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Opening Extract from...

Black Feathers

The Black Dawn Volume 1

Written by Joseph D'Lacey

Published by Angry Robot

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JOSEPH D'LACEY

Black Feathers

The Black Dawn
vol I



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He who fears the crowman

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

For Ishbel, without whose selflessness
and support the work could
not have been done.

PROLOGUE

When the final days came, it was said that Satan walked the Earth in the guise of a crow. Those who feared him called him Scarecrow or sometimes Black Jack. I know him as the Crowman.

I speak for him.

Across the face of the Earth, in every nation, great suffering arose and billions perished. An age of solar flares began, rendering much of our technology useless. The cataclysms that befell us, the famine and sicknesses, the wars – it was all the work of the Crowman, so they said. Yet it was ignorance that fuelled our terror of him and the rumours of his wickedness.

Ignorance and convenience; we needed someone to blame.

None who beheld the Crowman, whether in dreams or in reality, ever forgot him. Nor will he be forgotten now. We still recall his deeds of war and sacrifice. We tell his story to our children so that they may pass it on to theirs. Only in this way can we keep him close and dispel the lies. This you must understand: the Crowman is no more evil than you or I.

Hear his tale now. Take it to heart.

Though it pains me, I will tell it, clear and true.

I do not *want* to recount it. I do not want to recall the casting out of so much goodness, nor the reaping of so much pain.

But, for the sake of all of us, I must and I will. Mark it well. Tell your kin and those you love his story. Tell them this: Satan walks nowhere on this Earth, nor has he ever, save where he treads within the human heart. Tell his story and let us keep the Crowman alive for as long as our kind walks the greening byways of this world.

Above all, make them understand one thing: the Crowman is real.

Where does his story begin? It begins in England, not really all that long ago. It begins with a nativity; the coming into the world of a special child. It was this infant who changed everything. This lonely boy, who became a man in the harshest of times; it was he who was destined to seek out the Crowman, only he who had the grace and strength to find him. It was this wondrous boy who revealed the Crowman to the world.

I am an old man now, broken and blind. But I still see the boy's journey. I see it with great clarity, as though I'm sitting on his shoulder or holding his hand. Sometimes I look out through his eyes, other times I watch from above. I see everything, even the things he couldn't. I find I want to shout to him, to push him this way or that, to warn him about what I know is coming. But I can't, of course. His story, and the story of the Crowman, is already over. It finished long, long ago and there's no changing any of it now.

All I can do is tell it. And in the telling, resurrect him for the good of all. For, without the teller, there is no tale. And without this tale, there can be no world.

PART I
AMONG CROWS

"Sometimes, when a bird cries out,
Or the wind sweeps through a tree,
Or a dog howls in a far-off field
I hold still and listen a long time.

My world turns and goes back to the place
Where, a thousand forgotten years ago,
The bird and the blowing wind
Were like me, and were my brothers.

My soul turns into a tree,
And an animal and a cloud bank.
Then changed and odd it comes home
And asks me questions. What should I reply?"

HERMAN HESSE

"Scarecrow, scarecrow, fingers o' bone
Here come the scarecrow
Into your home
Scarecrow, scarecrow, teeth o' glass
Here come the scarecrow
Let 'im pass

Scarecrow, scarecrow, eyes o' stone
Here come the scarecrow
When you're all alone"

CHILDREN'S RHYME, BLACK DAWN ERA, ORAL TRADITION

"The high,
the low
all of creation
God gives to humankind to use. If this privilege is misused,
God's Justice permits creation to punish humanity."

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

1

I see the boy's birth.

There were signs; portents, if you will.

His two sisters were banished from the master bedroom where Sophie Black wished to give birth. It was upon the same bed where she had conceived the boy but for this, the moment of his introduction to the world, her husband was excluded. Sophie's closest friend, Amelia Porter, comforted her, squeezing her hand and massaging her sacrum with every accelerating contraction.

There was no sign of the midwife.

Downstairs, Louis Black paced the living room, checking his watch and sipping often from his whisky glass. He glanced at the inglenook and stooped to add a log to an already roaring fire. As he stood, he noticed the celebratory cigar poking from the breast pocket of his worn tweed jacket. He pushed the cigar out of sight.

On the mantelpiece stood a collection of photos. Louis's eyes were drawn to the tiny birth portraits of his daughters – wrinkled, red faces cocooned in white blankets and protected in the arms of their mother. A dozen times already Louis had thought of fetching the camera from his study. A dozen times he'd checked himself, deeming it hasty. Childbirth was

dangerous, unpredictable.

