

TOO MANY CROWS

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They said air was the element of freedom, the source of life, but as Daniel Cooper looked out across the lake he had never felt so trapped. The cool breeze that had so often cleared his head seemed to be drawing itself away from him, pulling him off balance. Or maybe that was his conscience, trying to pull him back, as if Daniel could undo everything. Oh how he wished time machines existed, they'd be far more useful than these new-fangled automobiles that were all the rage with the youngsters. What use was a car, when his life was crumbling to pieces? Could they take him back to that fateful day 10 years ago when he'd started down this path to destruction, dragging poor, hapless Marion Burns along with him?

Some days Daniel tried to tell himself this was her fault, that *she* was the one who'd ruined everything and his only fault was to have fallen to her beguiling charm. Other days he thought maybe this whole mess had been preordained; they'd been born with chaos in their veins and the two of them had been destined to tear each other apart. *First Marion, now your veins?* A mocking voice whispered. Daniel had always hated his pesky mind. If only he could run off whatever wiring made those automobiles come alive. He'd never have to deal with another treacherous emotion, another admonishment tinged with disappointment. Unfortunately, the voice was here to stay. *How long will it take you to stop running, to face the truth? How many more are you willing to sacrifice in order to keep lying to yourself? This is your fault.*

Daniel took a shaky step towards the cerulean lake, glittering with bright promises beneath the sunrise. *Just a little closer,* the silky waters whispered. *We can set your mind at ease.* In his

dazed state Daniel saw no reason to doubt it. How could the lake bring anything other than happiness, with its still surface, in painful contrast to his constant turmoil?

He hesitated before dipping his big toe into the shimmering water, dirt loosening and pulling away from the skin. It should've been impossible, he thought, that any part of him could be so clean when the dark stain on his heart seemed to be swallowing him whole. Even the tiny pebbles resting on the lake bed stared at him accusingly. *You have sinned*, they whispered. *If even the small and worthless feel the extent of your crimes, then what hope do you have of escaping them?*

"I have none," Daniel said softly. He fell to his knees, letting the icy water immerse him, wishing it would numb the ache of the internal war that was rending his heart in two.

Night was falling by the time Daniel, shivering uncontrollably, made his way home. He almost wanted to stay outside. Dread was coursing through him at the looming prospect of going back to the house that was so full of stupid, stupid, Marion. Of facing his daughters' dull eyes, of their hands clinging to him, demanding comfort. They'd always been full of their mother's insufferable weakness. Perhaps it would fade now she was gone.

"Daniel," the soft voice stopped him in his tracks. "What on earth have you been doing?" The mirth in Martha's voice was infectious. He grinned as he turned and strode into her outstretched arms. The moment he touched her, Daniel knew he'd done the right thing. Marion would've died eventually anyway, and she was hardly a great loss to the world. His life with Martha would be

infinitely better. She'd never cry at him to give up his business as an abortionist, she'd never persuade him to have more useless brats.

"I've been out fixing things," Daniel whispered. "Fixing things for us."