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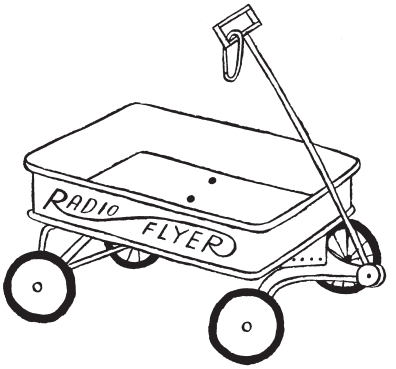
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CHAPTER I

A Murder of Crows

How five crows managed to lift a twenty-pound baby boy into the air was beyond Prue, but that was certainly the least of her worries. In fact, if she were to list her worries right then and there as she sat spellbound on the park bench and watched her little brother, Mac, carried aloft in the talons of these five black crows, puzzling out just *how* this feat was being done would likely come in dead last. First on the list: Her baby brother, her responsibility, was being abducted by birds. A close second: *What did they plan on doing with him?*

And it had been such a nice day.

True, it had been a little gray when Prue woke up that morning, but what September day in Portland wasn't? She had drawn up the blinds in her bedroom and had paused for a moment, taking in the sight of the tree branches outside her window, framed as they were by a sky of dusty white-gray. It was Saturday, and the smell of coffee and breakfast was drifting up from downstairs. Her parents would be in their normal Saturday positions: Dad with his nose in the paper, occasionally hefting a lukewarm mug of coffee to his lips; Mom peering through tortoiseshell bifocals at the woolly mass of a knitting project of unknown determination. Her brother, all of one year old, would be sitting in his high chair, exploring the farthest frontiers of unintelligible babble: *Doose! Doose!* Sure enough, her vision was proven correct when she came downstairs to the nook off the kitchen. Her father mumbled a greeting, her mother's eyes smiled from above her glasses, and her brother shrieked, "Pooo!" Prue made herself a bowl of granola. "I've got bacon on, darling," said her mother, returning her attention to the amoeba of yarn in her hands (was it a sweater? A tea cozy? A noose?).

"Mother," Prue had said, now pouring rice milk over her cereal, "I told you. I'm a vegetarian. Ergo: no bacon." She had read that word, *ergo*, in a novel she'd been reading. That was the first time she had used it. She wasn't sure if she'd used it right, but it felt good. She sat down at the kitchen table and winked at Mac. Her father briefly

peered over the top of his paper to give her a smile.

"What's on the docket today?" said her father. "Remember, you're watching Mac."

"Mmmm, I dunno," *Prue* responded. "Figured we'd hang around somewhere. Rough up some old ladies. Maybe stick up a hardware store. Pawn the loot. Beats going to a crafts fair."

Her father snorted.

"Don't forget to drop off the library books. They're in the basket by the front door," said her mother, her knitting needles clacking. "We should be back for dinner, but you know how long these things can run."

"Gotcha," said Prue.

Mac shouted, "Pooooo!" wildly brandished a spoon, and sneezed.

"And we think your brother might have a cold," said her father. "So make sure he's bundled up, whatever you do."

(The crows lifted her brother higher into the overcast sky, and suddenly Prue enumerated another worry: *But he might have a cold!*)

That had been their morning. Truly, an unremarkable one. Prue finished her granola, skimmed the comics, helped her dad ink in a few gimmes in his crossword puzzle, and was off to hook up the red Radio Flyer wagon to the back of her single-speed bicycle. An even coat of gray remained in the sky, but it didn't seem to threaten rain, so Prue stuffed Mac into a lined corduroy jumper, wrapped him in a stratum of quilted chintz, and placed him, still babbling, into the

wagon. She loosed one arm from this cocoon of clothing and handed him his favorite toy: a wooden snake. He shook it appreciatively.

Prue slipped her black flats into the toe clips and pedaled the bike into motion. The wagon bounced noisily behind her, Mac shrieking happily with every jolt. They tore through the neighborhood of tidy clapboard houses, Prue nearly upsetting Mac's wagon with every hurdled curb and missed rain puddle. The bike tires gave a satisfied *shhhhh* as they carved the wet pavement.

