

## Prologue

### THE MURDER OF CROWS

January 1947

The murder of crows had feathers blacker than the mouth of Catesby Tunnel.

They were perched along the looping garland of telegraph wires running parallel to the railway tracks, hopping and flapping from one wire to another, making croaking and cracking noises that rattled around the deep, but otherwise silent, railway cutting. The land lay still. The wind had finally dropped, leaving undisturbed the fresh snow caught upon the black-etched lines of the tree branches, and only the birds' movements sent showers of fine powder from the sagging wires to the drifts below.

The crows watched and waited, impatiently flapping a wing or making small jumps along the wires as they looked for any chance of food: searching for a small rodent stopped dead by the cold far from its cosy nest, or a rabbit, chilled and starved to the bone, its last hope of food buried beneath impenetrable layers of snow, now crouched into a furry ball, eyelids drooping as merciful sleep lulled it away from life in this frozen land, soon to become the crows' next meal.

*Snow had fallen, snow on snow.*

Two emboldened jackdaws were strutting confidently around the railway tracks, turning their heads in jerky movements to fix their sapphire-blue eyes on the ground, pecking speculatively at any small object welded by ice to the hoary sleepers. Wires squealed as they pulled a signal into action, fighting against the deep frost caked upon the little pulley wheels that carried the wires from the distant signal box. The yellow-and-black signal arm groaned and pointed its twin metal fingers skywards. A deep rumble started to resonate through the frozen ground, the wooden sleepers quivering slightly under the feet of the jackdaws as the rails raised a fragile, glassy, ringing sound. The tunnel mouth exhaled a blast of air that smelt of wet loam and sulphur as the sound of a panting beast became clearer. Huffing and hissing, with fast-measured beats that ricocheted and roared around the tunnel walls, it drew closer. The jackdaws, without even a glance at the tunnel, flapped slowly into

the air with long, easy wing-beats and curved across the dimming sky towards the skeletal trees in the fields above the cutting.

The crows, taking this as their lead, leaped into the air like so many pieces of burnt paper swirling above a bonfire as the snorting iron horse thundered out of the tunnel, whistle blowing in a wavering, mournful blast that carried far across the iron-hard land.

The locomotive was streaming steam and its pounding motion was wrapped in clouds of white that swirled around the trailing carriages, dipping and diving between the bogies until finally the last shreds were torn into tiny fragments and melted away into the air. The engine was a rich, apple green, startlingly fresh against the white of the snow, and rimed in frost where the steel was not warmed by the roaring fire in its belly. The smoke clouds collecting around the cab were flashing in reds and oranges as the barely-visible fireman shovelled more coal into the open firebox, looking for all the world like a devil stoking the fires of hell. The driver leant out of the cab window, cap pulled tight down over his forehead, squinting at the signal arm, flecks of snow stinging his eyes and cheeks.

The train rattled past, a fine spray of snow swirling briefly around the rails before the land settled back into its frozen stillness. One by one, the crows circled above the railway cutting, watching the train stream past like a tiny model, then glided back down onto the telegraph wires, eager to see if the passing train had shed any crumb of food or disturbed some small creature from its lair. The piercing eyes of the jackdaws drew them in still closer; a ragged black vanguard, swooping and curving in graceful patterns just feet above the rails then, flapping and stalling their flight, they dropped down upon their long legs into the powdery snow. A chorus of excited cracks and croaks started up from the watching crows, like a sinister audience urging the jackdaws on.

Their luck was in.