

CROW BOY





CONTENTS

Chapter 1	NOT ENOUGH MAGIC	1
Chapter 2	IS THE RING SAFE	9
Chapter 3	ALEENA	19
Chapter 4	AT CHINA BEACH	28
Chapter 5	WATER TRAVEL	37
Chapter 6	ENDANGERED SNAILS	45
Chapter 7	STORM MOUNTAIN	55
Chapter 8	THROUGH THE RING	66
Chapter 9	TREE SPIRIT	77
Chapter 10	INTO THE EARTH	89
Chapter 11	DEEP MAGIC	97
Chapter 12	THE MAGIC BOY	104



CHAPTER ONE

NOT ENOUGH MAGIC

CAN YOU OPEN THE DOORWAY, JOSH?" Maddy asked.

"I don't know," I said. I knew there was a doorway here. I could feel it, almost see it, almost reach out with my fingers and touch it. But not quite. I didn't have enough magic.

Maddy and I had hiked to near the top of the trail up the front side of Castle Mountain. We stood at the edge of a small clearing, surrounded by a forest of dark evergreens. Sunlight shone through the branches, and the forest smelled sweet with pine and spruce. A gusting wind tossed the branches of the trees, and crows cawed above us.

Through the trees we could see mountain peaks

across the Bow Valley. The summer had been hot, so there was no snow on the mountains. They looked diminished, somehow, with no snow to outline all the cracks and crags above the tree line.

I could see Mom and Dad below us on the trail, as it switched back and forth up the steep mountainside. Mom had her black hair pulled back in a pony tail, freckles scattered across her cheeks. Dad walked beside her, the bald patch on his head more noticeable from above, their heads close as they talked.

My little sister Maddy stood beside me, her bright blue backpack over her oldest, too-small purple hoodie, too-long new jeans sagging over red runners. Her long blonde hair, lightened by a summer in the sun, was loose and already tangled.

The wind gusted, lifting Maddy's hair and catching the brim of my baseball cap. I tugged it down over my eyes. My hair was just as dark as it always was, my skin just as pale; only my freckles were darker. Even though I was still small, I'd been growing this summer. My favorite blue hoodie was getting tight, and my jeans were too short.

I gazed up at Castle Mountain towering above us. I was shocked at how much like a castle the mountain looked from here, with its row of vertical turrets. I longed to paint it, to capture the light and the shadows, and the fine shadings of colour, but we needed to get through the doorway first.

There's a veil of magic, like a curtain, between the human world and the magic world. It separates our worlds to protect the magic world from humans. Doorways allow magic folk to cross into the human world when they need to.

Maddy and I had learned all about them in July, when a green stone ring she'd picked up in a gift shop turned out to be the magic nexus ring, which helps magic folk cross the veil. Once in the magic world, we had to return the ring to a giant named Keeper because it was too dangerous to use. Ever since, Maddy and I had been plotting to find a way back to the magic world.

It was Maddy's idea to celebrate my twelfth birthday by camping near Castle Mountain. Mom and Dad said there was no way we'd get a campsite in Banff National Park on the Labour Day long weekend, the last weekend before school started. But Maddy begged and pleaded, and Mom and Dad agreed to come up a day early, to make sure we got a site.

So here we were, hiking up Castle Mountain early in the morning, while it was quiet. Maddy and I had raced ahead. We were hoping to find a doorway and slip through before Mom and Dad caught up with us. We knew Keeper, the giant at Castle Mountain, could bring us back to the human world before they noticed we were missing.

After all our planning, our scheming and our convincing, after our long run up the mountainside, we'd

actually found a doorway – and I couldn't open it. I growled in frustration.

“What's wrong?” Maddy asked. “You could do it before.”

“Once,” I muttered. “I opened a doorway once! In July. With the nexus ring to help. I haven't done any magic since then, and I don't feel it as strongly. It's like the magic is still there, inside of me, but really weak. It's not nearly strong enough to open a doorway.”

Maddy nodded and glanced down the trail, checking for Mom and Dad. “What now? We don't have much time.”

“I know,” I snapped. “But I don't have enough magic and you don't have any, so unless someone finds us, I don't know how we can get in.”

I sagged in disappointment. We'd so wanted to visit the magic world again, and I ached to learn more magic. The magic that had grown in me in July had faded to just a hint of what it had been.

