

# 1 • C R O W

“Hey, that crow’s in the garden again.”

“Where?” I gasped as Josie, my younger sister, swept past me. I jumped up from the kitchen table, almost spilling a bowl of cereal.

“On the gate post,” she said with a shrug. “It’s not *doing* anything. It’s just . . . sitting there.”

“Watching,” I muttered.

“Yeah . . . right,” she said doubtfully. She swept her hair off her shoulder and continued on into the front room.

“Michael, you need to get over this.” Mom was crouching down, spilling laundry out of the washing machine. She brought a basket of wet clothes over to the sink. “You’ve been as jumpy as a newborn frog for days, and stuck inside the house every night this week. I realize this hasn’t been an easy time for you, with Freya . . . passing away and everything, but trust me, this is not what she’d have wanted. Staying in, moping, won’t ease the pain. You need to face the world without her now. Nothing’s going to bring her back.”

Oh, no? I took a sharp breath. If only Mom knew what I'd seen in the graveyard when I'd gone to lay a rose on Freya's grave. I pushed aside the blind. "Josie said she saw a crow."

"Yes, I know. I heard her." Mom nudged me aside to get to the drawer where she kept her clothespins. "It's a bird. A member of the natural world. Allowed to visit our garden as often as it likes — as long as it doesn't interfere with my washing. What's the matter? Are you frightened of crows or something?" She threw some pins into the basket and glanced through the window. "I agree they can look a bit menacing, but you've never said anything about them before. Is there something you want to tell me?"

Lots. Too much. I gulped and said nothing.

Mom sighed and shook her head. "Right. That's it. When I've hung up these clothes, I'm taking you out."

"Out? Where?"

"A garden center."

What? Weren't garden centers places where *old* people went?

She saw my look of horror and met it with one of those smug parental grins. "It's either that or I confiscate your keys, strap you to your bike, and lock you out of the house for an hour. Either way, you're getting some sun on your skin. You're starting to look like milk gone sour."

She opened the kitchen door.

“Mom?”

“What?”

“Be careful.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” She was angry now. “Will you stop this nonsense? It’s a crow, Michael, not a . . . blood-sucking vampire!”

“It’s not — and . . . it could be,” I whispered. But by then she was halfway up the lawn, hanging socks on the clothesline.

I opted for the trip to the garden center. I wore a dark hoodie, which made Mom fuss and grumble even more. But I wasn’t going to run the risk of being recognized; some of my school friends’ parents shopped there.

While Mom and Josie toured the plant displays outside, I hovered in the doorway of the main building, pretending to be interested in a row of shovels. Twice, I was frowned at by a security guard for setting off the automatic sliding doors. When I moved deeper inside and stood by a rack of pruning saws, he followed me and pointed to a sign saying NOT FOR SALE TO MINORS. I pointed to Mom, who had just come in with a shopping cart laden with plants. The guard bounced on his toes and silently moved on.

“Having fun?” Mom quipped. She put a box of slug pellets into her cart.

Slug pellets. Gross. “This place sucks,” I said. “It’s so boring.”

“You won’t think that when you’re forty and your bedding plants are being eaten away by slimy beasts the size of your thumb. You’ll be glad you’ve got crows in your garden then. They gobble up the little monsters. *Schlup.*”

That was it. I couldn’t take this anymore. My mind was so full of fears and secrets. I had to unload them, no matter the cost. “Mom,” I said, trying to get her attention.

She had pushed the cart forward, into an area laid out with the sort of gifts you bought your auntie for Christmas: candles, silly socks, books of lists. “Mom,” I said again, “I want to tell you something.”

She looked back briefly. “Tell me in the café. It’s right through here.”

Stuff the café. I was at my breaking point. “I’ve got this special power; I can alter my reality. And I’m working for a secret organization called UNI —”

“Hey, grumpy, look at these.”

As usual, Mom hadn’t heard a thing I’d said. And now Josie was in my face, holding up a small stuffed toy. A life-size bird with a gray-white body and decorative blue wings. “It’s a blue jay,” she said. “It talks. Listen.”

She squeezed the body, setting off a recording inside the bird’s breast. It made a series of repetitive squeaks, like air

being forced from a plastic cushion, followed by a row of throaty clicks.

“Yeah, great,” I said, trying to move her aside.

She stood her ground. “They’ve got loads more birds on a stand over there.” She tilted her head. “Including this one. Pity it doesn’t work.”

And she held up a “cuddly” crow, saying, in a silly robotic voice, “Hi, I’m Blackie, and I’ve come to eat your nose. *Caark!*”

“Give me that!” I said, snatching it off her as she used it to “peck” my chest.

She backed away, making a face. “Honestly, you’re such a pain these days. I used to actually *like* you once.” A small look of hurt touched the corners of her eyes. She turned and ran after Mom.

Leaving me with Blackie the crow.

I stared into its plastic eyes and just wanted to rip its stupid flappy wings off. But curiosity got the better of me and I did as any kid would and squeezed its belly, trying to make it talk.

As I did, a voice behind me said, “You’ve been avoiding me, Michael.”