The morning flew by, giving way to a warm afternoon. After several random errands (a pair of Levis, not quite the right color, needed returning; the recent arrivals bin at Vinyl Resting Place required perusing; a plate of veggie tostadas was messily shared at the taqueria), she found herself whiling time outside the coffee shop on the main street while Mac quietly napped in the red wagon. She sipped steamed milk and watched through the window as the café employees awkwardly installed a secondhand elk head trophy on the wall. Traffic hummed on Lombard Street, the first intrusions of the neighborhood's polite rush hour. A few passersby cooed at the sleeping baby in the wagon and Prue flashed them sarcastic smiles, a little annoyed to be someone's picture of sibling camaraderie. She doodled mindlessly in her sketchbook: the leaf-clogged gutter drain in front of the café, a hazy sketch of Mac's quiet face with extra attention paid to the little dribble of snot emerging from his left nostril. The afternoon began to fade. Mac, waking, shook her from her trance.

"Right," she said, putting her brother on her knee while he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Let's keep moving. Library?" Mac pouted, uncomprehending.

"Library it is," said Prue.

She skidded to a halt in front of the St. Johns branch library and vaulted from her bike seat. "Don't go anywhere," she said to Mac as she grabbed the short stack of books from the wagon. She jogged into the foyer and stood before the book return slot, shuffling the books in her hand. She stopped at one, *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, and sighed. She'd had it for nearly three months now, braving overdue notices and threatening notes from librarians before she'd finally consented to return it. Prue mournfully flipped through the pages of the book. She'd spent hours copying the beautiful illustrations of the birds into her sketchbook, whispering their fantastic, exotic names like quiet incantations: *the western tanager. The whip-poor-will. Vaux's swift*. The names conjured the images of lofty climes and faraway places, of quiet prairie dawns and misty treetop aeries. Her gaze drifted from the book to the darkness of the return slot and back. She winced, muttered, "Oh well," and shoved the book into the opening of her peacoat. She would brave the librarians' wrath for one more week.

Outside, an old woman had stopped in front of the wagon and was busy searching around for its owner, her brow furrowed. Mac was contentedly chewing on the head of his wooden snake. Prue rolled her eyes, took a deep breath, and threw open the doors of the library.

When the woman saw Prue, she began to wave a knobby finger in her direction, stammering, "E-excuse me, miss! This is very unsafe! To leave a child! Alone! Do his parents know how he is being cared for?"

"What, him?" asked Prue as she climbed back on to the bike. "Poor thing, doesn't have parents. I found him in the free book pile." She smiled widely and pushed the bike away from the curb back onto the street.

The playground was empty when they arrived, and Prue unrolled Mac from his swaddling and set him alongside the unhitched Radio Flyer. He was just beginning to walk and relished the opportunity to practice his balancing. He gurgled and smiled and carefully waddled beside the wagon, pushing it slowly across the playground's asphalt. "Knock yourself out," said Prue, and she pulled the copy of *The Sibley Guide to Birds* from her coat, opening it to a dog-eared page about meadowlarks. The shadows against the blacktop were growing longer as the late afternoon gave way to early evening.

That was when she first noticed the crows.

At first there were just a few, wheeling in concentric circles against the overcast sky. They caught Prue's attention, darting about in her periphery, and she glanced up at them. *Corvus brachyrhynchos*; she'd just been reading about them the night before. Even from a distance, Prue was astounded by their size and the power of their every wing stroke. A few more flew into the group and there were now several, wheeling and diving above the quiet playground. *A flock?* thought

Prue. *A swarm?* She flipped through the pages of Sibley to the back where there was an index of fanciful terms for the grouping of birds: a sedge of herons, a fall of woodcock, and: a murder of crows. She shivered. Looking back up, she was startled to see that this murder of crows had grown considerably. There were now dozens of birds, each of the blackest pitch, piercing cold empty holes in the widening sky. She looked over at Mac. He was now yards away, blithely toddling along the blacktop. She felt unnerved. "Hey, Mac!" she called. "Where ya going?"

