

CHAPTER 1

The Ravens of the Wood

*Love cannot enslave
the world Never*





Chapter 1. The Ravens of the Wood

Mole dreamed of a path in the woods. The path turned left at a blackened tree then cut through an open field, ending at a still green pond. He followed the same trail everyday. In his dream, the days sped up, the sun rolled over the sky, tree shadows spilled like water across the ground. Still he followed, day after day after day—until one afternoon, at the lightning-scorched tree, the path that always turned left now split into a fork. The sun stopped overhead. The day waited. The wind rose and swept past, turning him to the right. Mole watched branches and leaves part around the new trail. The wide, unknown world seemed to be opening her arms. The wind leaned on his shoulder, whispering, Come away...

Mole stepped forward—and bumped his head on the burrow wall. He woke underground in cool darkness. “So,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “Another walking dream. I used to dream of food. Blueberries and blackberries and nuts and water. I’d wake up so deliciously hungry that a seed was a feast. Now I wake up tired, as if I spent the night walking. Sometimes my feet even hurt!”

He smiled to himself as he crawled through the dark. Always find the humor, if you can. That was one of his new laws. But was “law” the right word? Could he just declare a new law? Could he make his own way through the world as easily as he dug through the earth? He smiled again. That was pretty good: comparing the instinctive world to the solid earth. She always said he was good with words, though he could scarcely remember using them at all before they met. “My mockingbird,” she called him.

The burrow was nothing more than a roughly dug tunnel, a place to safely spend the night. Squinting up at the opening, he saw a bright circle of sun-backed leaves. “Looks like a green sun. Are there other suns? Where does the sun go at night? Is it afraid of the moon, or chasing it? And why does it always come back?” He rubbed his head and smiled again, an expression more in his small eyes than his mouth. “Dreams and questions. I don’t know what makes my head hurt more, this bump, or these dreams and questions.”

He waited at the opening and sniffed the air.

Spring. Green. Safe. He peeked out at the forest. His eyes and ears confirmed it: spring and green and safe. How could such a beautiful world be dangerous? He sank back into the hole, startled by such a reckless thought. That's the kind of thinking that got pups killed! Making new laws for yourself did not overwrite the old laws, the oldest of which was this: he was a small animal in a world of teeth. And so he waited, breathing and watching and listening, until the forest was as safe as he could make it.

Mole pulled himself out of the burrow, sat down, and dangled his legs into the hole. With stubby paws, he pushed the dark gray fur out of his eyes, as he did every morning. A mole's eyes were so hidden behind smooth fur that many animals assumed moles were blind. Now the fur, flattened backwards and sideways, made him look like wide-eyed, as if he was startled by everything he saw. He knew he looked a little foolish, but the light was brighter, the colors deeper. How did other moles live in the shade all the time?

Through the breeze and leaves, beyond the early birdsong, he heard the faraway rush of water. He stood, dusted off—another new habit his fellow moles didn't understand—and continued on his way.

The Elder Tree stood in a clearing by the river. The maples and dogwoods grown in a half circle on the clearing's edge, and the taller, wilder oaks and elms across the water, all seemed to lean toward the Elder,

holding out their green leaves like an offering. The Elder's silver branches, bare even in spring, did not reach back, but spun upward as if to catch the sky in a net. Five huge ravens perched in the branches, so still and black they looked like holes torn out of the world. But as Mole crept closer, he saw the indigo of their eyes and the dark crescent moon of their beaks. They were the oldest animals in the forest; the tips of their feathers were singed white by time.

He knew the Four Winds met here, whispering news of the world in a language only the ravens understood. At one time or another, every animal needed to know something they couldn't know, something more than the law. And so they all came, from the hesitant sparrow to the proud wolf, to bow before the dark birds.

The fox: "Are my grown cubs surviving on the far side of the hills?"

The swallow: "Is the barn across the vale a safe place to build a nest?"

The hare: "Will winter be so harsh we starve again this year?"

