

A Murder of Crows

The cell was out of juice, not even one bar, and the car battery was dead. It was still daytime, but the overcast sky made it impossible to tell what time it was or, more importantly, which direction to head. A two-lane blacktop road crept up into the distance and disappeared up into the woodsy forest. It also made its way down into some rolling hills and disappeared there as well. The sound of a chainsaw buzzed from a distance, but it was hard to tell from which direction, up in the woodsy forest or down in the rolling hills. So, once again, was a dilemma—two different ways to go with no cell and a useless dead battery.

"So, what do we do now?" Loretta asked. She was feeling sick again—a combination of anxieties, morning sickness, and her annoyance with Tommy for not getting the car checked before leaving Shiprock. At least they were halfway to their destination, Las Vegas—the Gambling Capital of the World. Loretta knew some referred to it as Sin City, but she wasn't about to go there. Not in her condition. The entire situation made her stomach sick when she wrapped her mind around it. This was not how she would have planned her life to go.

"You mad at me?" Tommy asked, reaching for something in the backseat.

Loretta was mad, who wouldn't be, but she couldn't pinpoint why exactly, and she wasn't about to admit it, as crazy as it sounded. Not now, anyway, with a deader than dead car battery, an even deader cell phone, and no telling when a motorist might come along. "No," she answered finally, trying to stay positive. "What are you looking for?"

"The roadmap. Where'd you put it?"

"I thought you had it."

"No, Loretta, I gave it to you when we got to the station, remember? After filling up. The clerk told us to take 98W to 89 in Page."

Loretta remembered now. She folded the map, slipped it into her purse, and then waited her turn for the restroom. Her overactive bladder was a problem these days, which may be how it was supposed to be. She couldn't possibly ask her mother, not when she hadn't gotten up the nerve to tell her the news. God, how she dreaded that moment. It wasn't exactly the kind of thing a parent wished to hear of their sixteen-year-old daughter, the one they bragged about to their friends, the one that would go places, be successful, who even had her five-year plan already mapped out. So much for that.

"Well . . . do you have it or not?"

Loretta opened her purse, knowing the map wouldn't be there. "Please don't kill me," she cried.

"Don't tell me you left it?"

"I had it with me in the restroom. You know how long it takes me sometimes when I'm not home, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I knew if someone knocked at the door, I wouldn't be able to go . . . so . . ."

"You read the roadmap?"

"It was all I had, and I wanted to see how far we were from Vegas. Afterward, I set it aside to wash my hands and meant to put the map back in my purse, but I must have left it on the tank lid."

"Guess we'll have to make do without it."

"Can't we wait for someone to come along, hitch a ride to the nearest city, buy us another one, and then call for a tow truck or something?"

"You won't find too many people willing to pick up hitch-hikers. Just a couple weeks ago, some girl left for school one morning and never made it. Later, after police got involved, her friends claimed she might have hitched a ride to Colorado to see her boyfriend, but that turned out not to be the case. Heidi, something was her name."

"Yeah, I remember that story. She was about our age, sixteen or seventeen. Do you think she ran off to be with her boyfriend?"

"Maybe, but her parents didn't think so, even offered a reward for her safe return. What little I saw on the news, they checked out the boyfriend, nineteen years old, who said he hadn't heard from her since her last letter the prior week. He looked pretty shaken up about it."

"Could have been an act," Loretta said. "We're always hearing about missing children. Volunteers search for the child; next thing you know, it's the parents who did it. What kind of monster kills their own child, anyway?"

"Some sick, deranged one, you ask me. Come on, let's get out and stretch our legs. Maybe someone will come along and jump-start us."

They were stranded for fifteen minutes when the first vehicle came barreling down the two-lane road. Loretta held up both arms, waved frantically, and then turned on her heel to watch the car disappear into the hills. "Damn! Why didn't she stop?"

"Loretta, a woman with any sense about her is not about to pull over for a couple of strangers. We may look harmless, but people can't be too careful nowadays."

