



WILDWOOD

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WILDWOOD

THE WILDWOOD CHRONICLES, BOOK 1

COLIN MELOY

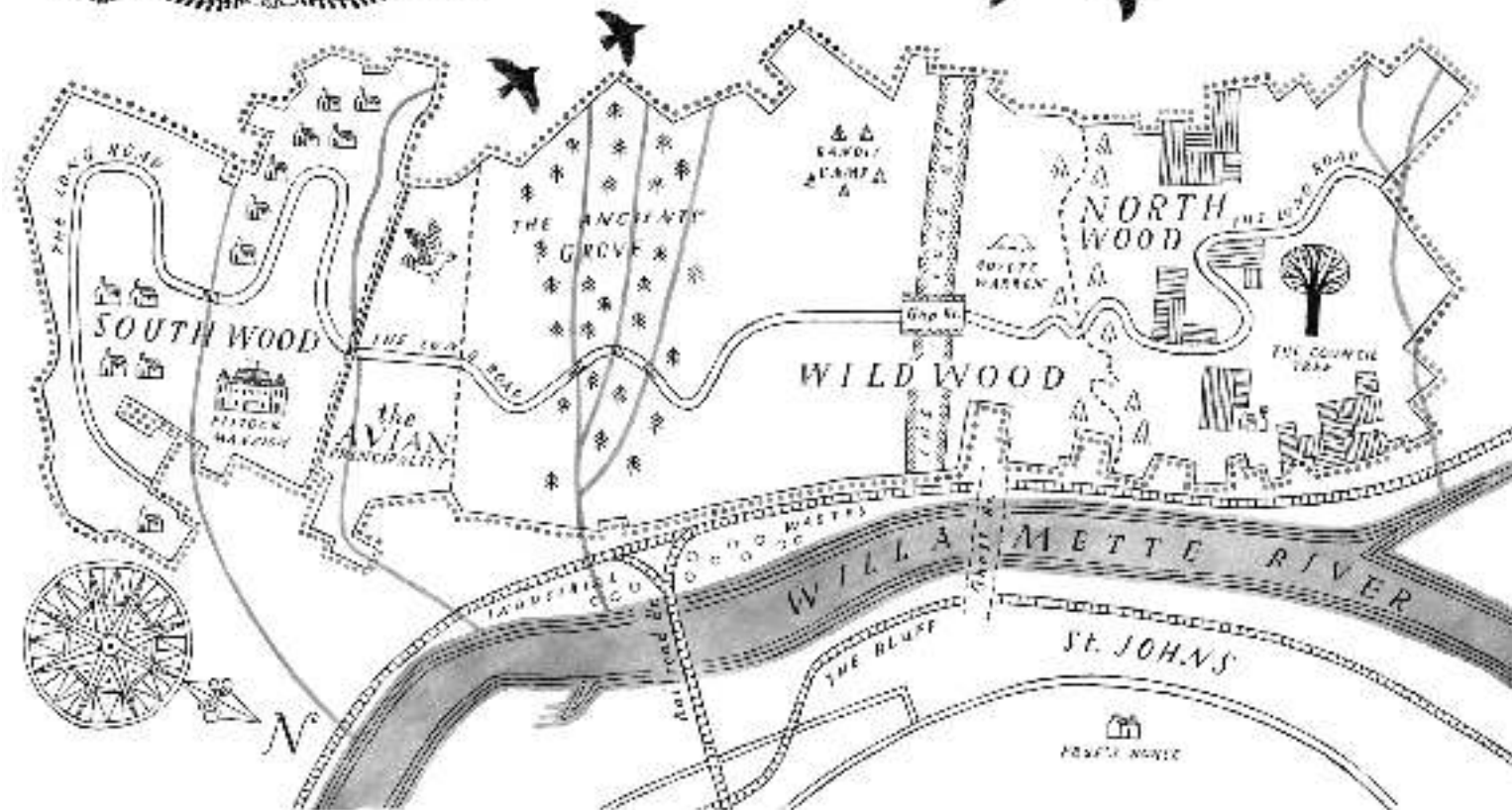
Illustrations by

CARSON ELLIS

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THE WOOD



Dedication

For Hank, of course

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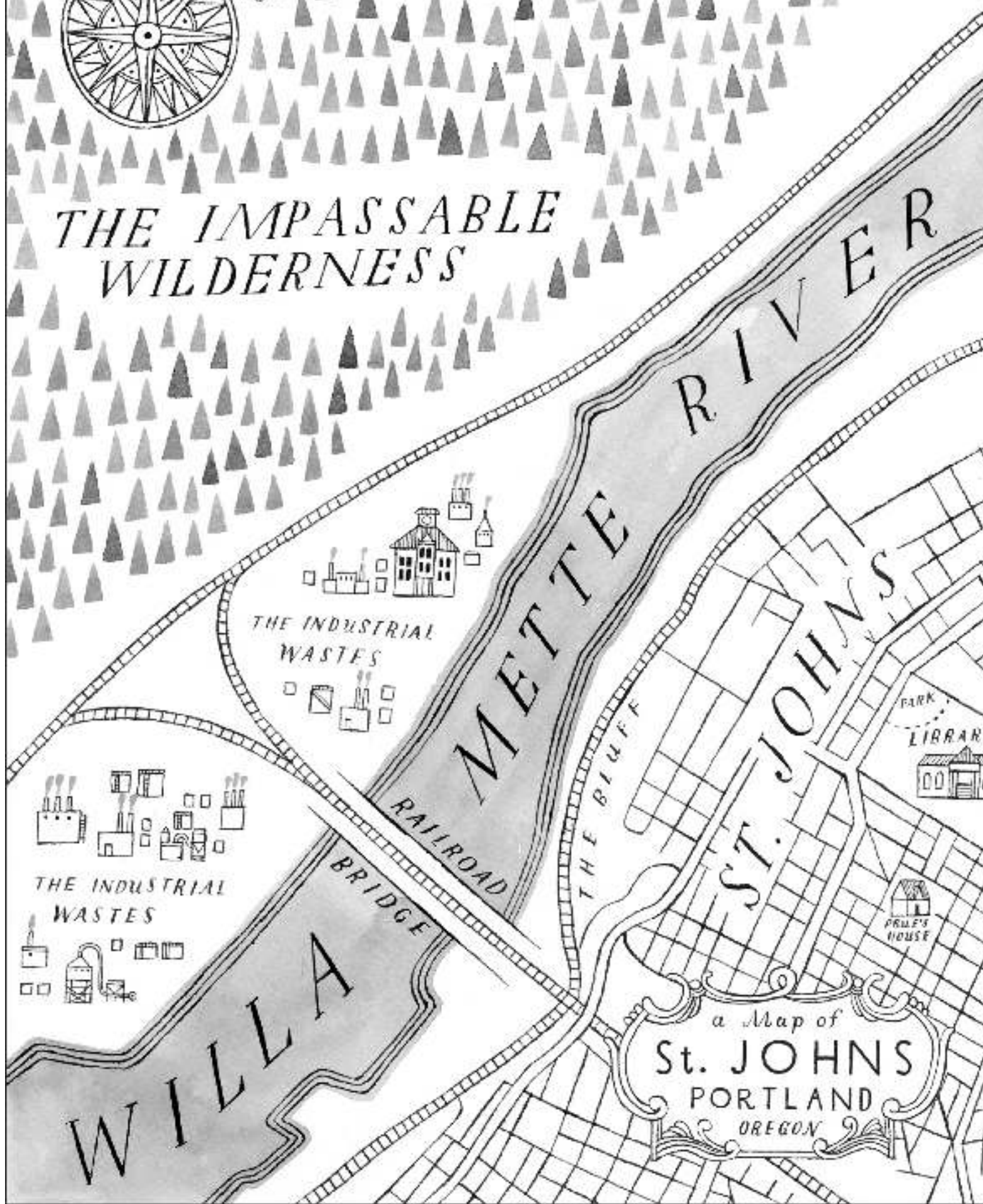
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About the Publisher



THE IMPASSABLE WILDERNESS



a Map of
St. JOHNS
PORTLAND
OREGON

Part One



CHAPTER 1

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, "Poo!" Prue made herself a bowl of granola. "I've got bacon on, darling," said her mother, returning her attention to the amoebic mass 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 stratum of quilted chintz, and placed him, still babbling, into the wagon. She loosed one arm from the 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 *shhhhhh* 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 on 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 fainted 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 a 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 river-bank, 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.



