

WHITE CROWS

By

T.J. MacGregor

Book I of the White Crows Trilogy

The Farm

Secrecy is the freedom tyrants dream of.

- Bill Moyers

Every day, Ellen prowled the periphery of the concrete wall, looking for a way out. But it was a dozen feet high, half as thick, crowned with electrified barbs, and extended at least four feet beneath the soil. She had never found a chink, a crack, or a hole in the concrete that offered any hope of escape. Yet, her ritual rarely changed.

At dawn each morning, she started at the east wall, where the tall trees on the other side of it whispered of wilderness and freedom. She watched their branches swaying in the wind, noticed how the leaves glistened with moistness from the fog that often rolled in after dark. She walked from east to south to north to west, struggling to remember her real name, her life before, the details. But her memory before the Farm was a void, a black hole.

Whenever she looked in a mirror, she saw a tall, attractive blonde who was probably in her late twenties. Her hair fell to her shoulders and every so often the hairdresser on the Farm trimmed it for her. She didn't have any scars on her body, no tattoos, nothing that might trigger a memory.

Who were her parents? Did she have siblings? A husband? Children? Why couldn't she remember anything from her life before? Ellen suspected they drugged the food, the water. She had no evidence of it, but what other reason would there be for such pervasive amnesia?

She had lost count of the days, weeks, months she had been here. The day she'd been assigned to Dorm A, she'd started making a mark on the wall for every day that passed. The markings were down near the floor in her room, where they wouldn't be noticed. But after day 93, it no longer mattered and she doubted her count was even accurate. She had figured out that her time on the Farm hadn't started in Dorm A, that she'd been somewhere else for awhile.

When she reached the west wall a long time later, she knew she had a few minutes before the bell rang for lunch. She wandered over to the field where the security dogs romped and played and lived when they weren't doing whatever they did- sniffing out contraband in the dorms, standing around in the cafeteria with the guards, chasing down runaways. She'd never seen them chase anyone, but had heard the stories, the rumors.

She stood at the concrete wall, watching them, a variety of breeds and colors and sizes. Three dogs had cornered a squirrel in one of the trees and were barking furiously, leaping at the trunk. The squirrel scampered to the top of the tree and then leaped into the closest branches of the next tree. He made his way from tree to tree, outsmarting the dogs, who were still at the tree where they first had spotted the squirrel. One of the dogs, a large male with reddish gold fur, realized the squirrel was no longer in the tree and wandered toward the wall where Ellen stood. She knew him. Sam, a Golden Retriever. Whenever she stood here, watching the dogs, he came over to her, remembering that now then she had some morsel from the cafeteria to give him.

He trotted over and leaped up against the wall, panting, his tail wagging. Ellen slipped her fingers through the fur on his head. "I've got a little something for you today,

boy," she said, and reached into the pocket of her shirt for the slice of bacon she'd hidden. It was cold now, but he gobbled it down and licked her hand in thanks.

"You probably shouldn't come over here, Ellen," said the man who joined her at the wall.

Ellen looked over at him, Toby, the cook, a tall, muscular man with a bald head. "It's against the rules?"

"The unspoken rules."

"I like watching the dogs. Sam is my favorite."

The moment she said this, she felt a memory slipping past the wall that surrounded her memories of her life before the Farm. She saw herself stretched out on a bed with a Golden Retriever alongside her. *When? Where was I? Who was I?*

The wall slammed into place again.

"Yeah, Sam's my favorite, too." Toby ran a hand over his bald head and glanced around, making sure they were alone, then brought a dog biscuit from his pocket and tossed it to Sam. The dog leaped gracefully into the air, caught the biscuit before it struck the ground, then hurried off with his treat. "Sam was being trained to sniff out drugs in school lockers. He flunked out of the program and one of the guards adopted him. He at least gets to go home at night."

This remark triggered so many questions for Ellen. A school where? Which guard? What kinds of drugs? But before she could say anything, the bell for lunch tolled, a deep, sonorous sound.

Toby stabbed his thumb at the electric cart behind them. "Want a lift to the cafeteria?"

“No, thanks. I like to walk.”

“Good enough. See you at lunch.”

He hurried off toward the cart and Ellen turned reluctantly toward the rambling farmhouses where she and the others lived and worked. Their numbers used to be greater, in the hundreds. But some had died, others had graduated and been transferred. She wondered about that. Transferred where? Graduated to what? Were there other farms like this one? Was anyone ever freed?