It was ten minutes later when a second motorist came along. This time two or more passengers accompanied the driver. Tommy and Loretta attempted to flag them

down, only to be swooshed with a gust of dusty wind.

Loretta brushed the dirt from her sundress, then suddenly felt funny. Not the laughing kind, the other kind. She leaned one hand against the frame of the Pontiac GTO and then chucked up her Big Mac and fries and the one-half cherry pie she split with Tommy.

"You okay?" Tommy asked and then handed her a napkin to dry the corners of her mouth.

"Do I look okay?" Loretta snapped harsher than she intended. She hadn't meant for it to come out that way, spiteful.

"Hey. . . I'm just trying to help."

"Yeah. Mr. Helpful! Let me count the ways." She knew this wasn't the time, but couldn't help herself.

"Are you seriously going to go there again?"

"Well . . . I did tell you, didn't I? It was the wrong time of the month."

"Look, we've been down that road already. I used a condom, didn't I? It's not like I knew the stupid thing would break. And I don't remember you protesting either. '*Oh, Tommy . . . Tommy . . . don't stop . . .*' The important thing is that I'm trying to do right by you, the reason we took this trip in the first place, to go on and get married."

Loretta snorted and turned to look away, arms crossed tight in front of her nearly flat chest and an even flatter belly. There was no telling what she was thinking driving out all this way as if getting hitched would solve their problems. Maybe her sister was right. Renee always said how men were all the same, with only one thing in mind. But Loretta hadn't believed a word of it. All men were not the same, and even if some of them were, Tommy was different. He didn't have to marry her; he wanted to.

And it was his idea to keep the baby. Loretta had contemplated aborting, keeping the child, or giving it up for adoption. But once she'd told Tommy, there was no debating. *"Loretta . . . I know this might not be the perfect time, far from it, but this is our child growing inside of you. And we'd eventually get married anyway, right?"* Loretta had nodded. *"I'll be graduating in eight months and can work full-time."*

"What about college?" she had asked. *"You always talked about being the first in your family to get a college degree."*

"Yeah, maybe that's just some pipedream. There's no scholarship money, and my family won't be able to help. I can't see paying thousands of dollars per semester, especially now, with a baby on the way. And I happen to believe that some things happen for a reason."

Loretta rehashed it all in her mind when she noticed a flock of crows overhead, hovering conspicuously, with two landing on the hood of the Pontiac GTO.

"You see that?" Loretta pointed to the crows and the splatter of dung dripping on the windshield.

Tommy stared and watched, thinking about who knew what? It always freaked Loretta out, as if he were in some hypnotic trance with that faraway gaze. And then, just like that, he snapped out of it. "Did you know that crows are the smartest birds on the planet and among the smartest animals? They can effectively reason cause and effect."

"So . . . what are you saying—they know what our problem is and can help?"

"Not saying anything. I just remember reading that. But, look at them." Tommy pointed to the ones hovering on a draped power line, the crows' heads cocked as if contemplating the situation. "Don't you get the feeling they know something is wrong?"

Loretta shook her head. She needed something cool to drink. Fortunately, there were still a couple water bottles left in the cooler. She took a swallow. No other vehicles had come by, and they were wasting time. Their choice of a less traveled road for the scenic view had turned against them. A chainsaw buzzed again. This time, it seemed to come from up in the forest.

Tommy turned from the crows, reached into the cooler for a water bottle, locked the doors, and shoved the keys in his pocket. "I think we should follow the sound of the chainsaw. There's someone up there; maybe he can help. It beats swatting flies around here, waiting for nobody to come along." Tommy reached for Loretta's hand and steered her towards the forest.

Loretta imagined someone cutting down a tree or sawing up logs for firewood. Maybe there were homes up there in the hills, a small village for all she knew. There was no path to follow, just a gradual upward slope. The ground was hard, covered with Ponderosa pine needles and fir and spruce trees everywhere. After climbing a good stretch, Loretta stopped, her breaths rapid; she gulped down some water from her bottle.

