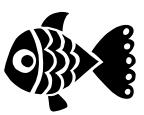
CROW CHILDREN

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For Betty and Norma

One

Dustin Marr came up to her the day after she and Mum arrived in Crawford. She was standing outside St Francis' Academy, getting a first look. It backed onto a broad field that swept up to the forest's treeline. She turned and walked up to the forest, stood there staring at it, at the wooded hills that strode along the horizon, and Dustin Marr came up to her.

'You Ava?' he asked. He prowled, came over to her and looked down at her and squinted. 'Ava Bridger? The new girl?'

She looked at him and nodded. They both stood shoulder to shoulder looking up at the forest together. The blackforest, people called it. Crows swirled around above the trees.

Ava stole sidelong glances at Dustin Marr and blushed. He was tall and gaunt, as skinny as she had ever seen anyone and a couple of years older than her, maybe fifteen or sixteen. Dark hair framed his cheeks and he seemed to wear a permanent scowl, though he was handsome, beautiful, even, with high cheekbones and sparkling blue eyes. His skin was like marble, Ava thought, pure white and almost glowing with it.

'Ava Bridger,' he repeated. His voice was soft. He smelled of ash and something animal.

'Yeah,' she said. 'So what?'

'An outsider,' he said. He smiled to himself and bared his teeth. Ava shook her head.

'My mum grew up around here,' she told him. 'My nana and pop live here. Their parents did, too, going way back, I think. And I've been coming here forever in the summer holidays and that.'

'So why have you moved back?' Dustin Marr asked.

Ava swallowed and looked at her feet. Then she looked up and squared her shoulders. There was no avoiding it. People were always going to ask. She felt her cheeks burn and her eyes burn and she took a deep breath and said the words she hated saying.

'My dad died a couple of years ago. Mum wanted to move back home. It's cheaper here, she says. She can afford it better. And she wanted to be closer to my nana and pop. We're staying with them for a bit. Until we find our own place.'

Dustin Marr grunted.

'Your nana and pop are good people,' he said quietly. 'Specially your nana.'

'Yeah?'

Dustin Marr didn't respond. He just carried on staring up at the woods for a little while.

'What do you hear?' he asked her eventually. 'When you stand near the woods?'

Ava didn't understand. 'What are you talking about?' she asked.

Dustin Marr nodded up at the trees. 'What do you hear?'

She listened out. Crows called to one another up in the trees. Plenty of other things squawked and screeched.

'I dunno. Some birds. Woodland noises.'

'Anything else?'

'No.'

He nodded. 'For now, maybe.'

She wondered if he was mad. She took half a step back in fear as he reached into a pocket and pulled something out, held it out to her on his open palm.

'Look,' he said.

She was relieved. It was nothing dangerous. It was beautiful, in fact, a crow's head carved from a dark and rich looking wood.

'I whittled it myself,' he said. 'And I lacquered it and varnished it so that it wouldn't spoil.'

'Yeah?'

He held it out for her. 'Take it. It's yours.'

'Really?' She felt herself blushing again.

He shrugged. 'I can always make more,' he said. He nodded at the blackforest. 'There's plenty of wood, isn't there?'

'Yeah. I suppose so.'

'You know anyone yet?'

'Not really.'

'That's OK. You'll soon know all you need to know. I'll see to that Ava Bridger.' He looked at her and his eyes flashed. 'You should come along with some of us one day,' he said.

'Come where?'

Dustin Marr nodded up at the woods again. 'I've got a place,' he said. 'We do a ritual there. Spooky stuff, you know. We talk to the crows. Some say it's bollocks but they're idiots.'

'The crows?'

'Yeah. They're like messengers to the dead. From the dead.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

And that was that.

She showed Mum and Pop the carved crow's head later on.

'I know the family of old,' Pop said. 'And your nana knows him well, Dustin Marr. Used to babysit him when he was a little boy. It doesn't surprise me, this kind of talent.'

'It looks kind of sinister,' Mum said.

'That doesn't surprise me either,' Pop replied with a small chuckle. 'Nothing about that lot would surprise me very much.'

Two

Dad fell down dead one day at the site. Mum got a call from the foreman. Then she screamed. Then she cried. Ava had mostly been angry. Furious, even. Sometimes it blotted everything out, or so it felt to her. Sometimes everything felt pointless. Life and the whole lot of it.

'You're depressed,' Mum had told her. She took Ava to see a doctor back home before they moved. He gave her some pills to take every day which made her feel rubbish, disconnected. A couple of times she went a few days without taking them. She would put them in her pocket in the morning and then flush them down the loo when she had a chance. It would make her feel good to be rebellious like that.

You're depressed. It's natural. Only natural, people often said.

It doesn't feel natural, she often thought.

She flushed the whole pack of pills in the end. All of them. Mum wasn't happy. The doctor wasn't happy.

'It's reckless, foolish, to do something like that without proper medical supervision.'

'So supervise me,' Ava said. 'I'm not taking those pills any more. You watch me if you want.'

'Yes, well.'

So the doctor had agreed to it without much of a choice.

'A trial, to see how you get on.'

'Sure,' Ava said. She smiled at the doctor. They both knew she wasn't going back on them.

That was over a year ago and she was getting on better, or at least had been until they left home. She missed her old flat. She missed her old school and her old friends, though there weren't many of them, especially towards the end. Sometimes she missed Dad, wanted to speak to him. She never got to say goodbye. He just left for work one morning and never came home again and the thought of it made her shake with rage sometimes. Other times she felt so incredibly unhappy. The sense of pointlessness weighed her down.

Ava got into a fight at school, at her old school, a

few months ago. The rage took over that day. She didn't remember it very well, only that a couple of girls in the year above had made some kind of snide remark. They joked about Dad and Ava went for them. She hurt them. Mum picked her up from school and then sat her down a few days later and cleared her throat. She looked nervous as she told Ava that they would be moving.

'Back home,' she said. 'To my home, Crawford, with Nana and Pop, where I grew up.'

'Why?' Ava asked.

'We need it,' Mum said gently. 'I need it. I need to be close to Nana and Pop right now. And honestly, I can't afford to keep us here, not without . . . you know, your dad's wages as well as mine. One salary alone doesn't go far enough these days, and Crawford's cheaper.

'We can move in with Nana and Pop for a bit, then get a house nearby and help them as they get older. It will be nice to be able to see them all the time. I can get a new job around there, and there's a decent school there . . . my old school, St Francis'.'

She looked at Ava nervously.

'Love, what do you think?'

'Whatever,' Ava said. She walked away and swore under her breath as she went, loud enough for Mum to hear, quiet enough that she could pretend she hadn't.

So they came, they arrived. Ava sat alone on her bed in her new room in Nana and Pop's little house and felt frightened and abandoned, dumped in this new place. She wanted to speak to Dad right then. She just wanted him to hold her one last time.

Ava heard a scrabbling at the window. Something screeched outside and she jumped. There were a couple of crows at the window. One of them was sitting on her windowsill and rattling its sharp beak against the glass. *Tap, tap, tap*, it hammered away. The other swooped and swirled through the air and came in close and went out again.

'Go away!' Ava shouted.

She looked through the glass. Her own reflection shimmered there with dark hair hanging lank and a pale face frowning. She looked just like Mum but with Dad's grey eyes. She glowered and her reflection glowered back, and she thumped on the glass. The crow on the windowsill fell backwards and flapped its wings and rose up into the air to glare back at her. The other swooped past and Ava smacked the glass again until they both fled.