CHAPTER 2

One City's Impassable Wilderness

As long as Prue could remember, every map she had ever seen of Portland and the surrounding countryside had been blotted with a large, dark green patch in the center, stretching like a growth of moss from the northwest corner to the southwest, and labeled with the mysterious initials "I.W." She hadn't thought to ask about it until one night, before Mac was born, when she was sitting with her parents in the living room. Her dad had brought home a new atlas and they were lying in the recliner together, leafing through the pages and tracing their fingers over boundary lines and sounding out the exotic place names of far-flung countries. When they arrived at a map of Oregon, Prue pointed to the small, inset map of Portland on the page and asked the question that had always confounded her: "What's the I.W.?"

"Nothing, honey," had been her father's reply. He flipped back to the map of Russia they had been looking at moments before. With his finger, he traced a circle over the wide northeastern part of the country where the letters of the word *Siberia* obscured the map. There were no city names here; no network of wandering yellow lines demarking highways and roads. Only vast puddles all shades of green and white and the occasional squiggly blue line linking the myriad remote lakes that peppered the landscape. "There are places in the world where people just don't end up living. Maybe it's too cold or there are too many trees or the mountains are too steep to climb. But whatever the reason, no one has thought to build a road there and without roads, there are no houses and without houses, no cities." He flipped back to the map of Portland and tapped his finger against the spot where "I.W." was written. "It stands for 'Impassable Wilderness.' And that's just what it is."

"Why doesn't anyone live there?" asked Prue.

"All the reasons why no one lives up in those parts of Russia. When the settlers first came to the area and started to build Portland, no one wanted to build their houses there: The forest was too deep and the hills were too steep. And since there were no houses there, no one thought to build a road. And without roads and houses, the place just sort of stayed that way: empty of people. The place, over time, just became more overgrown and more inhospitable. And so," he said, "it was named the Impassable Wilderness and everybody knew to steer clear." Her father dismissively wiped his hand across the map and brought it up to gently pinch Prue's chin between his thumb and finger. Bringing her face close to his, he said, "And I don't ever, ever want you to go in there." He playfully moved her head back and forth and smiled. "You hear me, kid?"

Prue made a face and yanked her chin free. "Yeah, I hear you." They both looked back at the atlas,

and Prue laid her head against her father's chest.

"I'm serious," said her father. She could feel his chest tighten under her cheek.

So Prue knew not to go near this "Impassable Wilderness," and she only once bothered her parents with questions about it again. But she couldn't ignore it. While the downtown continued to sprout towering condominium buildings, and newly minted terra-cotta outlet malls bloomed beside the highway in the suburbs, it baffled Prue that such an impressive swath of land should go unclaimed, untouched, undeveloped, right on the edge of the city. And yet, no adult ever seemed to comment on or mention it in conversation. It seemed to not even exist in most people's minds.

The only place that the Impassable Wilderness would crop up was among the kids at Prue's school where she was a seventh grader. There was an apocryphal tale told by the older students about a man—so-and-so's uncle, maybe—who had wandered into the I.W. by mistake and had disappeared for years and years. His family, over time, forgot about him and continued on with their lives until one day, out of the blue, he reappeared on their doorstep. He didn't seem to have any memory of the intervening years, saying only that he'd been lost in the woods for a time and that he was terribly hungry. Prue had been suspicious of the story from her first hearing; the identity of this "man" seemed to change from telling to telling. It was someone's father in one version, a wayward cousin in another. Also, the details shifted in each telling. A visiting high school kid told a group of Prue's rapt classmates that the individual (in this version, the kid's older brother) had returned from his weird sojourn in the Impassable Wilderness aged beyond belief, with a great white beard that stretched down to his tattered shoes.

Regardless of the questionable truth of these stories, it became clear to Prue that most of her classmates had had similar conversations with their parents as she had had with her father. The subject of the Wilderness filtered into their play surreptitiously: What once was a lake of poisonous lava around the four-square court was now the Impassable Wilderness, and woe betide anyone who missed a bounce and was forced to scurry after the red rubber ball into those wilds. In games of tag, you were no longer tagged *It*, but rather designated the Wild Coyote of the I.W., and it was your job to scamper around after your fleeing classmates, barking and growling.