"Pace yourself, Loretta. You don't want to run out before we get there." Solitude filled the air when the sound of the chainsaw ceased.

"How much further, you think?"

"Up there," Tommy pointed just as the buzzing sound resumed. They picked up their pace, hand-in-hand, Tommy leading the way until Loretta screamed. Tommy halted, turned quickly, and saw the snake curled up in a patch of weeds, its head slightly elevated, its forked tongue protruding. "Don't move!" he told her. The heavy-bodied snake had a triangular-shaped head. Two dark diagonal lines ran on each side

of its face, from the eyes to its jaws. "I'm not positive, but that looks like a diamondback rattlesnake."

"Is it poisonous?" Either way, Loretta wanted to run, to get as far away from the thing as possible, but Tommy's hold on her kept her from moving.

"Yes, but he won't hurt you if you leave him be. He wants nothing to do with us. Trust me."

"Yeah, sure. Okay, can we go now?"

"I've never seen one before," Tommy told her, "just caught an episode on *Wildlife* once." Then, at the sound of their voices, maybe, the snake slithered away, all five or six feet of him. "Come on," he urged her. "He's gone now."

"Are there lots of snakes out here? Maybe we should head back to the car. What if we get lost, Tommy? We don't even have a flashlight."

"It's still light out, Loretta. Don't be scared. Nothing bad will happen, not if I can help it."

"Well, what if you can't help it?"

Tommy slowed his movements, strained to hear. "Hey, did you hear that?"

Loretta halted and listened. "You mean the chainsaw that stopped?"

"No. I could have sworn I heard a man laugh. Whoever it was must be close by."

Loretta looked over her shoulder to ensure the snake hadn't turned around to follow them. Then, encouraged at the prospect of finding help, she picked up her pace and hung on to Tommy. Together they managed another fifty to one hundred paces when the ground flattened to a small clearing. The area to their left was wide open, empty land. Directly in front, a short distance away, began a rocky incline. To their

right was a forest, similar to what they trekked through. Tommy steered her in that direction. Loretta felt a sharp pain in her calf and released hold of his hand to massage the area.

"Charlie Horse?"

"Yeah." She rubbed it with one hand and swatted a fly with the other. Her stomach knotted up then. Probably just nerves, she thought.

"You okay? Can't be much further."

Loretta sipped her water, her bottle now half empty. The area grew quiet again until she nearly jumped out of her skin from the sound of a gunshot.

"It came from over there," Tommy pointed in the general direction. The two of them walked in steady sync until they came upon a wooded area with a narrow path. It was completely quiet again. Loretta looked around, having a weird feeling she was being watched. And then she saw it. A single black crow on a low-hanging branch, curiously watching them.

"Do you think he's following us?" Loretta asked.

"If he is, maybe he'll steer us in the right direction."

Loretta wondered how Tommy always remained calm, even when she would have expected him to react differently. It was just one more thing she loved about him. She then had a sudden urge to relieve herself.

"Tommy, I've gotta pee, like right now."

"Okay, well . . . take your pick of trees. Just look down before you squat. Can't be too careful out here."

"Oh great! Just what I need, to have a snake bite me on the ass."

Tommy handed her a handkerchief from his back pocket. Loretta chose a tree away from the gaping crowd, still intent on hanging out with them. The ground was clear, so she lifted her sundress, slid her panties down, and squatted low enough to allow the flow to keep from splashing against her legs. After drying herself off, Loretta folded the handkerchief to maybe use again later when she noticed the faintest sign of blood. Quickly, she lifted her skirt again; saw a single spot on her panties, no bigger than a peanut. She wasn't sure what to make of it. Wouldn't there be more blood if she were miscarrying?

"Hey, you okay back there; need any help?" Tommy knew something was wrong the moment he saw her coming toward him. "What is it? You look like you saw a ghost!" She hesitated before handing over the evidence, her eyes never leaving his. "What, you're bleeding?"

Loretta nodded. "Just a little."

Tommy thought a moment, then pulled her close and held her. "It could be nothing. Let's not jump to conclusions. Are you feeling okay?"