The bell continued to ring and men and women hurried toward the main farmhouse on the hill, past the ponds and lakes, past chicken coops, pig pens, horse pastures, sheep and cows. Some of the men and women worked in the mornings, and others, like her, worked in the afternoons. Every week, the schedule was rotated, so when she worked in the mornings, she walked the wall in the afternoons and evenings.

They were encouraged to spend time in nature – in the gardens on the land, in the fields where corn and strawberries grow, in the arboretum, the orchards, by the lakes and ponds. They were supposed to observe everything – birds, fish, bees, butterflies, the way the sun rose and set, how the pigs and horses behaved. And each day, they had to write about what they’d seen and learned. Who read these mini essays? The Elders? Were they graded? Did these essays determine who left or stayed?

Ellen considered not eating for a day. How long would it take for the drug to leave her body? Would her mind clear? Would she remember her life before? It wasn’t the first time she had thought it. In fact, when she woke this morning, it was on her mind and perhaps that was why she hadn’t eaten much breakfast. And last night at dinner, she had eaten almost nothing. So it had been nearly twenty-four hours since she had eaten anything

substantial. She had had water, of course, coffee, freshly squeezed lemonade, and wondered if the liquids were also drugged. What about the lake? Was it drugged? Perhaps she could draw water from the lake and boil it.

She decided this was something she could do without attracting the attention of the Elders. There was a gas grill in the garden where they were allowed to brew tea from the various herbs that grew on the grounds. Sometimes, ointments and paste were made from these herbs that were used on both animals and humans.

Excited by the idea, Ellen resolved to eat as little at lunch as possible. She would pick at her food and anything she put in her mouth she would spit out into a napkin. She would be famished by late afternoon, but she could pick oranges and grapefruits from the orchard or harvest strawberries. The stuff that grew here couldn't be drugged, could it?

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts she didn't realize someone had come up behind her until a familiar voice said, "Hey, Ellen."

She smiled at Neil as he fell into step beside her. He was dark-haired to her blond, brown eyes to her blue, with an impish smile and a lean runner's body. His overalls and shoes were splattered with mud. "Looks like you had pig pen duty this morning."

He laughed. "Yeah, it's not that bad. I actually like the pigs. They each have distinct personalities." He slipped a piece of chalk from a pocket in his coveralls, crouched and sketched a pig on the sidewalk. He was always sketching stuff. "My favorite pig. Cute, isn't he?"

"Adorable. But is he actually blue?"

"It's the only color I could find when I was rummaging around in the dorm kitchen this morning."

Ellen crouched beside Neil and ran her fingertip over the pig's snout, smearing the blue. "Now he's a pig with mud on his face."

They looked at each other, both of them smirking. When she spoke, she kept her voice low. "Maybe you were an artist before you ended up here, Neil."

"I don't know. It doesn't feel quite right." He also spoke quietly and sketched a wall around the blue pig. "The pig really wants to escape, El. So I'm going to give him an exit." He pressed his thumb to a spot on the blue wall and twisted it until the blue faded. "There. Now he can get out."

"How can *we* get out?" she whispered.

"I've been working on that."

A shadow fell over them and they glanced up. The guard who stood over them had an unlit cigar stuck in a corner of his mouth, a pack hanging from one shoulder, and his right hand rested on the assault rifle slung over the other shoulder. "You're defacing property," he snapped, "Clean it up."

Ellen hated this guard, Sergeant Tim Maldrove. Terrified that her hatred showed, she averted her eyes. "Clean it with what?" Neil asked.

"Your hand, inmate. Your goddamn hand."

Neil rubbed his palms across the pig, smearing the chalk until it looked like a pale blue stain against the sidewalk. Maldrove made a disgusted sound, pulled a bottle from his pack, and splashed water on the smear of blue. "Both of you, get rid of it. Rub-a-dub-dub."

They rubbed their palms through the water, against the sidewalk, until the smear was gone.

"Much better," Maldrove said.

They both stood.

Maldrove stuck out his hand. "And I'll take that chalk, inmate." Neil dropped the tiny bit of chalk into the guard's hand. His thick fingers closed around it. "Next time I see you doing that, I'll make you eat the chalk. We clear, inmate?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. You two better get moving to the cafeteria or you'll be late for lunch."

As Ellen and Neil hurried away from him, he whispered, "We need someone to sketch an exit in the wall around this place."