It was the specter of these coyotes that made Prue ask her parents a second time about the Impassable Wilderness. She had been awakened one night in a fright by the unmistakable sound of baying dogs. Sitting up in bed, she could hear that Mac, then four months old, had awoken as well and was being quietly shushed by their parents as he wailed and whimpered in the next room. The dogs' baying was a distant echo, but it was bone-shivering nonetheless. It was a tuneless melody of violence and chaos and as it grew, more dogs in the neighborhood took up the cry. Prue noticed then that the distant barking was different from the barking of the neighborhood dogs; it was more shrill, more disordered and angry. She threw her blanket aside and walked into her parents' room. The scene was eerie: Mac had quieted a little at this point, and he was being rocked in his mother's arms while their parents stood at the window, staring unblinking out over the town at the distant western horizon, their faces pale and frightened.

"What's that sound?" asked Prue, walking to the side of her parents. The lights of St. Johns spread out before them, an array of flickering stars that stopped at the river and dissolved into blackness.

Her parents started when she spoke, and her father said, "Just some old dogs howling."

"But farther away?" asked Prue. "That doesn't sound like dogs."

Prue saw her parents share a glance, and her mother said, "In the woods, darling, there are some pretty wild animals. That's probably a pack of coyotes, wishing they could tear into someone's garbage somewhere. Best not to worry about it." She smiled.

The baying eventually stopped and the neighborhood dogs calmed, and Prue's parents walked her back into her room and tucked her into bed. That had been the last time the Impassable Wilderness had come up, but it hadn't put Prue's curiosity to rest. She couldn't help feeling a little troubled; her parents, normally two founts of strength and confidence, seemed strangely shaken by the noises. They seemed as leery of the place as Prue was.

And so one can imagine Prue's horror when she witnessed the black plume of crows disappear, her baby brother in tow, into the darkness of this Impassable Wilderness.



The afternoon had faded nearly completely, the sun dipping down low behind the hills of the Wilderness, and Prue stood transfixed, slack-jawed, on the edge of the bluff. A train engine trundled by below her and rolled across the Railroad Bridge, passing low over the brick and metal buildings of the Industrial Wastes. A breeze had picked up, and Prue shivered beneath her peacoat. She was staring at the little break in the tree line where the crows had disappeared.

It started to rain.

Prue felt like someone had bored a hole in her stomach the size of a basketball. Her brother was gone, *literally* captured by birds and carried to a remote, untouchable wilderness, and who knew what they would do to him there. And it was all her fault. The light changed from deep blue to dark gray, and the streetlights slowly, one by one, began to click on. Night had fallen. Prue knew her vigil was hopeless. Mac would not be returning. Prue slowly turned her bike around and began walking it back up the street. How would she tell her parents? They would be devastated beyond belief. Prue would be punished. She'd been grounded before for staying out late on school nights, riding her bike around the neighborhood, but this punishment was certain to be like nothing she'd ever experienced. She'd lost Mac, her parents' only son. Her brother. If a week of no television was the standard punishment for missing a couple curfews, she couldn't imagine what it was for losing baby brothers. She walked for several blocks, in a trance. She found that she was choking back tears as, in her mind's eye, she witnessed anew the crows' disappearance into the woods.

"Get a grip, Prue!" she said aloud, wiping tears from her cheeks. "Think this through!"

She took a deep breath and began assembling her options in her mind, weighing each one's pros and cons. Going to the police was out; they'd undoubtedly think she was crazy. She didn't know what police did with crazy people who came into the station ranting about murders of crows and abducted one-year-olds, but she had her suspicions: She'd be carried off in an armored van and thrown into some faraway asylum's subterranean cell, where she'd live out the rest of her days listening to the lamenting of her fellow inmates and trying hopelessly to convince the passing janitor that she was not crazy and that she was falsely imprisoned there. The thought of rushing home to tell her parents terrified her; their hearts would be irretrievably broken. They had waited so long for Mac to come along. She didn't know the whole story, but understood that they'd wanted to have a second child sooner, but it just hadn't come about. They had been so happy when they found out about Mac. They had positively beamed; the entire house had felt alive and light. No, she couldn't be the one to break this terrible news to them. She could run away—this was a legitimate option. She could jump on one of those trains going over the Railroad Bridge and split town and travel from city to city, doing odd jobs and telling fortunes for a living—maybe she'd even meet a little golden retriever on the road who'd become her closest companion, and they'd ramble the country together, a couple of gypsies on the run, and she'd never have to face her parents or think about her dear, departed brother again.

Prue stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and shook her head dolefully.

