



A **MURDER** OF CROWS

ANITA
KLUMPERS

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Dedication

Dedicated to my grandchildren, who know that—
unlike popular depictions—crows do not have yellow
beaks, but are black from tip to toe and stem to stern.
And like my grandchildren, are unusually intelligent.

1

The screaming crows drowned out John's words.

"John? What did you say? I can't hear you over that beastly noise!"

The view on Pauli's dashboard-mounted cell phone switched from a wooded trail to John Tolen's grinning face. "More like a fowl noise. Ha! It'll get worse before it gets better. I'm going in to see what's got this flock so shook up. Wish you were here!"

Paulina Deacon hid a smile and made certain her phone pointed only at her face. If John caught a glimpse of her car window in the screen, he'd know she was a scant mile from him instead of heading to her apartment in town.

"You're recording this too, right?" he asked.

"Isn't that the point of this app you're testing?"

"Exactly. Unlike your ordinary video chat, it's saving both videos to our phones. We can watch each other on a split screen later."

Pauli's experience with phone apps fit in the same thimble as her knowledge of quantum physics. But when John, who tested those apps for a living, asked to install one on her phone for a trial run, she'd agreed. He joked that if it worked in her decrepit device, it would work anywhere.

Because she liked John more than she liked any man she'd met, she'd recently suggested—shyly—that they run together when the weather permitted. This spring the weather in eastern North Dakota proved quite permissive. They ran through the tiny town of Clio, around the track at the high school where Pauli substitute taught and coached girls' soccer, and lately were delighted to discover a little-used trail leading to an abandoned farm. It bordered a stand of hardwood trees which, in this section of eastern North Dakota, were in short supply.

Pauli could safely navigate the empty road while watching her phone screen. The phone was old and big and didn't really fit in the holder. But if she drove off the road in a frenzy of distraction, her low-slung sports car would encounter nothing more hazardous than flat fields awaiting spring tilling. And that phone was one of her most precious possessions. The screen now showed John turning off the farm track and jogging along a faintly discernible trail into the trees.

"Is that a deer path?"

"Good eye!" He sounded approving, and Pauli glowed. Possibly John liked her, too. Maybe as much as she liked him.

"I still can't see the crows." The sound was full-scale battle. John shouted to be heard over it. "They must be congregated around whatever got them so ticked off. Used to irritate me that they were called a murder of crows, but now it makes sense." John flicked the lens to his face for a moment and grinned. For the first time she could see the "Ask me about my apps"

hat that she'd special ordered for him in Grand Forks. She'd worried he'd think it too silly, too personal, or too soon in their relationship, and regretted the impulse. He wore it now, and that warmed her. She pulled behind his pickup truck. At that moment, he turned the screen to display a tangle of scrubby bushes, in much fuller leaf than a few days ago, when they last ran this route. The screen wavered.

"What on earth?"

At first, Pauli couldn't comprehend the image on her phone. People clustered in a small clearing. The entire six weeks she and John had jogged the abandoned farm road, they'd seen not a single person. Here were three. Two husky men with close-cropped hair, wearing black windbreakers, flanked the third man dressed in sports coat and khakis.

One of the windbreaker-wearing men glanced up and then directly at the screen. Which meant he looked directly at John. The man in the middle shouted. At least Pauli assumed it was a shout. The cacophony of crows and their hoarse anger grew louder, more wildly cruel. No sound could penetrate that. The birds were diving now, and the man who'd noticed John raised something to his shoulder. Pauli squinted at her five-inch screen. The something looked like a gun.

Crow hunters? No one wore hunting gear, and only the two in windbreakers carried rifles. The man in khaki slacks appeared unarmed. Pauli waited for the first man to blast at the crows, but, incredibly, the gun was pointed straight at John.

Pauli jammed the little car into park. "John, get out

of there! I'm right behind your truck!"

John shouted. It sounded like, "Pauli! Run!" but the hideous crows didn't quit shrieking, and she couldn't be sure.

"I'm here! You run!"

"Stay away!"

This time the demand was clear, and Pauli hesitated only a second. From the moment the gun first pointed at the phone—at John—to when he'd shouted, hardly any time passed. Pauli reached for her door handle as a blast exploded through the protests of frantic birds. She ducked as if the bullet would come through the phone at her face. But even in this involuntary spasm, she couldn't turn away from the screen. John's phone flipped, and for a mere second—plenty of time—the camera caught his face. His hat must have flown off, giving Pauli a perfect view of the small red dot between John's eyes. The world exploded in red. Then it went black.

The crows' screams hit fever pitch, penetrating the closed doors and windows of Pauli's little car. Black wings slashed past the screen and her car windows as she cowered in her seat. Crows overwhelmed the sky.

