

CHAPTER SAMPLER



Don't
look up.

FEATHERED FIENDS



JOCELYN
BOISVERT

TRANSLATED BY DAVID WARRINER

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Feathered Fiends

By Jocelyn Boisvert

Translated from the French by David Warriner

SHIVERS

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Summary: In this short horror novel for middle-grade readers, fifteen-year-old Daphne and her family are besieged by killer birds while on a family vacation.

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CHAPTER



THE COLLISION

Daphne looks out the car window. She's watching the scenery go by. Trees, trees, as far as the eye can see. This is not exactly the beach vacation she'd been dreaming of this summer. Nope. Her family is going camping for two weeks in a national park instead. Apparently, it's a great place for her dad, Fabian, to indulge in his favorite hobby—bird-watching.

Yeah, but it's not the greatest place for a nearly sixteen-year-old to have a fun vacation, thinks Daphne. Instead of chilling out on the beach and taking refreshing dips in the ocean, she'll be stuck in the woods, swatting away mosquitoes and blackflies.

Daphne's brother, Nick, is half her age. He's been glued to his tablet, playing *Bird Bombs*, since they got in the car. "Are we nearly there yet?" he asks.



“We still have about two hours to go,” their mom, Solange, replies. She has her feet up on the dashboard.

“*If* the weather stays like this,” their dad says, stressing the *if*. “But it looks like a storm is brewing. Look up ahead.”

There’s a big dark cloud looming over the forest in the distance. It looks like a spaceship made of black cotton wool. It’s the first cloud to darken the clear blue sky since the family left home that morning.

“I didn’t see rain in the forecast, though,” Solange replies. She sounds a little worried. “Are you sure we’re going the right way, darling? I don’t know what made you think it was a good idea to take these backroads instead of the highway.”

“I’m just following the directions I looked up on my phone, sweetheart. It knows the area better than we do.”



“Still, I can’t believe this gravel road is the quickest way to get to the campground.”

“I don’t know if it’s the quickest, but it’s certainly the most scenic route. Just look at all this wonderful nature around us!” Fabian beams and then warbles some cringeworthy country tune.

Solange and her husband love each other, but sometimes they bicker about trivial little things. Daphne heaves an exasperated sigh. This trip is going to be deathly boring.

No surfing big waves in the ocean, or parasailing behind a speedboat, or lazing on the beach with a handsome stranger. She’s a thrill-seeker. Now all she has to look forward to is hiking in the woods. With a bit of luck, she’ll see some neat stuff, though. A frog, a snake, maybe a fox. Who knows? Maybe she’ll adopt a pet squirrel.

“Can we stop for a break?” Nick asks. “I really need to pee!”

“And I’m thirsty,” Daphne adds.

“The car’s thirsty too,” Solange says. “We’re nearly out of gas.”

“Good idea. It’ll do us all good to stretch our legs a little,” Fabian admits. “We haven’t seen any houses for a while, but the next town can’t be too far away.”

Solange stares at her phone screen, annoyed. “There’s no signal now,” she says. “So we have no idea where we are. Darn it. What happened to good old road maps?”

“I really, *really* need to go.” Nick groans, like a natural disaster is about to happen in his pants.

“Sorry, Nicky, we can’t stop right now,” Fabian says. “If you really, *really* need to go, you can always go pee in this.” He points to an empty coffee cup.

“Seriously?” Nick says, looking dubious.

“Only joking! You know I wouldn’t make you do that, right? You’d get it all over the car!” Fabian chuckles as he pulls over to the side of the road.

Daphne rolls her eyes. When he’s in a good mood, their dad can be a real joker. He’s so annoying.

“All right, Nick, go answer that call of nature! I’m going to count to ten. If you’re not back here when I get to ten, we’re leaving without you,” he quips.

Solange gives Fabian a gentle whack on the back of his head so he’ll stop goofing around.

“Ow! Be gentle. My brain contains precious knowledge!”

Meanwhile Nick ventures into the woods. But not too far. Although he wants some privacy, he doesn’t feel safe in this unfamiliar place.

He looks around to make sure there are no wild animals lurking nearby. Just as he’s unzipping his pants, something moves in the bushes and startles him. His imagination runs wild. Is it a porcupine? A cougar?

No, it’s just a bird with dark feathers, sitting on a branch. It tilts its head and stares at him. It’s unnerving. But Nick really needs to go, and he can’t wait any longer.

The bird watches him the whole time. It freaks Nick out. He stares at the ground. When he’s done, the bird flies down from the branch and lands next to the puddle Nick has made. The bird doesn’t look

well. Its body is shaking. It looks feverish—or furious. Almost like it might explode.

Nick zips up his pants and runs back to the car. Daphne is amused to see him in such a hurry.

“Did you see a bear or something?” she asks.

Nick’s too embarrassed to admit he was freaked out by a little bird. So he doesn’t say anything.

They drive away, and Nick goes right back to catapulting birds across the screen of his tablet as if they’re cannonballs.

“We’re in the middle of nowhere,” Solange says, groaning. “There’s no way we’re going to find a gas station around here.”

“The road’s been following a river for a while. At some point we’re going to find civilization again,” Fabian replies, trying to sound reassuring.

And sure enough, right around the next corner, they see a sign that says it’s two miles to the next town—Isidore Falls. Solange is thrilled.

“I told you so,” Fabian says, smiling.

Nick looks up, wondering why his parents seem so happy all of a sudden.

“We’re just glad we’re not going to run out of gas, chickadee,” Fabian says, looking back at Nick in the rearview mirror.

Nick frowns. And not because of what his dad’s just said.

THWACK!

Something hits the windshield. Something about the size of a baseball.