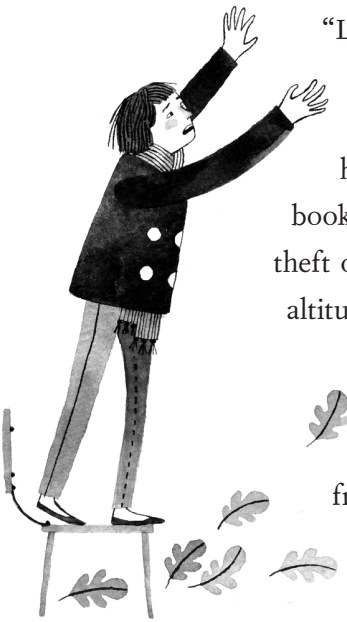
There was a sudden rush of wind, and she looked up in the sky and was horrified to see that the group of crows had grown twentyfold. The individual birds were now indiscernible from the mass, and the murder coalesced into a single, convulsive shape, blotting out the flat light of the afternoon sun. The shape swung and bowed in the air, and the noise of their beating wings and screeching cries became almost deafening. Prue cast about, seeing if anyone else was witnessing this bizarre event, but she was terrified to find that she was alone.

And then the crows dove.

Their cry became a single, unified scream as the cloud of crows feinted skyward before diving at a ferocious speed toward her baby brother. Mac gave a terrific squeal as the first crow reached him, snagging the hood of his jumper in a quick flourish of a talon. A second took hold of a sleeve, a third grabbing the shoulder. A fourth, a fifth touched down, until the swarm surrounded and obscured the

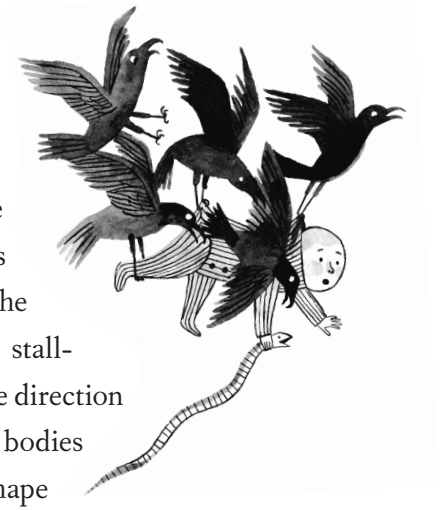
view of his body in a sea of flashing, feathery blackness. And then, with seemingly perfect ease, Mac was lifted from the ground and into the air.

Prue was paralyzed with shock and disbelief: *How were they doing this?* She found that her legs felt like they were made of cement, her mouth empty of anything that might draw forth words or a sound. Her entire placid, predictable life now seemed to hinge on this one single event, everything she'd ever felt or believed coming into terrible relief. Nothing her parents had told her, nothing she'd ever learned in school, could possibly have prepared her for this thing that was happening. Or, really, what was to follow.



"LET MY BROTHER GO!"

Waking from her reverie, Prue found she was standing on top of the bench, shaking her fist at the crows like an ineffectual comic-book bystander, cursing some supervillain for the theft of a purse. The crows were quickly gaining altitude; they now topped the highest branches of the poplars. Mac could barely be seen amid the black, winged swarm. Prue jumped down from the bench and grabbed a rock from the pavement. Taking quick aim, she threw the rock as hard as she could but



groaned to see it fall well short of its target. The crows were completely unfazed. They were now well above the tallest trees in the neighborhood and climbing, the highest flyers growing hazy in the low-hanging clouds. The dark mass moved in an almost lazy pattern, stalling in motion before suddenly breaking in one direction and the next. Suddenly, the curtain of their bodies parted and Prue could see the distant beige shape of Mac, his cord jumper pulled into a grotesque rag-doll shape by the crows' talons. She could see one crow had a claw tangled in the fine down of his hair. Now the swarm seemed to split in two groups: One stayed surrounding the few crows who were carrying Mac while the other dove away and skirted the treetops. Suddenly, two of the crows let go of Mac's jumper, and the remaining birds scrambled to keep hold. Prue shrieked as she saw her brother slip from their claws and plummet. But before Mac even neared the ground, the second group of crows deftly flew in and he was caught, lost again into the cloud of squawking birds. The two groups reunited, wheeled in the air once more, and suddenly, violently, shot westward, away from the playground.