"I want to know why we're here to begin with. Maybe that will tell us how we can escape."

Other inmates neared them and Neil stopped whispering and changed the subject. "Did you do your usual round-the-wall trek this morning, El?" He twirled his finger.

"Uh-huh. I've got barn duty this afternoon."

"How many miles do you figure you cover?"

"I don't have any idea."

"Toby the cook lent me his Fitbit yesterday, so I ran the wall. I clocked eleven miles." He gestured at her muscular thighs and calves. "That's why you've got the best legs around. You're walking a minimum of seventy-seven miles a week."

"Wow. I never realized that." She pointed at her shoes. The fabric on top had thinned and her toenail poked through. "Now wonder my shoes are worn out."

"It's important." He glanced around quickly, his voice fell to a whisper again. "Toby told me it's forty miles to the nearest town."

She and Neil often commiserated like this, exchanging facts and snippets of information they learned. He didn't recall his past, either, and neither of them had any idea how long they had been here or why they were here or where "here" even was. He was the closest friend she had at the Farm and she trusted him implicitly. "Is Toby an ally?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

"I think our food and water are drugged, and I haven't eaten much of anything since yesterday at lunch. I want to see what happens."

Neil looked surprised. "I decided the same thing just last night. At breakfast this morning, when the monitor wasn't looking, I scraped most of my food into my napkin and fed it to the pigs."

"Did they act weird?"

"I didn't notice. If the food was drugged, it probably didn't affect them. They weigh more than I do."

"So you haven't eaten anything since last night?"

"I took a couple of eggs from the henhouse, hard boiled them, and ate those."

"Maybe the hens are drugged."

"I doubt it."

They stopped next to a small garden and pretended to watch the monarch butterflies. They knew they were observed, weren't sure how extensive the spying was, but they'd agreed that the butterfly garden probably didn't hold any hidden cameras or microphones. "Do they spy on us in our rooms?" she whispered.

"Probably."

“Have they seen us kissing in the shadow of the barn?”

“Someone would have said something.”

“Where is it safe for us to talk other than right here?”

“In the pig pens. In the open fields.”

In her peripheral vision, Ellen saw an Elder approaching them. Bruce. In spite of his thick gray hair, he didn't look old at all. An unlined face. His affable demeanor defied the rumors she'd heard about him, about his private torture chamber. “You guys going to lunch?” he asked cheerfully.

“Sure. We're just enjoying the monarchs,” Neil said.

“They really are beautiful. So how were your mornings?” he asked, and walked with them into the building.

2

The cafeteria was a large, wonderful room. Sunlight poured through the floor to ceiling windows, picnic tables were scattered around, music was piped through speakers, the mood was festive.

Today's cuisine made Ellen's mouth water with hunger – chicken casserole, salad, corn on the cob, freshly baked bread, broccoli cheese soup. The servers were Toby, and Kate, another Elder, a pretty brunette. She didn't look any older than Bruce, maybe forty.

“What's your pleasure, Ellen?” Kate asked, flashing a smile that was all teeth.

“A little bit of everything. Thanks.”

“Coming right up.”

Ellen moved through the line, sliding her tray along the buffet to the desserts. Apple pie and coffee today. Sure, she would have some of that, too. Why not? She didn't plan on eating any of it.

She and Neil sat at one of the empty picnic tables near a window, in a wedge of sunlight. She dug her fork through the food, dropping some of it into the napkin in her lap, worried that the napkin would be so full of food before the end of the hour that someone would notice. So she folded the napkin into a neat packet, pressed it down inside her lap and helped herself to another napkin.

The music suddenly stopped and Kate's voice boomed from the P.A. system. "This afternoon, we've got something special planned for all of you. A contest! You don't have to be a part of it, but we would love it if everyone joined in. We're going to the strawberry fields and whoever picks the most in an hour wins a special prize. So I suggest you all finish up here, go back to your rooms and put on comfortable shoes, and we'll meet at the strawberry fields in thirty minutes," Kate finished.

"What's the special prize?" called a woman at the back of the cafeteria. "Lemonade or some other lame thing?"

Ellen glanced back. It was Rose who had spoken, Rose with the freckles on her cheeks and the dimples at the corners of her mouth when she smiled. Rose, who looked like a teenager, who should have had pigtails.

"A pizza night for all you choose to invite!" Kate replied enthusiastically, as though pizza night was the greatest thing ever.