Terrified as she was, Pauli had to reach John. She pulled on the door handle, but it wouldn't open. Again, she tried, almost sobbing in frustration, when the car rolled slightly. It wasn't in park. She shifted, made certain the lever was securely on *P*, and shoved open the door.

The crows were gone.

And from somewhere not quite in sight, the sound

of shouting men grew loud.

And louder.

She snatched the door closed and shoved the car back into drive. Dirt exploded as she accelerated past John's truck and toward town. She punched in the 911 emergency number. It didn't connect. She tried again. There was enough cell signal for her conversation with John a minute ago. Why wouldn't this transmit? Pauli tried four more times and finally tossed the phone onto the passenger seat when she almost slewed off the road. She'd need to race to the police station and tell them John Tolen was dead. And the faces of his killers were on her phone.

2

A vehicle—she swore it appeared out of nowhere—came fast behind her. A vortex of dust kicked up from the gravel road to obscure color, make, and model. With the exception of farm vehicles and an occasional lost semi, hardly anyone traveled this stretch of road. In the sparsely populated state of North Dakota, Marathon County was exceptionally remarkable for its paucity of population. So it wasn't hard for Pauli to convince herself the driver was one of the killers.

Driving seventy miles an hour, Clio's tiny police station was twelve minutes away. At her current eighty, she should be there in—Pauli tried desperately to do the math in her head. Ten minutes? Nine point seven? She glanced in the rearview mirror. Whoever followed didn't gain. Nor did they drop back.

Her phone bleated its "Drop everything! You're getting a text!" alert. She veered into the opposite lane as she scrabbled a desperate right hand to locate it. It wedged in its customary location of choice, between seat and console. By the time Pauli wiggled it free, the screen was no longer lit. A jab at its middle woke it to show a message from John's phone. Her building panic receded in a *whoosh* that made her insides go slack. He

was fine. That final grotesquely upward thrust of his body, the blood, the terror, all of them products of her imagination. Or the new app had a glitch.

heading home polly?

But her name wasn't Polly. It was Pauli, and John never spelled it any other way. Her stomach muscles tensed again and when she checked the rearview mirror, the gap between her and the vehicle had narrowed. She pressed the accelerator, and the speedometer approached eighty-five. Wouldn't it be wonderful if Marjorie was parked behind that corn crib and came out flying, siren wailing? No Marjorie appeared, no Chief Loren, no one raced the road but Pauli and the vehicle behind her. She was at the outskirts of Clio and decelerated rapidly. Not to save her life, report John's death, or bring his killers to justice, could she charge through town and jeopardize anyone.

Another text warbled as she turned toward the tiny police station in Clio. *Pauli! Meet you at your house!* The texter had caught the mistake.

One block up from the station and across the street, a car idled at the corner. Someone—a man, from her fleeting impression, sat behind the wheel. Only because he'd parked near John's apartment above the hardware store did she notice him at all. The apartment John would never return to. Before that thought even fully formed in Pauli's mind, the driver whipped in a U-turn to follow the car behind her. Through the terror continued to choke her, the situation struck her as ludicrous.

The lights were off in the Clio police station. Pauli didn't need to read the sign on the door. Loren and Marjorie were law enforcement not only for Clio, but for five other towns in Marathon County too small to support their own department. The police chief and his deputy must be out on a call, and that's what the sign would say.

The vehicles behind her slowed, possibly to read that sign. Their drivers must be unfamiliar with the shared police force. Once more the phone lit with a text.

"We are government agents. We want to meet you and explain everything. You name the place. John's fine."

That was a lie. One more attempt at calling 911, failed tries to call the first few numbers in her contact list, and Pauli shut it down. Her apartment was farther down the road, and she desperately wanted to reach it. But a glance in her rearview mirror showed the convoy doggedly on her tail, and she couldn't go home. Whoever texted wanted to make sure she and the video on her phone could never identify them.

At the edge of town, Pauli let the powerful engine in the little sports car have its way with the road. No matter how quickly it ate up the miles, she couldn't be certain she'd lost her pursuers until, with the sun setting behind her, she crossed the Red River into Minnesota.

3

Over an hour had passed since headlights last reflected in her rearview mirror. Still, Pauli kept driving. No trustworthy law enforcement buildings appeared in any of the towns—most, smaller than Clio—that she flew through. In fact, nothing was open; no light shone from the scattered houses. Until now, she'd never mourned the passing of telephone booths.

Her adrenaline gave out about midnight, somewhere in the middle of northern Minnesota. With the receding adrenaline came trembling, and her hands couldn't grip the steering wheel, her foot couldn't control the accelerator. Paulina Deacon pulled off the road and watched late spring snowflakes bounce on her windshield.