Loretta nodded, feeling numb, and not sure what she should be feeling. She wanted Tommy's baby and had already dreamt about it, but she also wanted to finish school first, pursue a job as a nurse's aide, and not be the cause of Tommy ruling out college.

"Don't take this wrong, Loretta," he began softly, smoothing down her hair, her face buried against his chest, "whatever this means, I want to believe it's God's plan. Sometimes it's His way of saying it's not the right time. So let's wait and see."

Loretta said nothing, though she weighed his words and knew what he said was true. Whatever it meant, it was beyond their control, and nothing they did could have caused it.

A muffled cry shattered their silence. The two of them eyed each other to affirm what they had just heard. In waiting, a gruff-sounding laugh followed. Tommy placed a finger to his lips, took hold of Loretta's hand, and followed the sporadic sounds. The muffled cry. The muted words. Gruff laughter. They reached an open area at the backside of an old wooden shack. The smell of smoke and food cooking over a campfire filled the air. The sounds, no doubt, had come from the front of the shack. Tommy eyed Loretta and whispered. "I have a bad feeling about this. Why don't you stay here? Let me look closer, see who's there, and ensure it's safe."

No way would Loretta be left behind. "I'm coming with you!" Tommy did not attempt to sway her. He just urged her to be quiet. Together, they crept along, step by step, their hands clutched tight, their shallow breaths, right up to a brush patch a short distance away. When the crusty voice came again, they waited and listened.

"Just a few more minutes, darlin', we'll have us a candlelight dinner. You can thank me later," the male said, then let out a curdling chuckle.

Loretta longed to hear a woman's voice, but none came. Instead, she glared at Tommy, who was considerably taller than she was, compared to her average height and smaller frame. Her eyes pleaded with his for what to do. Tommy itched to get a closer look, then saw the woodsman reach for a log from the woodpile beside the shack—his long, greasy hair and even longer, straggly beard, a heavier, shorter man than himself. The man moved away, out of his vision, and spoke again. "You ever

eaten rabbit before?" When no one answered, he went on. "You'll like it. The meat is white. Soft. Real tasty."

Tommy motioned to Loretta he would get closer and see who the other person was—or if there was another person. Maybe the fool was crazy, just talking to himself. "Wait here," he merely mouthed the words. "I'll be right back." Loretta didn't want him to leave her. *What if something happened? What if the guy was some lunatic axe murderer? Calm down, Loretta. Just calm down.* It was what Tommy would say. He was the rational one. It was one thing to be cautious and another to jump to conclusions. Before she could tell Tommy to wait, he slipped away, crept around the brush patch, and made his way to the stacked firewood.

The muffled sound came again. *What was that?* Loretta wanted to know. Like Tommy, she too had a bad feeling, so she inched her way over to join him. She saw then; the deep-seated fear registered in his eyes.

"What?" Loretta asked without uttering a sound. Tommy gave a slow, awkward nod, his face now drained of all color. Still, he held a finger to his lips. Loretta attempted a peek, but Tommy reacted fast, grabbed her wrist, and shook his head. Loretta was beginning to freak out now. *What could be so bad?* She gave him that look. She needed to know, just try and stop her. Knowing better, Tommy released his hold. The woodsman spoke then.

"We're just about ready. Don't it smell good?"

Loretta peered around the wood pile; saw the rifle leaned up against the woodsman's chair, his hairy arm stirring the pot as he mumbled something incoherent. And then, Loretta saw her. The girl. She was seated across from him, buck-naked, legs apart, with ankles shackled to each corner of the Adirondack chair

and her wrists tied to the arms of the chair. A bandanna was shoved between her teeth and secured behind her head. Her thick, curly hair, tangled and messy, rested against her bare shoulders, just above her full breasts that were dirty and bruised. She appeared to be much younger than the woodsman, of high school age. As the shock of what she saw sunk in, the weary girl's eyes locked in with Loretta's.

Oh my God! Loretta looked away and whispered. "She saw me!"