He massaged his temples and took another drink.

Upstairs, in her older sister's bedroom, Judith couldn't sit still. She spun and danced while Angela sat cross-legged on the bed picking at the threads from a tear in the knee of her jeans.

"It's going to be a boy, Lella," said Judith.

"How would you know that? You're just hoping for a little brother you can fuss over."

"I dreamed about him. He'll have black hair and grey eyes."

"When did you dream that?"

"Can't remember," said Judith.

"You're making it up."

"Maybe I am. Want to see me skip backwards? I've been practising."

Lifting her arms with each step, Judith managed to skip backwards in a small circle. She stood, waiting for judgement and smoothing her fine hair back from her face. Angela didn't look up.

"What do you think, Lella? I can do a handstand too. But I have to be near the wall or I fall over."

"Mum has blond hair and green eyes. Dad has brown hair and blue eyes. We're both blond with blue eyes. It won't have black hair. And it won't be a boy."

Their mother's scream, from the other end of the corridor, left a hush in the room. Judith ran to the bed, climbed up and into the arms of her sister. A few moments later a longer cry pierced the entire house. Judith clung to Angela and whispered:

"It doesn't sound like her."

Judith felt Angela's warm cheek against her head. Her sister's hair smelled of shampoo and her cardigan was soft lambswool. Judith wished Angela would hold her more often until their mother howled again.

Judith cried out too, "You're hurting me."

There were deep red dents in the skin of Judith's arm.

Angela released her grip a little but still hugged Judith hard.

"Sorry."

"It's OK, Lella. Was she like this with me?"

"I wasn't there. Maybe Dad knows. Come on, we'll ask him."

"But he'll shout at us. We're meant to stay up here."

Louis Black screwed the lid back onto a bottle of Dimple. When he turned he saw two pale faces.

"What are you doing downstairs?"

The moment lengthened, broken only by mellow crackles and hisses from the hearth. Louis smiled and they ran to him, Angela hugging his hips, Judith clutching one of his thighs. He placed his glass on the mantelpiece, knelt and put an arm around each of them.

"Is she going to be OK, Daddy?" asked Angela, trembling. "Her voice is so horrible. She sounds like… like an animal."

Angela began to cry. Seeing her big sister break down, Judith wept too. Louis Black guided them to his huge armchair and lifted them both up, one onto each side of his lap. He squeezed them to him and spoke in a deep, soothing rumble.

"Your mother is a very strong and healthy woman. This is the third time she's done this, so she knows what she's doing. She'll be fine."

"But why is it hurting her?" asked Judith.

Louis sighed.

"Giving birth is painful. Anyone would cry out under the same circumstances."

"Does it always hurt?" asked Angela.

"Yes, always."

"I'm never going to have babies," said Judith.

"Or me," said Angela.

Louis nodded.

"A very wise decision. However, if no women ever gave birth again, all the people on Earth would die out."

"Why?" asked Judith.

Angela rolled her eyes.

"Duh! Because there would be no children born to replace them, stupid."

Louis's eyes silenced Angela but Judith had other questions.

"Does that mean that we'll have to have children even if we don't want to?"

"No. It doesn't mean that. The choice will be yours. Anyway, Jude, you're a little young to be thinking about it. But when the time comes, you'll know exactly what to do, just like your mother does. It's all perfectly natural and normal."

There was a vigorous rapping at the front door.

Louis stood, spilling the girls who followed him to the black-and-white tiled front passageway. Louis shivered and rubbed the chill from his arms. The girls sheltered behind him as he turned the Yale lock and drew open the door. Snowflakes and frosty air blew in. Louis frowned at the weather. Filling the doorstep was a plump barrel of a woman in a navy-blue overcoat with the collar turned up. On her head was a starched white nurse's hat and in her right hand a battered leather medical bag.

"Mr Black?"

"Yes."

"I'm Frances Godfrey."

Louis blinked at her, blinked at the snow whirling around her.

"The midwife."

"Right, right. Come in."

He stood aside. Frances Godfrey was so broad he had to press against the wall to let her pass. She walked with a determined waddle and removed her overcoat in a series of impatient shrugs. Below it her nurse's watch lay upon a massive shelf of bosom. Her cardigan was ill-designed for such an enormous chest and it stayed back somewhere around her armpits. Louis noticed all this with a perplexed look and spent another few moments staring into the night. White flakes swirled in and out of view. A layer of powder an inch thick

already coated the ground.

"Was this forecast?" he asked.

"I've no idea. Which room?"