I thought about how I'd done magic before. I'd used my fingers to draw, to let the magic flow through my art. I shut my eyes, reached out a finger and began drawing on my pant leg, mist and a doorway. No magic. I tried again, struggling to inhale magic, to pull it through my body into my fingers. All I felt was a tingle, not nearly enough to open a doorway.

My eyes snapped open as something heavy landed on my shoulder, sharp claws digging in. It was a crow,

perched on my shoulder, staring at me. I stared back, not daring to move. He was totally black – his feathers, his beak, even his gleaming eyes. He cawed, I jumped, and the crow leapt off my shoulder, wings smacking my head.

Maddy stared, open-mouthed, as he flew off, turned and soared straight at me. I yelped and ducked, and he dove, snatching my ball cap off my head. I leapt after him, yelling, while Maddy laughed. Then we both froze as the crow flew to the doorway I'd been struggling to open. A deep patch of mist had filled the space between two trees, with a doorway open in the centre of the mist. The crow flew straight through and vanished.

“Yes,” I yelled, punching a fist into the air. Grinning at Maddy, I stepped into the doorway. It was like walking into a thick bank of fog. Mist clung to me, cold and damp and impossible to see through. I felt my way forward until the fog thinned. I stepped out onto Castle Mountain, but I knew I was on the magic side now. And right in front of me stood Keeper.

He was even taller than I'd remembered, twice as tall as my dad, huge and blocky like he was carved out of rock, and grey just like Castle Mountain. Grey clothes, grey hair, grey skin. But he wasn't scary at all, not with that big grin on his face.

“Josh,” he said, holding out his hands to me. I grabbed one with both of mine, grinning as my hands were swallowed in his.

Maddy burst through the doorway and Keeper turned to her. "Little Maddy," he said, his gravelly voice full of laughter. He swung her up in a gigantic hug.

The crow sat on a branch, holding my baseball cap in one claw, muttering and pecking at the picture of the blue jay on the front.

"Corvus, give Josh his hat," Keeper said.

The bird cawed and flew past, dropping my cap as he passed overhead. A gust of wind caught the hat and it spun, drifting down the mountain. I raced after it, leaping to catch it. Caws mocked me while I ran.

"You know him?" Maddy asked, watching the crow.

"He is a friend," said Keeper.

"Some friend," I muttered, as I walked back to them, tugging the cap onto my head.

"Crows are friends. Most do not talk to not-crows. So one talks for all. That one is always Corvus. This is Corvus."

We watched him hop along the ground, strutting and muttering. Maddy laughed, but I didn't think he was funny.

"I sent Corvus for you," Keeper said.

"How did you know we were here?" I asked.

"The crows told me," he said.

Corvus cawed.

"Corvus opened the doorway?" Maddy asked.

"Yes," said Keeper, his voice low and rumbly.

“How could he do it so easily?” I asked, as he strutted around us.

Keeper paused to think. “As Corvus, he is all crows. All crows, together, have much magic.” He nodded, agreeing with himself.

Corvus kept eyeing my ball cap, intent on the blue jay on the front. After his third fly-by, I snatched it off and stuffed it into my backpack.

Maddy pointed to where the doorway had been, where the mist was slowly dissolving. “Our parents will be there soon. They’ll be worried if they don’t find us.”

Keeper nodded. “Later, I will take you back to them. First, we will visit.”

Keeper had brought us back in time once before, so we just nodded.

Maddy and Keeper talked, Keeper leaning down, Maddy looking tiny as she craned her neck to look up at him. I relaxed as I listened to Keeper’s deep, deliberate voice. When I first met him, once I had gotten over being really, really scared, I’d wondered if he was slow and stupid. He’s not. He just thinks slowly, and speaks thoughtfully.

I turned and looked all around. From this high on Castle Mountain, I could see right across to the mountains on the other side of the Bow Valley. There were fewer clouds here, just scattered white puffs making the blue of the sky more vivid. A brisk west wind pulled at the clouds and kept us cool.

Far below, there was no TransCanada highway running up the valley, no railway line parallel to it, no highway winding past Storm Mountain south to Radium. Sounds were clearer, colours richer, and everything shimmered ever so slightly, radiant with magic. I could feel it seeping into me; I sighed, loving being back.

Photograph by Mark Harding



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MAUREEN BUSH has a post-graduate certificate of creative writing from Humber College. She also obtained a bachelor's degree in history and a masters in environmental design (Environmental Science), both from the University of Calgary. She is a trained mediator and public involvement consultant, and has written and edited in this field.

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