The mouse: "Can you teach me to hear the hawk in flight?"

The deer: "Is there a forest where men do not go?"

The mockingbird: "When will my love songs be answered?"

Last fall, on his first visit, Mole had watched a raccoon and her two cubs bow before the ravens. The mother asked, "How can I protect my children from

the predators who cut our lives so short?" She explained that raccoons could live ten years or more, maturing into wise old age. But most were taken in their second or third year. The ravens said her question was one of the oldest, and so far the winds had found no answer. That winter, when Mole made his weekly trip to the ravens, the raccoon cubs came on their own, asking the same question.

Taking a deep breath, Mole stepped into the clearing and lifted a paw.

"Back again," he said, shrugging in his humble way. "It's me. The mole."

The ravens waited as he moved into the tree's shadow. He walked slowly, starting and stopping, as if expecting to step on something sharp. On his previous visits, they always startled him by barking, "Not yet, not yet!" or "Later! Later, later!"

He took another step. This was as close as they had ever let him come. This time, they must have an answer. Finally, the Four Winds have brought news. News for him.

"So," he said, lifting his brown eyes. "When will I see her again?"

After a pause filled with the restless voices of the wind, the raven on the left spoke a single word.

"Never."

"Never," echoed the next.

"Never," tolled the third and "Never" the fourth.

Mole waited as his heart cracked, waited for the

fifth raven to contradict the others. But the last, without even glancing his way, repeated the verdict.

The last “Never” fell, bowing his head. He stared at the ground. The Elder’s shadow tangled around his feet. He knew the ravens expected him to leave now, but his feet wouldn’t move.

“So,” he began timidly, looking up. “The Ravens of the Brook have spoken. The Rooks of the Tree have judged. Your wisdom is legend. You are older than memory. You have never been wrong. Never spoken in haste. I know that. But. Well. Two seasons I waited. Do you know how lonely autumn can get? And such a cold winter. Two seasons you listened to the winds that listen to world. And now your judgment is delivered, and the word is Never. But love,” he ended with a helpless shrug, “cannot endure the word Never.”

“Never,” the first raven repeated.

One by one their heads sank between stiff shoulders, their eyes closed into purple seams, and their attention returned to the eloquent wind. Mole waited, staring up at the dark judges. He hoped his determination would move them to reconsider.

The first raven opened its eyes and noticed Mole was still there. But neither sadness nor sympathy shone in the bird’s expression; it seemed puzzled, as if a stone had asked a question and was now waiting for an answer.

Unable to bear the raven’s gaze, Mole lowered his eyes, turned around, crossed the small clearing, and

stopped at a wall of bushes between two maples. He listened to the wind talk behind his back, then pushed through the thorny green into the forest.

Mole followed the river as it widened through the woods. He didn't think about where he was going, and so missed the narrow path that turned for home.

"Rusted hearts and dusted souls! Never, is it? Set as many Nevers on my back as trees on a hill! This is love, you sooty birds! Love!"

But small animals who burrow in the ground were not built for courage. He walked on, hushed by doubt.

"I'll never give up. I'll wait out the world for you. I'll dig tunnels to the horizon's ring. I'll reach for you as the moths reach for the moon."

His brave promises overwhelmed him. He felt how small, how insignificant he was. The raven's word lapped in his mind like the water against the mud banks of the river.

Never... Never...

Stumbling, Mole knelt by the water. He gazed into the upside down world. Sunlight sparked off the river, skipping away like stones of light. He felt like crying, but no tears came to his eyes. Moles never cried. They were matter-of-fact animals, more so than most, grounded to the earth.

"In a story," he said, "my eyes would fill with tears and my tears would fall with gold and silver splashes. The river would carry my tears undiluted to the sea. The ocean would feel suddenly sad and wonder what

great thing has happened in the world.”

His eyes warmed. Surprised, he touched the wetness and smiled. “Look at that,” he said. “A mole, crying.”

Additional Chapter Illustrations...

