

## Prologue

### Fressingfield, November 1884

He awoke to a whimper barely audible above the dawn chorus, then the child screamed and Jonathan lurched to full consciousness from the safety of sleep. Watery rays from the early morning sun shed scant light on the tiny box room he rented from his sister.

He lifted the threadbare blanket from his chest and surveyed the room. It was unseasonably warm he thought, wiping beads of sweat from his brow. Night terrors again, no doubt, though he could not remember. His recall had all but vanished since he found the first crow. It had been replaced with a relentless dread that masked his memories.

The stairs creaked. Harriet was taking one of the children below. Jonathan did not attempt sleep again; the room was too dark, the lighting too shadowy. The corners of the room were bathed in darkness and he could only imagine what lurked there. Better to be downstairs in company. How could children sleep soundly in this house, in this village of the damned, near the witch?

Jonathan laced his hobnail boots, buttoned a worsted jacket and pulled a tattered smock over his head. It had been many years since he worked in the fields but he never lost the habit of wearing a smock, regardless of season. It reminded him of better times, of haymaking songs, company and sunshine; poor days but happy, before he was widowed; before he was bewitched.

He trudged downstairs and into the parlour where Harriet poked the embers of a fire. A grubbily-clad child lay resting in the crook of her arm.

"You look tired," she said. "Bad dreams again?"

"Every night, sister," he muttered. "The crows...." His voice tailed off and he stared into the distance, lost in thought.

"Forget the blessed crows," sighed Harriet. "It is all nonsense. A grown man should know better."

"What would you know, woman?" he snapped. "It is I who has fallen prey to the witch."

"There are no more witches, Jon Carter." Harriet shook her head and placed the child roughly on the floor by the fire. It reached a hand towards the embers.

"No," she barked, swiping the hand away. The child rested its chin on its knees and rocked backwards and forwards, staring balefully at the fire.

"You'll do yourself no good with that sort of talk," she continued, lifting a black kettle onto the stove. "You are old enough to know better."

"Nothing else accounts for the crows." Jonathan raised his head. His milky blue eyes were bloodshot with lack of sleep.

"Now, now." Harriet positioned her bulky frame on the wooden bench & shuffled closer. She took his hand. "It was a shock, Jon, and a nasty way to scare a body. But it is mischief-making pure and simple, wrought by human hands."

"But why me, and why crows?" he murmured. "Crows mean death and there's plenty of that in the village."

"Come now, Jon," replied Harriet. "There's been naught unexpected this year except little Polly Gable's scarlet fever and Harry Roper falling off his cart. All the other deaths are from age or long-standing illness; nothing sinister."

"All very easy for you to say, sister, but you are not troubled by the crows."

"How do you know that, Jon? The last ones were rotting on the doorstep of this very cottage. They could have been put there to give me fright."

"You know why," Jonathan said softly. "I was alone for the curse crow. It was in my resting place, waiting for me."

"There's more folk than you break their journey on that old tree stump by the brook, Jonathan Carter," replied Harriet. "Why do you think the crow was meant for you?"

"Because Elijah Scoggins says so," Jonathan replied. "The crow was for me or my namesake."

"And how do you know so long after you found it?"

“I took the note to Scoggins,” replied Jonathan. “He can read and write and knows how to keep his mouth hushed.”

“What note? You never mentioned a note?”

“There was a note in the top of the stick that pierced the crow’s breast. I kept it.”

“Whatever for?”

“I could not read it and I was ashamed to show anyone who could. Then after the second crow...” Jonathan lifted a trembling hand to his forehead. “... my pride was put to fright so I took it to the parish clerk.”

“What did it say?” Harriet asked, patting her brother’s hand.

“It said,” Jonathan swallowed, “It said, ‘I curse you Jonathan Carter. Death stalks you.’ He stared into Harriet’s eyes. “I am bewitched.”

Harriet sighed as she rose from the bench and began poking the fire again. After a few moments, she spoke. “I do not doubt that some unkind person has taken against you, brother. But there are no witches now. Doubtful there ever were. You must stop thinking such nonsense and see it for the cruel trick it is.”

“It is no trick. I cannot sleep easy. I am hot, I am cold and my heart beats so hard and irregular, I fear it will burst. I was well before the first crow and now I am frail and frightened.”

“Well I am not,” said Harriet. She snatched a broom from the corner of the room and began sweeping the floor vigorously. “You are older than I, Jon Carter. You should know better than to let an old busy-body frighten you into believing myths. And you a big, tall man to boot. I would not be worried by a few rotting crows.”