I whipped around and there she was. Freya Zielinski. Just as alive as she’d been in the graveyard seven days ago, dressed in the same shawl-like wrap, her hair as wild as a nest of springs. Her dark eyes were strangely opaque, staring, as if

she'd left all threads of humanity in whatever place she'd chosen to perch.

"You can't be here," I said to her, backing away.

Farther down the building, I heard someone say, "Hey, look at that. A crow's got in." A flutter of wings made me look up briefly. Not one but two crows were perched on a horizontal metal strut that formed a part of the roof assembly.

"Don't mind them, they're just backup," rasped Freya. Her voice alone was enough to give me chills.

"Get away from me. You're dead." I took another pace back.

"You turned me into this," she said in anger. She raised her arms, and the shawl spread out like feathered wings. "I want my life back. Make me *real* again, Michael. I'm sick of feeding on slime." She made a caarking sound and opened her mouth. What remained of a brown slug was stuck to her tongue.

Retching heavily, I stumbled backward into a rotating rack of cards, knocking it against a display of cake pans. The clatter made a nearby woman yelp — and brought the security guard running.

"All right, you. Out." He grabbed the neck of my hoodie, intending to haul me up off the floor.

But over his shoulder I could see the crows descending. I

put an arm across my face as the first bird landed on his back and clamped its beak to the lobe of his ear. It was torn clean through before he knew what was happening. He screamed in agony and let me go, trying in vain to beat off the second bird coming for his face. He crashed sideways into a footwear rack, spilling hiking boots and shoes all over the floor, then fell against a table full of gardening books. Blood was running down his lime-green shirt. The place erupted with frightened voices. One old man grabbed a gardening fork and tried in vain to stab the crows away.

Through the scrimmage, I saw Freya staring at me as if to say *This is just the start*. Then her eyes flicked up and she caught sight of something over my shoulder. She turned into a crow so fast that anyone who'd seen the change would not have believed a girl had been standing there an instant before. She called to the birds and together they flew for an open skylight. All I could see of the security guard's face was a mess of blood, and skin torn back in shreds to the muscle.

“Michael?! Are you okay?”

Mom was right beside me, as shocked as anyone. I guessed Freya must have seen her (or Josie) and fled before one of them recognized her.

“What happened?” gasped Josie. She still had the blue jay in her hand.

“Crows, gone mad,” the man with the garden fork jabbered. His weathered hands were shaking, his eyes fixed hard on the skylights above.

“Crows? *Again?*” Mom said.

“It was Freya,” I panted, my head spinning with fear, confusion — and guilt.

“Sorry?” said Mom.

“I turned her into a bird,” I mumbled.

“What?” said Josie, clutching the blue jay close to her chest.

Mom took a deep breath. “Look at me,” she said, repeating it more firmly when I didn’t catch her gaze. “*Michael, look at me.*”

I did. I was almost crying.

“Freya is dead,” Mom said as if she’d dropped the hammer at an auction sale.

I glanced at Josie. She was chewing a fingernail, as confused by my gibbering as the folks were by the crows.

I looked at Mom again and gave a single nod. What was the point of telling her what I knew about Freya or the UNICORNE organization? How my father, her husband, missing-believed-dead these past three years, had secretly been working for UNICORNE. And how they had recently recruited me, too, allegedly to help them search for Dad. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, with a weight that seemed to anchor at the bottom of my soul.

“It’s all right,” she said, smoothing the hair from my eyes. “We’ll fix this. Don’t worry. I know what to do.”

“But . . . the crows?” said Josie. She picked up the toy one that didn’t talk. She was starting to believe me. And it scared her hollow. I could see a chink of fear in her clear blue eyes. Something unworldly had happened here. Something that had caused a bunch of wild birds to attack an innocent human being. Something that had screwed with her brother’s mind.

“Come on,” Mom said. She pulled me to my feet. Many garden center staff were on the scene now, rebuilding the displays and restoring order. The injured guard had been led to a restroom. As we headed for the checkout lines, I saw the skylights being shut.

At home, Mom made me a cup of tea, gave me a plate of cookies, and sat me on the sofa. I knew something big was going down because cookies, like chocolate, were rationed in our house. Josie had been silent on the journey home, but the moment we got in, she had run upstairs to report the drama to her gang of friends.

Unbeknownst to me, Mom had also made a call.

I was on my fourth cookie when the doorbell rang. Mom invited the caller in. “Thank you so much for coming at such short notice. He’s through there.”

The door slowly opened and a tall, suited man with perfect cheekbones and pale-gray hair stepped into the room.

“Hello, Michael,” he said in a soft voice spiced with a German accent. He stretched out a manicured hand.

I didn’t shake it.

Mom rested on the arm of a chair. She looked nervous, guilty for laying this on me. “Dr. K has kindly offered to speak to you,” she said. “I want you to tell him what’s worrying you — about the crows, and Freya.”

Dr. K tilted his head in acknowledgment.

“He’s not a doctor; he’s an android. Dad made him,” I said.

Mom steepled her hands around her nose. “See what I mean? He’s been saying things like this for the last few days. I’ll be in the room next door when you want me.” And she slipped out without another glance.

Leaving me alone with the “kindly” Dr. K, a machine I knew better as Amadeus Klimt, head of the UNICORNE organization.