sharp angles like a wire coat hanger. And in place of the vague air of menace that the other crows projected, it appeared merely sullen and sulky, like it had been told off by a teacher for something it hadn't even done.

But then Jordie saw that the bird held one wing so low that it dragged on the ground, and he realised that it must be broken and that the crow could not fly.

And then there was the pigeon. Like the other two, it was thin and scrawny, but its feathers looked trim and neatly groomed. It was only when the pigeon moved that Jordie realised what was wrong with it. It limped and stumbled and Jordie saw that its feet were ruined. On one foot the toes were worn down to stumps, while on the other there were no toes at all, just an angry red swelling.

The three birds appeared so sad and forlorn that Jordie's grump disappeared.

He looked at his sandwich. The thought that he ought to give it to the hungry birds transformed it. It was no longer the most boring sandwich in the world. It became a treat, a rare delicacy. He could almost taste its savoury goodness: the crumbly cheesiness of the

cheese, the soft, bready bread and the smooth, buttery butter all united to make the greatest thing anyone could ever want to eat.

He looked again at the bedraggled crow, the jackdaw with the bent beak and the scrawny pigeon. They looked back at him. The jackdaw took one, two, three steps forward and put its head on one side. The crow stalked after it. The pigeon flapped its wings and limped behind them.

It was no good. Jordie realised that he could never enjoy the sandwich, no matter how wondrous it was. It would turn to ashes in his mouth. Then he thought of a way to keep everyone happy. He tore the sandwich into four rough quarters. One for the crow, one for the jackdaw, one for the pigeon and one for him.

"Here, birdies," he said, holding out one of the quarters. At the sound of his voice and the sight of the food, the three birds began to move again more urgently, hopping, stumbling, limping closer to the train.

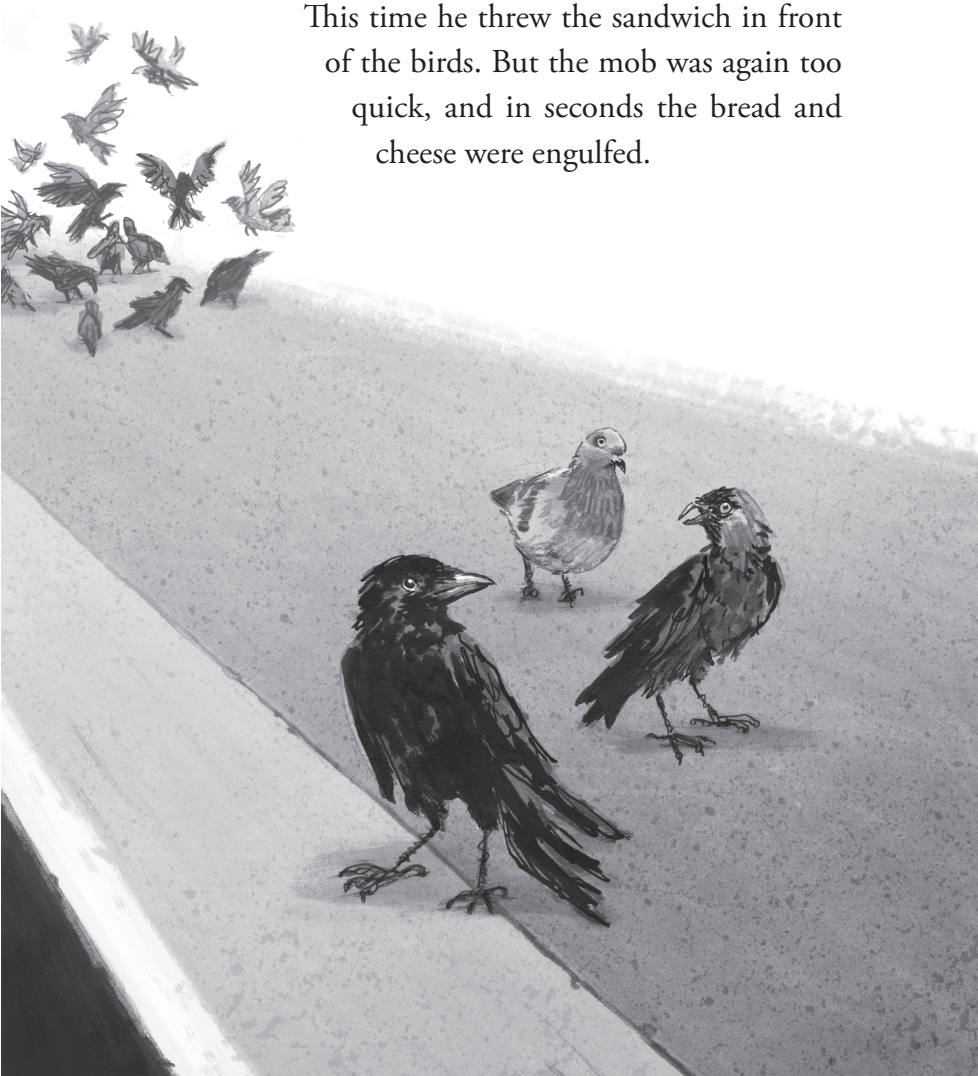
Jordie tossed the first quarter in their direction, but he got his throw slightly wrong, and it landed behind them. The three birds turned, but before they reached the feast, the great flock saw what was happening and descended in a cloud of feathers and squawks.

Jordie felt a shock of anger. "Not fair!" he cried aloud.

He tried to attract his own crow and jackdaw and pigeon by waving the next quarter enticingly before them.

"Here, look! There's more!"

This time he threw the sandwich in front of the birds. But the mob was again too quick, and in seconds the bread and cheese were engulfed.



The three birds looked more forlorn than ever. It seemed that there was nothing Jordie could do to help them.

Then he had an idea. It meant losing his own quarter of sandwich, but sometimes, he told himself, you have to make the ultimate sacrifice to do good in this world.

He swung his arm out of the window and hurled the third quarter as far as he could down the platform towards the front of the train. It broke up in mid-air, with bits of cheese spilling out. Even before it landed, the black flock was after it, rising and falling like one thing, not many.

Perfect. There is great joy to be had from a plan that works.

Only his crow, his jackdaw and his pigeon were left. In his mind, Jordie had already named the birds. The crow was Herman. The jackdaw was Beaky. The pigeon was Pidge. The names came to him the way sometimes a tune pops into your head and you don't know where from, but there it is.

"Your turn," he said, and quietly dropped the last quarter right in front of the train door.

The three birds looked at Jordie and then at the fallen banquet. The jackdaw moved quickest and tried to snatch it with his crooked beak. But he couldn't get

a proper grip and, with despair, Jordie saw that all the bird had managed to do was send the bread and cheese skipping towards the edge of the platform and down into the dark space below the train.

At that moment, the guard blew his whistle, and the train eased away from the station with a dieselly sigh. Jordie looked back at the three birds growing smaller and smaller, and the three birds looked at him. The sadness of the boy met the sadness of the birds, and there was no comfort to be had for any of them.