Determined to do *something*, Prue dashed to her bike, jumped on, and gave pursuit. Unencumbered by Mac's red wagon, the bike quickly gained speed and Prue darted out into the street. Two cars

skidded to a stop in front of her as she crossed the intersection in front of the library; somebody yelled, "Watch it!" from the sidewalk. Prue did not dare take her eyes off the swimming, spinning crows in the distance.

Her legs a blue blur over the pedals, Prue blew the stop sign at Richmond and Ivanhoe, inciting an angered holler from a bystander. She then skidded through the turn southward on Willamette. The crows, unhampered by the neighborhood's grid of houses, lawns, streets, and stoplights, made quick time over the landscape, and Prue commanded her legs to pedal faster to keep pace. In the chase, she could swear that the crows were toying with her, cutting back toward her, diving low and skirting the roofs of the houses, only to carve a great arc and, with a push of speed, dart back to the west. In these moments Prue could catch glimpse of her captive brother, swinging in the clutches of his captors, and then he would disappear again, lost in the whirlwind of feathers.

"I'm coming for you, Mac!" she yelled. Tears streamed down Prue's cheeks, but she couldn't tell if she'd cried them or if they were a product of the cold fall air that whipped at her face as she rode. Her heart was beating madly in her chest, but her emotions were staid; she still couldn't quite believe this was all happening. Her only thought was to retrieve her brother. She swore that she would never let him out of her sight again.

The air was alive with car horns as Prue zigzagged through the

steady traffic of St. Johns. A garbage truck, executing a slow, traffic-stalling Y-turn in the middle of Willamette Street, blocked the road, and Prue was forced to hop the curb and barrel down the sidewalk. A group of pedestrians screamed and dove out of her way. "Sorry!" Prue shouted. In an angular motion, the crows doubled back, causing Prue to lay on the brakes, and then dove low in an almost single file and flew straight toward her. She screamed and ducked as the crows flew over her head, their feathers nicking her scalp. She heard a distinct gurgle and a call, "Pooooo!" from Mac as they passed, and he was gone again, the crows back on their journey westward. Prue pedaled the bike to speed and bunny-hopped the wheels of the bike back onto the black pavement of the street, grimacing as she absorbed the bump with her arms. Seeing an opportunity, she took a hard right onto a side street that wound through a new development of identically whitewashed duplexes. The ground began to gently slope and she was gathering speed, the bike clattering and shaking beneath her. And then, suddenly, the street came to an abrupt end.

She had arrived at the bluff.

Here at the eastern side of the Willamette River was a natural border between the tight-knit community of St. Johns and the riverbank, a three-mile length of cliff simply called the bluff. Prue let out a cry and jammed on the brakes, nearly sending herself vaulting the handlebars and over the edge. The crows had cleared the precipice and were funneling skyward like a shivering black twister cloud,

framed by the rising smoke from the many smelters and smokestacks of the Industrial Wastes, a veritable no-man's-land on the other side of the river, long ago claimed by the local industrial barons and transformed into a forbidding landscape of smoke and steel. Just beyond the Wastes, through the haze, lay a rolling expanse of deeply forested hills, stretching out as far as the eye could see. The color drained from Prue's face.

"No," she whispered.

In the flash of an instant and without a sound, the funnel of crows crested the far side of the river and disappeared in a long, thin column into the darkness of these woods. Her brother had been taken into the Impassable Wilderness.