"Sorry?"

"Which room is your wife in?"

"Oh, I see. First on the left at the top of the stairs."

"Nearest bathroom?"

"It's en suite."

"Fine. Will you be joining us, Mr Black?"

"Ah, no. No, I won't."

"In that case I shall see you later. I may call on you to bring certain items from time to time. Will you be… available?"

"Yes, of course."

"Some tea would be most welcome. I'm frozen to the core."

She held out her overcoat, ice crystals becoming beads of rain which dripped onto the hallway tiles. Louis took the coat and she wobbled away from the three of them, her feet pointing to ten and two. The stairs creaked louder than usual as she climbed them, her behind almost totally filling the gap between banister and wall. Her blue, drip-dry uniform crackled over black nylon tights as she ascended. She drew the too-small cardigan tightly around her against the chill. It sprang open again straight away. Long before she reached the bedroom, her pace had slowed and her chest was heaving. As she raised her hand to knock, an agonised stiletto of a scream cut them all.

"My god," whispered Louis. He took the stairs two at a time. The midwife had already opened the door and appraised the situation with a glance. She turned to Louis and pushed him away.

"Stay out, please, Mr Black. This won't take long."

Louis had seen past her bulk, though, and he never forgot the scene:

A freak gust had sucked open a window. Unexpected winter breathed into the room. Snowflakes twirled in and fell to the carpet. A fleeting impression of black wings beating their way

into the night was interrupted by the curtains billowing inwards. In the reflective black of the panes which remained closed, Louis saw his own face, dazed by a glimpse of his wife.

On their bed, padded with layers of towels, Sophie squatted with her hands thrust between her legs, intent on what was happening there. She wore the top half of an old pair of his pyjamas and was naked from the waist down. This was the position she most enjoyed when making love to him but beneath her now was a dark, wet stain of blood and mucus. Her ankles were streaked with fresh and drying spatters of her body fluids. Amelia Porter's hands were on Sophie's shoulders, either giving massage or merely support through her touch. Sophie's face, though shiny with tears, was not contorted by pain; she appeared to be concentrating. Louis was awed by the primal will he saw there. She screamed again, her face showing the strain, and his heart broke for her. His wife – so determined, so strong, so full of courage.

Then the midwife was closing the door on him.

"I'm sorry, Mr Black. You can be with her very soon. Why don't you go and put the kettle on?"

Louis shut his eyes, committing the scene to memory. It was sacred and extreme, both beautiful and base. A smell from the room lingered in his nostrils – the dry, almost Alpine chill of the air and the moist scent of Sophie's sweat and blood. My god, he thought again, there was a brininess to that smell; could it have been the smell of her tears? Perhaps the impact of the moment had brought some extra intensity to his perception. And those dark, beating wings at the window: surely just a misinterpretation of his own reflection in the glass.

Stunned, he walked downstairs.

His daughters stood unmoving in the hallway. They looked small and terrified. As he held his hands out to them and they began to walk towards him, there was one last scream from Sophie. It paralysed them all with its rawness. Louis could almost feel her throat bleed as it released that final, barbed

howl. Some seconds later there was a smaller sound, also a cry, but that of an infant. The front door blew open and the panes of frosted glass in its upper half rattled in their frames when it smashed into the wall. The fierceness of the wind frightened the girls even more and they began to cry again. Louis walked to the front door, certain he'd closed it properly the first time. A living strength resisted him from the other side. He had to use his shoulder and much of his weight to make sure the lock caught and clicked.

He ushered the girls into the kitchen, filled the steel kettle and switched it on. From the cupboard he took down four tea mugs and arranged them on a tray. He made the girls get the tea bags and pot, sent them again for the milk and sugar. All this he did without being fully present, without conscious control, so that, when it was all arranged and the kettle had almost boiled, he barely knew how they'd done it.

There was a call from upstairs. It was Amelia.

"Louis? I think you'd better come up."

He walked up the stairs, aware that his movements were stiff and automatic. Amelia's face was tear-stained and full of care when he reached the top. She held the door open. The girls were right behind him but they waited on the threshold. The towels now lay in a tangled pile on the floor. Sophie was propped up with pillows, still in his pyjama top but now tucked under the bedcovers. In her arms she held what looked like a giant, mummified prune.

She smiled through crystal-tinted lashes.

"It's a boy, Lou. Our very own boy." She held the oblong parcel up high. "Say hello to Gordon Louis Black."

2

The girl erupts from the cover of the woods, scattering leaves, her face whipped by vines and tendrils. She feels no pain, only the imperative of flight and the animal will to survive.