"That's it? A fucking pizza?" shouted Bob, a burly man with curly black hair.

Kate glared at him. "And what's wrong with a pizza, Bob?"

“Everything!” he yelled and shot to his feet and hurled his platter of food at Kate.

It struck her in the chest, splattering her with chicken casserole and corn on the cob and apple pie. She staggered back, arms pin-wheeling for balance, and crashed into the buffet table. Serving platters clattered to the floor, casserole spilled everywhere, people sat there in shocked stupors as the guards moved in on Bob and Rose.

Two guards wrestled Bob to a wall, Rose tried to run and another guard tackled her and they both slammed to the floor. An inmate hurled himself at the guard who had tackled Rose and was shot before he reached them. He pitched sideways, blood pumping from a gaping wound in his neck.

Ellen nearly bolted to her feet to run to him, she knew she might be able to help him, to save his life. But Neil grabbed her hand, holding her in place. *No*, his eyes screamed.

They'll shoot you.

Now Bruce and Kate and other employees moved rapidly from table to table with a horde of guards, instructing inmates to exit through the side door. Guards, weapons ready, escorted them outside. Neil still gripped her hand. Her head pounded, her heart raced, her terror burned so deep it felt as if her insides were scorched.

They were forced to stand outside in the hot sun as Bob and then Rose were hauled out of the cafeteria. Rose sobbed hysterically, Bob screamed, *“I have rights, you can't do this!”*

“Tie them to the lamp posts!” Bruce shouted, waving his arms at the guards.

“No!” Kate marched over to him, bits of food still clinging to her shirt. “Take them to isolation.”

Bruce, thought Ellen, looked furious. But because Kate was his boss, he couldn't object, couldn't make a scene.

Then Kate turned toward Ellen and Neil and the rest of the inmates. "You're on lockdown until further notice. When I call your dorm, get into groups of four, wait for a guard to escort you."

When Dorm A was called, Neil released Ellen's hand and they got into a line with Frank and Loretta, two other people from Dorm A. Loretta was sobbing into her hands and Ellen slipped an arm around her shoulders, trying to comfort her, but tears leaked from her own eyes, too, tears of fear and horror.

Sergeant Maldrove marched over. "First Dorm A group, let's move." He gestured with his weapon at Ellen and Loretta. "No touching. Remove your arm from her shoulder, inmate."

"She's in pain," Ellen said.

"You're going to be in pain if you don't move your arm from her shoulders."

Fury overpowered everything else she felt just then and she blurted, "Fuck off!"

Maldrove grabbed her by the arm, twisted it behind her, and shouted, "Got another one here for isolation!"

Toby ran over to them. "Hold on, Sergeant, just hold on. She was comforting another inmate. That's not punishable by isolation."

"She told me to fuck off," Maldrove snapped. "And that *is* punishable by isolation."

"Ms. Bentley," Toby called to Kate. "We're in need of some clarification here."

Kate joined them, but she looked pissed. "What is it, Mr. Hopkins?"

"Is telling a guard to fuck off an offense punishable by isolation?"

"Is *that* what's going on here?" She glared at Maldrove.

"Uh, yes, ma'am. She had her arm around another inmate and when I told her to remove it, she told me to fuck off."

"I was comforting her," Ellen said. "She was crying."

She felt Neil's eyes on her, saw that his hands had curled into fists and hoped he wouldn't do something as stupid as she had done.

"Let it be, Sergeant," Kate snapped. "We've got enough problems right now. Get them to Dorm A."

Maldrove released Ellen's arm. "Move, let's get going."

Once their group of four was far enough away so he wouldn't be overheard, Maldrove leaned in close to her. "We'll see about this, you little bitch." And he poked her in the ribs with the end of his rifle.

3

Two nights later, they came for her while she was sleeping. Maldrove grabbed her by the arms and jerked her forward, Bruce jammed a needle into her neck. As she sank into black, she heard Bruce say, "Goddamn inmates need to follow the rules."

"Kate's not going to like it."

"She's on the road with her crows."

"Where're we putting her?"

"Isolation for awhile. Then we'll see."

"Personally, I'd take her straight to the Dark Place."

“Naw. Sometimes, it’s best to let them sit in an isolation cell for a long time and listen to the screams and shrieks from the Dark Place. That’s nearly as painful and terrifying to them as the physical torture.”

Maldrove scooped Ellen off the bed. “Lead the way, boss.”