

# A RIVER OF CROWS by Shanessa Gluhm

## EXCERPT

Mud squished under Sloan's brown Doc Martens as she climbed the steep ridge. She had run up this incline ten thousand times but wasn't as surefooted now.

Sloan's shirt clung to her back and her hair was already frizzing. "We're in for another hot summer," the friendly postal worker told her yesterday. As if there was a different kind of summer here in East Texas.

The water moved slowly today, trickling around massive boulders in the middle of the wide river. It was the kind of sound that soothed people, the peaceful noises they played when getting a massage or trying to fall asleep. In a few more months it would be difficult to even hear the water over the sound of the crows. That was a sound nobody could fall asleep to.

Not much about the river had changed. Sloan's favorite climbing tree still stood; its limbs just as gnarled as she remembered them. If she closed her eyes, she could still see a pink glittery Easter egg in the crook of a branch, the last one she'd found the year they hunted eggs here.

A moss-covered fallen tree trunk she remembered was still here too. How many times had she, Ridge, and Noah balanced on it? The same trail still cut through the tall, pinecone-littered grass—the one made by animals visiting the water's edge. Bits of tinfoil and leftover plastic baggies from picnics still littered the bank.

Sloan peered into the creek. Minnows flashed beneath the surface and brought back a memory. She was a toddler wading in the ford of the river, holding hands with both her parents, splashing and singing "Ring Around the Rosie." They were laughing. They were happy.

Hard to believe this peaceful place was the site of her brother's death. Of course, the water hadn't been peaceful that day. It had rained for weeks and the creek raged. But it hadn't been the creek that took Ridge's life. It was their father.

Sloan closed her eyes to stop her tears. She inhaled, breathing in wet earth and rotting bark. Now was no time for a panic attack.

She sat down and touched the water. They'd never found her brother's body, just a shoe, a piece of his torn t-shirt, and the god-awful green beanie he loved so much. And, of course, his blood. "Where did you go, Ridge?" Sloan asked her reflection.

A crow cawed loudly from a tree. Sloan wondered if her mom had been out here yet to look for nests, wondered if she even cared anymore. Sloan stood. Only one way to find out, and she couldn't put it off any longer.