Was it real? she wonders. Was *he* even there?

There are no answers.

To look back will waste vital moments. Focussing ahead she sprints for home through the cornfield, the stalks high and green around her, hearing nothing now but the rustle and snap of leaves as she passes, the tramp of her feet on the moist earth, the pounding circuits of her breath. She dare not even cry in case it saps her strength.

Her foot catches a fallen cornstalk. She takes long ungainly steps in an attempt to right herself and slides face first into the dirt. She's running again before she feels the pain of the soil-hidden flints which have pierced her palms and knees. Moments later the cuts make their presence known. The pain tightens her skin, slows her down.

She spits earth from her mouth and wills more speed to her legs.

The girl bursts from the cornfield, taking a few stalks with her into the meadow. The uprooted greenery falls away. Horses, cattle and sheep look up as she passes, before continuing to

graze unconcerned. She's running uphill now, her thighs beginning to burn. At the top of the meadow there's a gate. She's already certain there won't be enough time to stop and open it. Not knowing exactly how, she vaults the gate, ecstatic to leave a barrier between her and it. *Him*.

She's in the village now, scattering chickens as she pounds down the main street. Faces look up and watch her pass. Someone shouts:

"Hey, Megan! You alright?"

But she's already left them behind.

And then she's at her parents' front door and through it and bolting it and leaning back against it. Panting, sagging to the floor. Crying.

Her mother wipes her floury hands on her apron and rushes to her daughter.

"Megan? Whatever's the matter?"

Sobs and gulps for breath have muted her. Megan's mother eases the girl to her feet and guides her to a chair. She ladles water from a stone ewer and hands it to the girl in an earthenware cup.

"Calm yourself down, Megan. I'm going to fetch your father."

Megan gasps and shakes her head.

"No, Amu… don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere, Meg. I'll ring the bell for him."

Megan's mother pushes open the kitchen window and uses a poker from the fireplace to whack a rusted metal tube hanging just outside. It releases a resonant, melodious clang. Three short peals, the sign to come home quick. And soon enough, Megan's father is entering through the back, also panting, his face creased with concern.

"What's happened?"

"I don't know yet. She's barely got her wind back. Came in here like Black Jack himself was after her."

At that, the girl looks up and weeps anew.

Her father, a bear of a man with kind eyes and a gentle smile

that even a chest-length beard can't hide, comes to sit with his daughter at the table.

"It's all right now, petal. You're safe." He puts his huge hand over hers and squeezes gently. "Tell me all about it."

"I saw something… some*one*… in the woods."

"Who did you see?"

"I don't know."

"What did they look like?" he asks.

She looks at her mother again and puts her hand over her mouth.

"Come on, Megan. If it's someone dangerous we need to send people after them as soon as we can."

"Black."

That's all she says at first.

"What?"

"Black. All in black from head to toe."

Her mother and father exchange a brief glance.

"What else?"

"He…"

"It was a man?"

Megan nods and her blond hair shakes with the vigorousness of the movement. Her father's frown deepens.

"He had a hat. A tall hat. It was flat on top – like a chimney. And his clothes were all black. A long black coat that poked out at the back. And black trousers and big, fluffy black boots."

"Fluffy?"

She nods again.

"Like… feathers or something. Black feathers. They came out of his sleeves and his collar too."

"And what about his face, Megan," asks her mother now. "Did you see his face?"

The girl nods. More slowly this time.

"It was like a bird's face. Pointy. And his eyes were grey. Like storm clouds."

Again, her mother and father look at each other. The father nods.

"You mustn't be frightened, petal. I'm going to fetch Mr Keeper."

"Mr Keeper? Why? I'm not sick, Apa."

"Mr Keeper has other responsibilities than tending the poorly. He knows things most folk don't."

"I thought he was a healer."

"He's that and more," says Apa.

"He can see into the weave of things," says her mother. "He'll know what's best."

Mr Keeper looks very odd.

Megan's never been this close to the man before but he's always been an object of fascination. He wears what Amu and Apa call a "boilasuit". For the winter there's a fur lining that buttons inside the boilasuit but in the October sunshine there's no need for it. The boilasuit is faded green and either it's too small for him or he's cut a few inches off the cuffs and legs. He wears no shoes and his hands and feet are always dirty. Mr Keeper wears a dun-coloured sack strapped over his shoulders which gives him a big humped back. The sack has many pockets sewn onto it and there are always interesting things poking out – strange plants that don't grow near Beckby village, small woven pouches with unknown contents, the bones of animals and the occasional brightly coloured feather. Megan always thought his bag was full of medicines but, now that he's been summoned to their cottage and knowing there's nothing wrong with her, she wonders what other purpose they might have.