If she couldn't drive, she could try 911 again, and check to make certain the video of the crime had saved. Her fingers trembled as she tried to turn on the phone. Annoyed, she mentally ordered them to stop. She breathed in. Deep breath. She exhaled until it felt like her ribcage would whack against her spine. Three more deep breaths and she could turn on the cell with a steady hand. Only a grudging half tower showed up. Still, Pauli tried the emergency number several futile times before choosing the icon to open the app. She

started the video, pressing John's side of the split screen so it would be the only one displayed.

Once again, John walked along the farm track, made his corny joke about crows, turned onto the deer trail, grinned at her from her phone's screen. Once again that exclamation. *"What on earth?"*

Pauli, huddled behind the steering wheel among tall Minnesota pines, steeled herself to watch what would happen next. She needed to be certain the video operated long enough to record the faces of the murderers. And hoped against hope that what she'd seen in the live transmission had been a trick, a deception, a figment of imagination. When the phone buzzed and snapped out, *"Drop everything! You've got a text!"* she did. Literally. Picking the phone from the floor mat took her remaining shreds of courage. She tried not to read the text as she powered down the phone. The words sprang at her retinas before she could stop them.

Enjoying the trip Pauli? Why leave John behind? Tell us where you want to meet. We can wait.

Driving was impossible after that. The earlier texts indicated that the men who killed John controlled his phone. They knew who she was. Now they knew she was running away.

Even turned off, Pauli's steady diet of crime drama shows taught her that cell phones were as easily traced as a slug on a sidewalk. She'd no cause to disbelieve this and no cause, up until now, to fear it. Who'd be interested in her, a gloriously ordinary resident of Clio, North Dakota?

Now her life wasn't quite so ordinary. Pauli pulled the battery from her dinosaur of a phone, turned the car's heater to its highest setting and cranked up the fan. Even after sweat leaked from forehead pores, she trembled. At some point, she dozed. Pauli's head snapped back a split second before it hit the steering wheel. Through the windshield, the sky above the trees reflected no light; no stars glinted. She couldn't stay here forever. She shifted into drive, relieved she hadn't asphyxiated from the running engine and pulled onto the empty highway.

Scarcely had her cramped muscles begun to relax when something pinged. Pauli jumped and the little vehicle jumped with her, swerving like a crazed carnival bumper car from one side of the blessedly flat and empty road to the other. Her fuel light was on. Sure enough. The needle showed itself cozied down to empty.

She saw no signs for gas, no signs for an approaching town, no signs of life. No hills to coast down and save the last precious drops of fuel. This part of Minnesota took a topographical template from North Dakota. One didn't coast long on a level road.

Before her panic level could mount, Pauli set cruise control to fifty-five. For insurance, she said the Lord's Prayer, the only prayer she'd any familiarity with, seven times. She was beginning on the eighth recitation when that most lovely of sights—a road sign—materialized in her headlights. Faded, peeling letters announced: GAS NEXT EXIT.

Whether by fumes, a tail wind, or the celestial

inclusion of fuel in the “daily bread” category, she eased into a station. Now she faced another problem. Those same crime drama shows informed her that credit cards could also be traced. She had money. Her mother taught her to always carry plenty of cash. But the station was dark, only the pumps lit. The days when cash was king vanished with polyester jumpsuits.

So Pauli sat and shivered and tried not to think about John, the men in the clearing, mortal danger. She apparently dozed again, because when lights swept across the windshield, her eyes opened to dazzling confusion. The lights kept going, the battered pickup truck attached to them shambled along the station and disappeared. She opened her door and heard the pickup’s door slam shut. A man who could be the *Homo sapiens* manifestation of his truck shambled back around the corner. In the dim parking lot lights, she saw him glance her way. The front door of the station opened, lights went on inside and still Pauli waited. She counted to sixty-five, slowly, and debated her next move.

The door opened again, and the man looked left, right, up at the sky, and finally at Pauli in her parked car. His shoulders raised in a slow-motion shrug. His chin stretched forward as though capable of discerning her odd behavior. With a final shrug, he strolled across the lot and stood outside her car. They stared at each other through her half-opened car door.

“Hello.” When one couldn’t think of anything meaningful, stick to the common niceties. “The snow is

letting up." It was true but didn't further her cause. "I need gas."

The man nodded at her greeting and peered in the beam of her headlights to confirm that the snow was letting up, and let his eyes drift back to the gas pump. "Need help pumping?" It wasn't said with sarcasm or even much curiosity. Merely another common nicety.

