

Chapter 1

THE BIRDS WERE FOLLOWING ME.

Which was a very irregular thing, even for me. My life was full of the kinds of things people might call irregular, but up until then, not one of them had to do with birds. I knew it could only mean one thing: Either I stunk of worms, or something bad was fixin' to happen.

In my heart of hearts, I was really hoping for worms. I was sitting in the front seat of Toot Jefferson's old pickup truck, watching the trees fly by the window, when I spotted the birds for the third time that morning. They were ravens. Five of them.

"One of these days, I'm going to take me a tropical vacation," said Toot. "When I get lucky."

"When will that be?" I asked, sniffing my bare arm and trying to remember the last time I washed. "Oh, I don't know the particulars," she said, "but one of these days my ship will come in. Believe you me." I stuck my head out of the window to get a better look at the birds. The warm June wind tickled my face. They were doing a pretty fine job of keeping up with us, those birds. Although, considering how tenderfooted Toot was with the gas pedal, it couldn't have been awful hard. "But there aren't any ports in West Virginia," I said, leaning back inside the truck. That was the problem with living in a landlocked state; there was no easy way out.

"A minor technicality." Toot was gripping the top of the steering wheel with both hands. Each of her plump fingers was outfitted with a ring, which she clacked against the wheel. *Clack. Clack.* "I read about a woman who woke up one morning with the firmly held belief that she would win the lottery even though she had never gambled before in all her life. So she bought herself a ticket. And the next thing she knew, she was a super-mega jackpot winner and on the front page of all the papers. Now she owns a chain of islands. Not just one island, *a whole chain*. Can you believe such a thing?"

I nodded.

I believed in most impossible things.

Toot steered her old truck over the dips in the gravel road down the mountain. Her dyed curls, the color of a chili pepper, swept her chin. The road to the nearest town, Gypsum, was steep, and Toot badgered the brake the whole way.

Toot Jefferson worked in the cafeteria at Vera B. Marigold Elementary, where I had just finished fifth grade. Toot saw it as her own personal concern to look in on me, especially during the summer, and once a month, she drove me down to Gypsum's No Hunger Food Pantry, where I could get food for myself and my uncle, Horace.

"Do you see those birds behind us?" I said, looking out the window again.

"Birds?" Toot adjusted her rearview mirror. "I think they're following me," I said. "I saw them back at Horace's place, and now here they are again." "Following you?" said Toot. She clobbered the brakes, sending me into the dashboard.

"Murderation!" I said, shifting back into my seat and holding onto the door handle.

Then Toot gave me a worried look. "Honey, birds don't follow. They look for food. They build nests. They lay eggs. Such is the uncomplicated life of a bird. We should all be so lucky." She frowned and kept her eyes on me until I looked away.

Maybe I'm getting like Horace, I thought as I watched the trees out my window. *Strange. Or, sick.* "Now then," Toot said, easing off the brake for a bit and then smashing it again. "How's it been?" I tugged at a loose thread on the cuff of my jeans. "There's something wrong with Horace." Toot raised her eyebrows at me, and I said, "I mean, more wrong than usual. Lately all he does is sleep. Unless he's running around with Charlie Mullet. He was gone three days and then came back last night, muttering to himself about the curse again. And sometimes, he just stares out the window, you know? At nothing. Like he's here, but he's not really here. Like his mind is caught someplace else." *Clack. Clack.*

Uncle Horace had always been strange, since as far back as I could remember. Strange because he kept himself away from most people, and he never was much for talking. When he did have something to say, he didn't make a whole lot of sense. He talked in circles, and even triangles and rectangles, but never in straight lines. He believed that a curse was set on him and our family, and that's the reason we lived the way we did, him and me. The reason my parents went away. He wouldn't say anything more about the curse than that, not that I believed him much, anyhow.

Over the years, I'd gotten used to Horace and his strange ways, but the last couple of weeks, ever since Charlie Mullet came back around, something was different. It was like there was a curtain pulled tight around Horace that kept him in a dark place, that kept him from being in the world that everybody else lived in, including mine.

"I don't mean that old Horace," said Toot, shaking her head. "I mean *you*, sugar. How's it been?" *Clack. Clack.*

"Oh. Fine." The words came out as thin as toilet paper. Still, I nodded, smiled, and hoped Toot would believe they were true. Nothing good would come from Toot worrying any more than she already did.

"One day you'll see," she said, taking her foot off the brake and letting the truck catch some speed. "Your life's gonna change in a heartbeat. Just that quick."

Toot said that a lot. But it couldn't happen quick enough for me.

I looked in the truck's side mirror. The ravens were still there.

We hit a deep pothole. I bobbed in my seat, and the coil springs underneath me spronged.

Toot pushed up her purple glasses and rubbed at the deep lines in her forehead, smoothing them. "Sugar, I've got to tell you something. I'm going away for a little while."

Clack. Clack.

Something heavy pulled at my stomach. "Away?" I sputtered. "Where? For how long?"

Then Toot explained that her mama had gotten worse and how she was going to be with her on her last days. *Last days*, that's what she said. She was going to drive all night, the good Lord willing, across the great state of West Virginia to Charles Town, where her mother lived. She didn't know how long she would be gone. Maybe a few weeks. Maybe more.

The trees that lined both sides of the road leaned in closer, as if they couldn't believe it either. I wrapped the loose thread from my jeans tight around my finger. Like I was holding onto the world and trying to steer it around a bend. "Can I come with you?"

"You know I would bring you along if I could," answered Toot. She tramped on the brakes again. "I don't think Horace would like it."

"We could ask him," I said.

Toot shook her head. "It's not only that, sugar. My mama, she's so sick." Her voice grew smaller. "She's about to leave this world, and the manner in which she's gonna do that may not be something you want to see."

I didn't want to see anybody leave this world, but the problem was, I also didn't want Toot to leave mine. The wind untucked my hair from behind my ear.

Toot reached over and put it back into place. "You know if I had my druthers, the way things are for you right now, well, that's not the way things would be."

I let go of the thread. *Would be*. It was an idea so big I couldn't see its edges, and nothing was too impossible to fit inside. Like waking up one day and, just like that, finding that everything was different. Easier. We were quiet for a long time.

"My mama," said Toot, after a while. "She liked to tell me fairy stories when I was a little girl about your age. Sometimes the stories came from a book, but most of the time, I think she just made them up on the spot. But before she got going with a story, she always told me to keep my eye on the luminaries."

"What are luminaries?"

"That's the same thing I asked her," said Toot. "She told me that luminaries are the bright ones. The ones who look into the belly of the dark forest and see a way through when nobody else can. By the end, some of them even made it to the highfalutin castle. And you, Cutie

Grackle, you've got the makings of a luminary. You've just got to do what I'm always telling you."

"Don't lose heart," I replied.

"Amen to that."