Apa ushers him in, closes the door with a loud crash and then follows. A few folk have gathered outside the cottage, attracted by Megan's odd behaviour and the coming of Mr Keeper. Amu opens the door and makes eye contact with the bystanders. They all retreat.

Mr Keeper has had to duck to enter and now he shrugs his cumbersome pack to the floor. When he stands straight he's

even taller than Apa and his hair is longer but much dirtier, matted and clumped together in what Megan thinks are called deadlots. As soon as he is inside their home she can smell him too. He doesn't wash, that much is clear, and yet he doesn't smell bad like the diseased, unwashed lunatics who wander from village to village begging scraps before moving on. He smells of work-sweat and of the very earth itself. He smells of dried wildflowers and wet sap. The whites of his eyes flash like lightning when he glances around and the wrinkles at their corners are deep and kind when he smiles – which he does as his gaze falls upon her.

"Megan," he says.

Is it a greeting, an accusation, a question? In her panic she doesn't know.

His tones are deep and soft, rumbling like the purr of a wildcat, soughing like wind through the trees. And she has a strong sense that Mr Keeper has not come alone. Even though there's nothing to see, she feels the lives of many things, or perhaps their spirits, moving around him as though he were their hub. She wants to trust him because she can see that trust is what Mr Keeper is all about. She wants to but–

"It's all right, little thing," he says. "I only want to talk with you. And after that… we'll see."

So saying, Mr Keeper approaches the heavy wooden table and sits on a small stool in front of Megan. His face is now about level with hers and she can smell his breath, all mint and wild fennel and smoke. The smell makes her pleasantly dizzy and a smile comes to visit the corners of Mr Keeper's mouth.

He turns to her parents.

"Do you wish to stay or would you rather be… elsewhere?"

Apa says, "I think she'll talk more easily if we're not here to distract her." He smiles at Amu and holds out his hand. "Come on, hen. Let's go for a walk."

When they reach the door, Amu turns back to Megan.

"Don't you be afraid now, Meg. Mr Keeper's here to help. You can tell him anything. Anything at all. Understand?"

Megan nods, but her stomach flutters.

3

On a Saturday morning near the end of October, when Gordon was two weeks old, the Black family were all outside in the rugged back garden. The scent of wild roses from the last blossoms lingered in the air. Aside from the snow flurries and gales of a fortnight earlier – events no one mentioned – it had felt like an endless summer. Mornings and afternoons were chill by now but it was still bright enough that none of them wanted to be indoors at the weekend.

Sophie sat in a deckchair reading a thriller. A wide-brimmed, floppy white hat kept the sun out of her eyes. Behind her on the terrace, well-insulated in his pram, Gordon slept. Angela was reading a magazine on a blanket on the grass and Judith was alternately running, skipping and dancing or stopping and losing herself for long moments in the tiny details of the life of the garden. For a full fifteen minutes she had been on her stomach watching wasps eat their way through a fallen pear. Each of them wore a skin-tight yellow and black uniform and walked with an agitated mechanical twitch. Their black antennae wavered unceasingly and their yellow mandibles cut through bite after bite of pear flesh.

Louis, walking past with a wheelbarrow full of hedge trimmings and fallen leaves, saw what she was doing.

"You be careful, Jude."

She looked up at him.

"They're like soldiers, Daddy. Look how pretty."

"They're not so pretty when they sting you. Don't get so close."

Mesmerised by the wasps and their work, she rested her chin on the backs of her hands.

"Judith."

"What, Daddy?"

"Back away from them a little, would you?"

Not looking up, she scooted backwards, somehow keeping her head on her hands. Her skirt rucked up, exposing the backs of her smooth thighs and white knickers. As young as she was he could already see her mother's shape in her. As he walked on towards the compost heap the wheelbarrow bumped up and down over the uneven grass, eliciting tinny rumbles. He wondered if Judith would still be so unselfconscious in ten years and dreaded the complexities that time would no doubt bring.

When he'd dumped the load, he abandoned the wheelbarrow and walked over to Angela's blanket. She too was lying on her front, bending one leg up until the heel of her sandal touched her backside and then letting the leg straighten until the toe bounced off the grass. Louis squatted beside her and glanced at the article she was reading.

"Sports day diets?" He struggled to register the implications. "I'm sure we've got some *Bunty* annuals in the loft. Mighty Mo and Watson the Wonder Dog were great."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Dad."