Tommy motioned for them to move further away and led her to the far end of the shack, putting distance between them and the woodpile.

"He has a gun!" Loretta mimicked the words. "He could kill us."

"Do you know who that girl is?" Tommy asked, barely a murmur. Loretta shook her head. "It's her. The missing girl on the news. Heidi. The tattoo near her shoulder is the same."

"What do we do? I'm scared."

"We can't leave her."

The muffled moaning started up again harder than before. Loretta froze. *What if she tells him she saw someone?*

"You hungry?" the woodsman asked. "It's coming. We need to get some meat on those bones. Don't want you going skinny on me. Always did like my women with a muffin around the middle, something to grab onto." He let out a howl of laughter that sickened Loretta. The moaning got louder, more insistent. Tommy and then Loretta snuck a peek long enough to see the woodsman set down the spoon he was stirring the pot with to remove the gag from Heidi's mouth.

"I have to go to the bathroom, real bad," she said.

"You can go right here. I don't mind."

"No, I have to go number two. Please. I haven't gone in days. I just need a few minutes."

The woodsman undid her ties, leaving the long rope knotted around her right ankle and secured to a chain bolted to a concrete slab on the ground. Heidi rubbed the soreness from her wrists, slightly staggered as she rose, then made her way behind the woodpile, the distance she was allowed.

"Don't try anything funny back there, little missy, not if you know what's good for ya." He laughed at the sound of his voice.

A mere thirty feet away, Tommy motioned for Heidi to keep quiet. He turned his head briefly when she squatted, watching the fire pit. Loretta watched the girl, their eyes meeting again, detecting a desperate hopefulness, a plea not to leave without her. Tommy surveyed the scene: the large stones stacked around the fire pit, the burning wood under a cast iron pot, the poker beside it, the chainsaw, and a bolt action rifle propped up beside the woodsman. It was the same kind his dad owned. Only this one had a scope attached. Tommy whispered in Loretta's ear before turning back to Heidi. She had just pulled something out from between the log stack and eyed it a moment in the palm of her hand. Whatever it was, Tommy watched her slip it behind her ear, beneath the matted hair and glanced around her before making her way back to her chair.

"Everything come out alright?" the woodsman garbled, having already started to eat without her. He chewed with an open mouth. Juice soaked his lips and dripped to his chin; he mocked her with a wink. Heidi reluctantly took her seat, the rope dragging behind her. The woodsman leaned over to secure her ankles to each leg of the chair, an act she'd become accustomed to. Casually, Heidi raised her right hand as if to push

back a lock of her hair from her eye or perhaps scratch the side of her neck. The slight movement seemed natural; the woodsman paid her no mind. With his head lowered, in a kneeling position, he focused on the task. Heidi removed the three-inch rusty nail she'd found and clutched it tight in the palm of her hand. Then, in one swift movement, she raised her fist. The woodsman took notice just in time to be stabbed straight in the eye. The contact was spot on, and the nail surprisingly stayed stuck where it landed.

"Goddamn bitch!" He cursed. The eye began to bleed and tear. He swung for Heidi's head, halfway missing her when she ducked. Tommy made his move when the woodsman focused on the rusty nail. In a few long strides, he snatched the firearm. Loretta leaped out from the other end of the shack and got hold of the poker stick. The stunned woodsman spun around, doing a double-take. "Hold on there, boy, you got this all wrong." He glanced at Loretta, then back again he began to approach Tommy.

"Don't move!" Tommy said, the rifle aimed at the woodman's chest. "Or I swear to God I'll pull the trigger." He manipulated the bolt by rotating, pulling, and pushing the bolt handle, ready to fire.

The woodsman slowly raised his hands in surrender but then lunged for Loretta. Before Tommy could react, Loretta was already in a choke-hold, her backside held against the woodsman, the poker nearly cutting off her windpipe. "Your choice," he said. "Hand over the rifle, or I snap this sweet thing's neck."