"No. But I don't have a credit card." She paused, thinking that after so many fervent prayers she shouldn't lie. "That I can use right now," she amended.

For the first time the loosely jointed, rusty-haired man moved uncomfortably. "Guess I could spare you a few gallons. Wouldn't be a good idea to give away much more'n that."

Pauli took a moment to grasp his meaning. "Oh no! I've got cash!" She waited for an exclamation of surprise, or disdain, or a denial of any acceptance of cash. But he shrugged again, this time an agreeable sort of motion.

"Want me to pump for you?"

"No, but thank you."

He sidestepped the gas pump.

"Sir?"

He paused. "Ma'am?"

"Don't you want me to pay first?"

"For what? You don't own the gas yet. If you don't want to come inside and pay, just toot the horn, and I'll come get it."

Pauli filled her tank and walked into the small building. A bell jangled over the door. The room smelled of fresh coffee and lavender air freshener

accented with motor oil. The building housed a service station too, and she waited for the man to come in from the garage. He placed a wrench in the toolbox on the seat of a beautifully golden pumpkin-colored tractor with red wheels. Cinderella would have been proud to ride to the ball in that tractor.

The man followed the direction of her gaze as he pushed into the office area. "A gift for my granddad. He'll be ninety-five in July. I come in early to work on it. 1938 Minneapolis Moline."

"Yes. I know. It's beautiful." She gave him money and he made change. "Is there a phone I can use?"

He nodded toward a tidy worktop built into the wall. A very old phone sat in the corner. The gentleman trundled back into the garage, making certain to shut the door behind him. Pauli put fingers in the unfamiliar holes of the rotary dial. At first she didn't turn the wheel far enough and needed to start over, and when that maneuver was mastered she still must wait for the return rotation after each number. Chief Loren's phone went to voice mail, and she decided against leaving an incoherent message. Pauli knew no other law enforcement numbers except 911. She dialed the emergency number, almost expecting the phone to disconnect.

She connected with someone, but nothing went well. They weren't happy with her name. "Anonymous" didn't seem to inspire much confidence, but she remained steadfast. They were confused about her location. The crime occurred in North Dakota and she currently called from Minnesota? She'd not

actually witnessed the shooting? Yet she had a recorded video of it? They weren't happy about the time of the alleged shooting. How many hours ago? And how could they reach her? Maybe she should report to local law enforcement. Pauli hung up.

The gas station attendant stayed tactfully busy in the garage, occasionally glancing through the glass window between shop and office. A moment later, he shuffled in, balancing a full coffee pot. "Coffee's fresh. Want a cup?"

"Yes. Please. How much?"

"You're always wanting to pay for what you ain't got yet, aren't you? Call it your cash discount. Or the good-taste-in-tractors deduction."

Back in her car, the travel mug, also part of her discount, warm in her hand, Pauli tried to come to grips with the reality that she'd watched John's murder and done nothing to help him.

4

The coffee kept Pauli warm to the very shore of Lake Superior, where she ran out of road. She climbed stiffly from her car, coughed on the frosted predawn air, and glared from the dead end to the expanse of water, a lighter shade of dark against the sky. Since leaving the gas station, she'd hurtled off the main road at least four times when headlights appeared behind her, certain the killers had finally caught up. Each time, she'd lost the vehicle, and each time, she'd found another east-bound road to take her farther from North Dakota. The most recent car, like the others, probably had no malevolent intentions.

This time, though, she couldn't head farther east. The lake was in her way.

Pauli, North Dakota bred, where seas were of grass and shrubs and oats and sunflowers, was, at first, intimidated but then entranced by the water. It grew lighter every moment from an as-yet-unseen sun. How lovely it would be to relax and watch the dawn. A clinical portion of her brain informed her that she was most likely in shock. Pauli liked being in shock. The stretch of water turning silver was all that existed. That and Pauli and her car. Her mind veered from the cell phone in the glove compartment. The battery she'd

shoved in the back seat under a car blanket, as if mere proximity could power up the phone and John's killers would find her.

This would be a most convenient spot for them to corner her. Pauli snatched the coattails of reality, leapt in the car and ground the ignition before she realized she'd left it running.

After several false attempts, she found a road that led around the edge of the lake. As the sun rolled itself up the far horizon, she took a lovely bridge that led to Wisconsin.

The lighter the morning sky grew, the more exposed she felt. By now, John's killers might have her car's make and model. The sun would keep rising. Was some satellite recording her progress across the northern U.S.A. and transmitting it to a clandestine website? Pauli needed to find a police station and dump the problem in their laps. If only she could locate one.

Ultimately, the decision of destination wasn't hers to make. A mere ten miles farther, an accident closed her current route.