"Wholesome children's books, Angela. Instead of pre-teen *Cosmopolitan*."

"It's not like that."

"How would you know?"

Angela tutted.

"It's just a magazine, Dad. I'm not turning anorexic."

When she said nothing else, Louis stood up.

"Fine."

He wandered over to Sophie's deckchair and sat down beside her on the grass. She didn't acknowledge his arrival.

"*You* still love me, don't you, Soph?"

He waited a long time for the reply.

"Hmm?"

"I asked you if, out of all the females in this family, you were the one who still loved me."

After a few moments, Sophie managed to turn her head from the seductive pages of her book.

"Female family what?"

"Forget it."

Rising, he walked the last few paces to the terrace where Gordon was warmly swaddled. He wanted to look into the lodestones of his eyes but the boy was deeply asleep, one tiny fist held beside his head in a baby power-salute. Louis smiled.

"I'm glad you're here, mate. Balances things up a bit. One day, we'll be able to discuss rugger and you can come home from school knowing there's a safe haven in your old man's study."

Louis thought about the suggestion. Half joking, he added:

"Don't take that too literally, by the way. I may be working and not able to stop straight away. And you must always knock – everyone has to. But once you're in, well, *then* you'll be in the safe haven."

Suddenly content, Louis backed quietly towards the rear wall of the house and took in the scene; everyone who mattered in his life was arranged in this perfect landscape. He wished he could have had a painting, not a photograph but a unique painting, some rendering of his perspective that would seal in the satisfaction he felt in this moment of pre-autumnal perfection. Here was his family, his land and his life in silent rapture under a cerulean October sky.

Scanning the blue, he saw the tops of the trees and noticed one in particular, the horse chestnut that rose up to his left. It was the nearest tree to the house and had taken its share of

damage over the years. Each winter it looked like it was dead and each spring the leaves came back leaving more and more branches bare. As he looked now, he caught sight of a large black bird sitting on the topmost barren branch. His satisfaction turned to ire and disgust. A haughty black crow was looking down on his son. A filthy carrion-eater.

An English vulture.

The crow hopped down to a lower branch, fixing Louis with a single obsidian eye. Louis frowned. Bold and unheeding of the presence of humans, the bird dropped from its perch and flapped to the lowest branch of the horse chestnut. The branch reached directly over Gordon's pram.

"Sophie."

When she didn't answer Louis didn't let the pause draw out.

"SOPHIE!" he shouted.

All of them turned around when they heard the command in his tone. Gordon woke up. Sophie struggled out from the sagging canvas of her deckchair.

Louis pointed.

"Have you seen this?"

"What? What is it?"

"It's a bloody enormous crow. They're evil. Have you seen them around here before? It's acting like it owns the place."

"I… I don't know. I suppose so. I think they're always around."

The crow floated down onto the edge of the pram like a kite of black silk rags, its talons curling over the navy-blue, waterproof fabric. For a moment, no one moved. Unconcerned, it regarded each of them without expression. Only when it lowered its head to test Gordon's blankets with its sharp beak did Louis rush at it, flailing his arms and screaming.

"Get away. Get out of it, you fucking *vermin*!"

The crow bated at the air but didn't take off until Louis was less than a couple of paces away. Finally it let go of the pram's rim and flew up. Gaining height fast, it rose once more to the

topmost branch. There it perched, cool and untouchable, its tiny black eyes fixed not on Louis but on Gordon.

"Don't tell me you've left him out here alone, Sophie. Don't tell me you've just popped into the kitchen to put the kettle on and left him out here on his own for even a moment."

"I don't remember doing that. I might have, but only–"

"Don't say any more." Louis tried to hold on to his anger. His face was sick and grey. Gordon was crying now: a wail of fear and shock. It moved Sophie to run to him but Louis didn't even hear it. "You don't have any idea, do you?"

"Any idea of what, Louis? It's only a bird."

In the garden, both the girls had returned from the reveries that had so recently allowed them to ignore their father. They lay still in the places where they had been, but now they were jack-knifed on their sides and silent for other reasons than simple absorption. They shrank into themselves, hoping that their father wouldn't notice them and make them the target for his anger. Louis Black's rage was a rare thing but that didn't make it easy to forget. They watched as his eyes drove spikes into their mother, a figure who could usually ward off any of Louis's moods. He approached her and pointed again into the top of the horse chestnut tree as she knelt beside Gordon, trying to placate him. He spoke quietly and clearly, containing his fury.