For the first time ever, Loretta feared for her life. Their day had started on a positive note, but now all that mattered was for them to make it out alive. She knew that Tommy would never forgive himself if anything happened to her. The woodsman held the metal rod roughly against her throat, his body pressed against hers. She felt

his heavy breathing in her ear, smelled his musty breath, his sweaty cheek touching hers. The stench of his odor reminded her of raw hamburger left out in the sun for too long. She thought she might pass out from the sheer smell if he didn't kill her first. If he snapped her neck, she wondered if it would be quick and painless or if he was the kind of monster that would enjoy watching her suffer. But Loretta wasn't ready to die. So she forced herself to breathe and kept her eyes on Tommy.

"Come on now," the woodsman said, "smart boy like you. Put the gun down nice and easy, and nobody gets hurt." Blood dripped from his glassy, clouded eye, now bulging in its socket, and the surrounding area bruised and swelled. His wild bushy hair, yellowed teeth, and sweat-stained, filthy clothes gave him a crazed caveman look. Tommy held the rifle, his finger on the trigger, aimed for the man's head, and then paused. The move was too risky. Loretta pleaded with her eyes, too afraid to even cry. And just then, Heidi freed her legs, grabbed a jagged stone, and rammed it against the woodsman's head. The act was swift, and though she wasn't strong enough to do much damage, it was enough to throw him off guard and relax his hold on Loretta to where she kicked and clawed out of his clutches. The woodsman swung the poker at Heidi, grazing her shoulder. With the longer rope still tied to her ankle, she began to retreat, but the woodsman pulled hard on the rope, causing her to fall forward, landing on all fours. Heidi cried, begged, and pleaded, and covered her head with her arms in a curled-up fetal position when the woodsman hovered above her with the raised poker, his arm in the air when Tommy pulled the trigger.

He had aimed for the woodsman's right shoulder, but the kick from the shot caught the woodsman in the neck. Blood spurted in pulse-like squirts. The poker fell to the ground. The woodsman clutched his neck, tried to speak, breathe, get his

bearings, and finally collapsed to his knees before falling over to his side, his head at an awkward angle. His eye bulged, glazed over like a bigmouth bass caught on a hook. Heidi was up in a flash and backed away. Then, with a rock, she stabbed at the rope repeatedly to free herself.

* * *

The following day, after trekking down the mountain the evening before, just before dark, they managed to lure a trucker to take them to the police station. Once Tommy told them the story, the sheriff's department made a few calls, and Heidi Lancaster reunited with her family. A crew was dispatched to pick up the woodsman's body. After contacting their parents, Tommy and Loretta stayed in a hotel for the night. A local garage owner agreed to send someone to replace the dead battery in the morning.

When they were ready to head home, police officers, reporters, and cameramen surrounded Tommy and Loretta, along with a dozen or more bystanders.

"How does it feel to be a hero?" the reporter asked.

"It feels good to be alive," Tommy said, "to have found the missing girl, Heidi. I wouldn't call myself a hero, though, more of a survivor."

Loretta spoke next. "I was never so terrified, so scared for our lives. Tommy was the brave one. He reacted with a clear head. In my mind, he *was* our hero."

"You'll be receiving a handsome reward for this, you know. Any idea what you'll do with the money?"

Loretta had forgotten the reward promised for any information leading up to the arrest or capture of the person or persons responsible for Heidi's abduction and safe return. It wasn't like they set out in hopes of finding Heidi. They merely stumbled

upon her. Of everything that had gone wrong, this was something that had gone right.

"We didn't do this for the money," Loretta said.

"We're just grateful to be alive," Tommy added, "to witness the sunrise this morning and return home to our families."

They made their way through the crowd over to the Pontiac GTO. And as they approached it, a murder of crows hovered from above. There were hundreds of them, just watching until one landed on the hood of the car and a second one flew down beside it. Tommy and Loretta stood some distance away and watched the crows curiously watching them. Finally, the first crow squawked and then the other before the two flew away.

There was only one way to go this time—with a recharged cell and a new battery. So they hopped in the GTO and headed home.