“Perhaps you would not,” said Jon slowly, “but George fears the crows as much as I.”

“George Corbyn? My husband?” Harriet stopped sweeping and wiped her hands on her apron. “George fears no-one.” She clenched her jaw and raised an eyebrow, challenging her brother to disagree.

“He tells me different,” said Jonathan. “It was George who said crows are harbingers of death. His family told stories of witchcraft and rituals, magpies, demons and the like. He said they were warnings passed down from his ancestors. Naturally, George believes in evil.”

“We all believe in evil,” said Harriet. “All good God-fearing folk do, but the rest of it is stuff and nonsense. I am not surprised to hear George has been talking twaddle. His kin always were a superstitious lot but ours were not and nor should you be.”

Jon placed a hand in the small of his back & rose to his feet, wincing at the effort. “Doubtless you are right, sister,” he said. “I will walk to the village now for my weekly shave. I have no wish to offend the God-fearing folk of Fressingfield when I go to church tomorrow.”

Harriet smiled. “Away you go to the barber’s shop” she said. “Undiscovered creatures will be found in your beard hair if you do not get it shaved off soon.”

Jonathan was in his seventh decade but he walked regularly. It was over a mile to the village centre and the distance did not usually trouble him, despite occasional palpitations. Today, it was a chore. His heart was not in it. The lane towards the village was long and straight and stretched into the distance like an insurmountable obstacle. Head bowed, he trudged along, hands deep in the pockets of his smock. There was not another soul in sight.

It was several hours past daybreak but the lane, bordered by trees and hedges, was poorly lit. Tall trees arched towards the pathway, threatening to obscure the sky. Jonathan shrugged off a feeling of melancholy as he surveyed the dismal route ahead. He continued his lonely walk watching tree tops shimmer in the billowing wind. Jonathan shivered as he neared the end of the lane and felt the first drizzle of rain. The drizzle turned into a shower and started seeping into his clothes.

He turned towards the village centre. The pale chimney pots of the vicarage stood in stark relief against the sombre black of the surrounding trees. They gleamed like beacons of hope in a shadowy, menacing gloom. Jonathan rubbed his chest, panting. His heart skipped a beat, righted itself, and skipped another. Though the cold numbed his fingers, a bead of sweat trickled down his sideburns. He thumped his chest trying to quell the feeling of panic that accompanied the irregular heartbeats. Palpitations that increased in frequency whenever he thought of the crows.

He reached the wooden gate at the top of the churchyard and gazed towards the familiar timber framed rear of the Fox & Goose Inn. The red-bricked building with its moss-covered roof, was strangely comforting. There were quicker ways to the barber shop, but Jonathan liked routine. His Saturday morning shave ritual always took the same route from the rear gate to the fore gate of the church. Once level with

the Fox & Goose, it was not far to Church Street where the barber lived. He could sit down there, rest his tired legs and will his heart beat back to normal.

He picked his way through the churchyard along the stony path, and past the graves of his ancestors. The square-towered flint church stood solidly to his left. The November sky was indigo blue and covered in dark clouds, heavy with the threat of storms. He could not remember seeing such a black sky this early in the day. The irregular gravestones seemed to ripple as he walked by. He gazed upon them through tired eyes amidst ever-increasing winds.

Once past the church, head bowed against the driving rain, Jonathan turned towards the Fox and Goose. An intricately carved figure nestled in a corner post. He would touch it for luck when he was a small boy. He wondered whether he ought to touch it now. Luck might break the curse, but his musings went no further.

A sudden noise ripped through the stillness of the churchyard. Startled, Jonathan stared towards the porch. Nobody was there. The churchyard was empty. Another shriek pierced the air and this time he recognised it - the shrill caw of a crow. He picked up his pace and hastened towards the church gate. It was only a short distance away. Across the road, he watched a woman in a black bonnet scuttle down Church Street. Only a few minutes more and he would be safe in her company.

As he stumbled towards the gate, his eyes were drawn to a puddle of black mud on the stone path. He moved closer, trying not to look as a cold dread clawed at his chest. It could not be; not in the Lord's churchyard. Pray God, no. But there was no doubt. The dark mass in the path was all that remained of a trio of crows, fetid, stinking and crawling with worms. Jonathan clutched his heart as he fell towards a slanted, moss-covered tombstone. He lay prone feeling his heart beat ebb away. The last thing he ever saw was a crow impaled upon a sharpened stick, as it tumbled to the ground by the side of his head.