"That 'bird' is a killer. At the very least, it is a maimer of the defenceless. Crows, ravens, rooks, jackdaws, magpies – all of them – are carnivorous opportunists. They peck the eyes from the heads of newborn lambs given half a chance. And ravens are hunters; they'll attack and kill small animals. And yet you let our child, our only son, lie out here unprotected, with one of them just waiting for us to turn our backs."

"Oh, come on, Louis. I'm sure it wouldn't–"

"Sure?" he screamed. "You're sure? What the hell would you know? You may enjoy the countryside, but you don't understand the first thing about it. I grew up on a farm and I've seen newborn lambs wandering blind with blood pouring

from their empty eye sockets. Lambs with crows still sitting on their backs, waiting for another peck of flesh. Don't tell me what you're bloody sure of, right?"

Sophie was crying now, dismayed by his ire and terrified by the images. Angela and Judith cried their tears as silently as they could, fearing what might come next and not moving in case they caught his attention. The shouting didn't stop.

"Take the baby in the house right now and don't you ever leave him unattended in the garden. Never. Understand?"

"But Louis, I never knew–"

"I don't want to hear it, Sophie. You've risked my boy's life."

"He's my boy too," she half sobbed, half screamed at him.

Louis advanced.

"Get him in the bloody house now." He turned and caught sight of the girls. "You two. Inside. Go to your rooms until I say you can come out."

Sophie carried Gordon to the living room. He was screaming as loud as his tiny lungs would allow, barely drawing breath between each cry. She held him against her chest and bounced her knees, gently patting and stroking his back all the while.

"It's OK, honey, it's OK. Daddy was afraid for you and sometimes when he's afraid he gets angry. But it's OK, it's OK. Come on now, Mummy's going to keep you safe. You'll always be safe and we'll always take care of you. Oh yes, we'll always take care. Always, always, always. Settle down, my baby boy, settle down. Mummy loves you, we all love you and soon all the anger will go away, I promise."

On and on her soothing words went and it was the tone, perhaps, more than the content that slowly calmed Gordon down. The girls, each silent and pale in their own rooms, heard their father stomp along the corridor to his study. They heard the clicking of the key in the glass-fronted cabinet and the sound of him breaking, loading and snapping shut his shotgun. Determined footsteps sounded back along the upper hallway and down the stairs at a trot. They ran to their windows and saw him emerge into the garden.

Sophie, too, saw him as he stalked from the terrace onto the grass not far from where she'd been sitting. She watched him raise the shotgun and take aim and she glanced up at the tree where the crow still perched, looking unconcerned. The girls at their windows also saw the crow. It wasn't looking down at their father or his gun. It didn't appear to sense any danger at all. Instead it seemed to be watching them. At the final moment, it looked earthward, but not at Louis. Sophie was certain it peered down through the living room window at her and Gordon. It opened its wings but not to fly; it looked as if it was settling itself into a more comfortable position.

When the shot came it was as though they'd all forgotten what happened after a loaded weapon is pointed at a target, had never heard the sound of Louis firing his shotgun at the rabbits and wood pigeons they sometimes ate. Sophie jumped back from the window, and Gordon, who had been near to sleep, snapped his eyes open to his second shock of the day. Upstairs, Angela and Judith started back too. All of them saw the puff of black feathers and splintered dead wood spray upwards from the crow. All of them saw it fall slowly from its perch, gathering speed until it thumped to the grass, bouncing once before coming to rest.

Louis approached the dead bird and saw how the tiny seeds of scorching lead had shredded one of its wings, torn a hole through the upper portion of its chest and taken half of its beak off. Ruby beads dappled its silky, coal-black feathers. He let the shotgun droop downwards and everyone jumped a second time as he released the projectiles from the second barrel into the fallen crow. Its body was spread out and flattened by the blast. More feathers flew into the air, some settling, others levitating on a soft breeze that had sprung up.

For the rest of that day, Gordon cried. Not the screams of shock he'd first made, but mournful wails that frightened Sophie and made her worry he was sick. Louis retreated to his study to clean his gun and be away from the people he'd hurt with his anger. He left the crow's body where it had fallen as

a warning to other winged opportunists and also to his family. As was the way on the occasions when Louis Black lost his temper, it was Sophie who fetched the girls from their rooms because he'd forgotten about them. Louis drank whisky from the Dimple bottle in his study cabinet and spent the night on the small leather couch in the bay window, having swept all his files and papers onto the floor.