It makes all four of them jump. Fabian slams on the brakes and turns the steering wheel to the side. The car swerves and screeches to a stop on the muddy roadside. Fabian takes his hands off the steering wheel and turns to the kids in the back seat.

“Are you two all right?” he asks.

“What *was* that?” Nick asks. He sounds a little shaken.

There’s blood on the windshield.

“The same thing that’s in your stupid game,” Daphne says. “A bird just hit us.”

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The image features a white background filled with numerous black silhouettes of birds in flight. The birds are scattered throughout the frame, with some appearing larger and more detailed than others, suggesting varying distances or sizes. The silhouettes are simple, capturing the essential shape of a bird in flight, including its wings, tail, and head. The overall effect is a sense of movement and a large flock of birds.

FIRST AID

It takes a few moments for them all to catch their breath after what just happened. Meanwhile, the engine's still running.

"The poor thing," Fabian says. He sighs as he looks at the bird, which is lying lifeless on the ground. "What was it thinking? Birds often fly into building windows by accident, but rarely into windshields."

"Do you think it's dead?" Nick asks.

"I'll go check," his dad says. He turns off the engine and gets out of the car.

Fabian is a vet, so if the bird is injured, he might be able to help. Daphne opens her door too. She's about to step outside when she sees another bird.

"WATCH OUT!" she cries, half a second before it slams into her dad's head.

Fabian doubles over from the impact, like he's been punched in the face.

Daphne rushes over to him. "Are you okay, Dad?"

"Yeah. A bit stunned, but I'm okay."

"What's wrong with these birds? Have they forgotten how to fly?" she says.

Their attention is drawn to the wings flapping above them. Lots of wings. There's a flock of birds, all the same kind, circling overhead.

"I think we should get back in the car," Fabian says, rubbing the back of his head. "Just in case one of those critters goes rogue as well."

He gets back behind the wheel. Daphne waits a second. She looks up and sees even more birds in the sky now. It looks like there's an army of them. Solange examines the wound on her husband's head and grabs some paper towel to wipe away the blood in his hair.

Daphne can't quite grasp what just happened. It's so weird. Her dad loves birds. The last thing he deserves is to be hurt by one. She reaches for the door handle. "I'll get the first-aid kit from the trunk."

“Oh, don’t worry,” her dad says. “It’s just a scratch. I think I’ll survive.”

He’s about to turn the key in the ignition when Solange stops him.

“It’s not a good idea for you to drive after a hit on the head. Let’s trade places,” she says.

But as soon as she opens the passenger door, Nick cries out, “Be careful, Mom!” He looks worried.

“It’s okay, Nicky,” she reassures him. “Birds don’t attack people. That was just an accident.”

But Daphne and Nick are not so sure. They watch their parents going around the car to trade places. Their eyes widen as a bird suddenly swoops right over their mom’s head without her realizing it.

“See? I told you there’s nothing to worry about,” she says when she’s in the driver’s seat.

“But one just nearly flew right into you!” Daphne protests.

“Really? Well, it doesn’t matter, because we’re getting out of here right away.”

With those words, she starts the car and steps on the gas pedal. But the front wheels just spin.



“I think the car’s stuck in the mud,” Fabian says.

“Obviously!” His wife stomps harder on the gas pedal. The engine roars, but the car’s not going anywhere.

“Stop! There’s no point burning what little gas we have left,” Fabian says.

In the distance, under the big dark cloud, a bolt of lightning flashes across the sky.

“Try again but turn the wheels this time,” he calmly suggests.

A huge clap of thunder gives them all a fright. There must be a hundred agitated birds swarming above them. Well, that looks like a portent of doom, Daphne thinks.

Her mom stomps on the gas again and turns the steering wheel one way, then the other. The car still doesn't move. She resists the urge to pound her fists on the wheel in frustration.

"There's only one thing to do. I'll have to get out and push," Fabian says. "That should get us out of the mud and back on the road."

Just as he says that, two small dark-colored birds land on the hood of the car, as if to warn the family that this is not a good idea. The birds tilt their heads to the side and stare in through the windshield. There's something sinister in their beady eyes. Nick thinks one of them looks just like the bird he saw in the woods.

"These birds are freaking me out," he says.

"They don't look very friendly," Daphne admits.

"They're harmless songbirds. They look like starlings to me," Fabian says. For someone who knows a lot about birds, he doesn't sound very sure.

Suddenly the two birds launch themselves at the windshield. They're squawking and beating their wings against the glass.

Solange shrieks. "Are they out of their minds?"

She switches on the windshield wipers to scare them off, but that only seems to agitate them even more.

I've had enough of this, Daphne thinks. As the birds claw at the wiper blades, she says that she'll get out and push. I'm stronger than I look, she tells herself.

"Let's do it together. With two of us pushing, we'll be out of here in no time," her dad says.

"Be careful! Those birds don't look friendly." Solange has changed her tune now.

"They're only small," Daphne says. "They're not exactly going to kill us."

"Maybe not, but they can hurt you. Look what they did to your dad."

Daphne's putting on a brave face. But the truth is, she's scared. Because something about these birds is wrong. Very wrong.

"Ready, Daphne?" her dad asks.

"If any one of them so much as touches me, I'll pluck all its feathers out," she replies with false bravado.

"Let's go!" Fabian opens the door and steps outside.

Daphne does the same. They brace themselves against the rear bumper of the car and push with all their might.

Solange revs the engine. The car moves—but only a few inches. They can do it. Daphne knows they can.

“Get back in the car RIGHT NOW!” Solange screams.

Daphne looks up and sees about a dozen birds coming right at them. Like fighter jets.