What are you thinking? She reprimanded herself. *You're out of your mind!* She took a deep breath and kept walking, pushing her bike along. A chill came over her as she realized her only option. She had to go after him.

She had to go into the Impassable Wilderness and find him. It seemed like an insurmountable task but she had no choice. The rain had grown heavy and was pelting down on the sidewalks and the streets, making huge puddles, and the puddles became choked with flotillas of dead leaves. Prue devised her plan, carefully gauging the dangers of such an adventure. The chill of evening was draped over the rain-swept neighborhood streets; it would be unsafe to attempt the trip in the dead of night. *I'll go tomorrow*, she thought, unaware that she was mumbling some of the words aloud. *Tomorrow morning, first thing. Mom and Dad won't even have to know.* But how to keep them from finding out? Her heart sank as she arrived at the scene of Mac's abduction: the playground. The play structure was abandoned in the sheeting rain, and Mac's little red wagon sat on the asphalt, a heap of soggy blanket sitting inside, collecting water. "That's it!" said Prue, and she ran over to the wagon. Kneeling down on the wet pavement, she started to mold the sopping blanket into the form of a swaddled baby. Standing back, she studied it. "Plausible," she said. She had started to attach the wagon to the back axle of her bike when she heard a voice call:

"Hey, Prue!"

Prue stiffened and looked over her shoulder. Standing on the sidewalk next to the playground was a boy, incognito in a matching rain slicker and pants. He pulled the hood back on his slicker and smiled. "It's me, Curtis!" he shouted, and waved.

Curtis was one of Prue's classmates. He lived with his parents and his two sisters just down the street from Prue. Their desks at school were two rows apart. Curtis was constantly getting in trouble with their teacher for spending school time drawing pictures of superheroes in various scrapes with their archenemies. His drawing obsession also tended to get him in trouble with his classmates, since most kids had abandoned superhero drawing years before, if they hadn't abandoned drawing altogether. Most kids devoted their drawing talent to sketching band logos on the paper-bag covering of their textbooks; Prue was one of the only kids who'd transitioned away from her superhero- and fairy-tale-inspired renderings to drawings of birds and plants. Her classmates looked askance at her, but at least they didn't bother her. Curtis, for clinging to his bygone art form, was shunned.

"Hey, Curtis," said Prue, as nonchalantly as possible. "What are you doing?"

He put his hood back on. "I was just out for a walk. I like walking in the rain. Less people around." He took his glasses off and pulled a corner of his shirt from beneath his slicker to clean them. Curtis' round face was topped by a mass of curly black hair that sprang from beneath his slicker hood like little coils of steel wool. "Why were you talking to yourself?"

Prue froze. "What?"

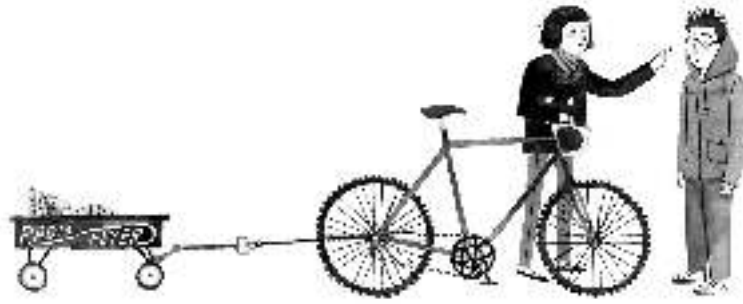
"You were talking to yourself. Just back there." He pointed in the direction of the bluff as he squinted and put his glasses back on. "I was sort of following you, I guess. I meant to get your attention earlier, but you looked so . . . distracted."

"I wasn't," was all Prue could think to say.

"You were talking to yourself and walking and then stopping and shaking your head and doing all sorts of weird things," he said. "And why were you standing on the bluff for so long? Just staring into space?"

Prue got serious. She walked her bike over to Curtis and pointed a finger in his face. "Listen to me, Curtis," she said, commanding her most intimidating tone. "I've got a lot on my mind. I don't need you bothering me right now, okay?"

To her relief, Curtis appeared to be easily intimidated. He threw up his hands and said, “Okay! Okay! I was just curious is all.”



“Well, don’t be,” she said. “Just forget everything you saw, all right?” She started to push her bike away toward home. As she straddled the bike seat and put her feet in the toe clips, she turned to Curtis and said, “I’m *not* crazy.” And she rode off.

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