I do know the land, he had told himself again and again, I know the behaviour of carrion eaters. But he was afraid they would all think he'd over-reacted. It was strange that the crow had been so bold, not flying away even when it had seen the gun. He tried not to think about it, but the memory of it sitting there as if he did not exist wouldn't leave him until he collapsed half-drunk onto the couch and slept.

4

The cottage door shuts and Megan hears the sound of her parents' footsteps receding over the dusty track through the village. Down in the direction of the Usky River most likely, where they've always loved to walk and where, they sometimes tell her, she was created in the third quarter of the moon during the snows of February.

Mr Keeper is smiling as if he knows all these thoughts of hers.

"You've been to Covey Wood today," he says. "I can smell its soil on you. And you still echo with the chatter of the oaks."

"The oaks talk?"

"Oh, yes. Constantly. You'll hear them one day, I'm sure."

Megan's eyes widen.

"I think I'd like that."

"Well, sometimes you get to wishing they'd shut up, but it's great at first."

Mr Keeper is smiling and the lines beside his eyes have deepened into kindly cracks and his teeth are showing, much whiter and straighter than any she has seen, and it doesn't seem to matter anymore that she can't tell the difference between the tan and the dirt on his forehead.

"It's OK to tell me what happened out there, Megan. I have

a sense that whatever it was is very important. That's why I've come to see you. But I don't want you to tell me a single word of it, not a breath, unless you can promise me faithfully right now that you won't leave a single detail out of your story. Can you do that, Megan?"

Megan nods.

"I need you to swear it, little thing. I need you to swear it on the body of the Earth Amu."

She doesn't hesitate.

"I swear it on the body of the Earth Amu, Mr Keeper. I will tell you everything."

His smile lines concertina even more and she suddenly realises that Mr Keeper is ancient. In spite of his height and his strong back and the speed at which he marches, Mr Keeper is a very old man indeed.

And Megan, careful to begin at the beginning and end only at the end, tells this very old man her story, without missing out a single detail.

"It started a couple of moons back. In the night country I dreamed about a boy. He was beautiful. I've never seen anyone like him in the day world, so I knew he was special. He was standing next to my bed looking down, and even though there was only moonlight to see by, I saw his face more clearly than I see yours right now by the light of Apa sun. His skin was as pale and smooth as the stones in the river. His eyes were grey as moon dust – I don't know why I say that but I know it's true – and they shone just as bright as the moon itself. His hair, well, I've never seen anything like that either, Mr Keeper. Black as Tor Caves on a winter's midnight. So black it was blue. And it shone too. His skin, his eyes, his hair; lit up my dream like purest starshine. He made me feel a little strange. I suddenly thought maybe not all boys are only good for wrestling and playing ball and hunting. Maybe there's other things they're here for. He made my chest fill up with something, like I had something to give away to him – to everyone – but whatever it was, it was stuck there for the

moment, with no way to come out. I looked down at myself and I'd grown lovely soft mams as big as my amu's and I had hair on myself just like my amu. I felt lovely, Mr Keeper. It was the boy who brought them to me, so they only existed in the night country at first, but now…" She glances down shyly at the obviousness of her chest, "Well, they're real. They're coming. I shall be a woman soon enough."

Megan is crying. She doesn't know why. She's smiling too. Nothing makes any sense. But Mr Keeper doesn't say a word. He merely nods, and the nod says he understands everything she's telling him. Understands it better than she can now or perhaps ever will. She wipes away the tears with a knuckle and continues:

"Then, just this evening past, the boy brought me another night country gift. It was a feather, quite long and thin and straight, but shimmering blue-green in the moonlight. It was the tail feather of a magpie. He touched it to my forehead and suddenly I wasn't in my bed any more. Just for a moment – and I thank the Great Spirit that's all it was – I saw a man bound to a twisted old black tree, a tree long dead, I reckoned. The man was suffering a great torment at the hands of his captors. It was so terrible, what they were doing to him, that the moment the boy took the feather away, I forgot it. All I know is that they intended to kill this man and they wanted him to suffer. They wanted his death to be so awful it would be a lesson to us all.

"When the boy took the feather from my forehead, I was weeping. He gathered up my tears with the tip of the feather and flung them out of the window. The next thing I knew, my tears were sparkling in the night sky with a thousand other stars."

Megan shakes her head as she remembers.

"He was a bearer of gifts, that boy."

She puts a hand to her chest.

"And then he left. I couldn't bear to see him go so I got up and followed him. He was too quick, though. He flew.

Somehow, the night gave him wings. By the time I was out of the front door, he was gone. I was so sad. And then I looked down and there on the track outside the door was the magpie feather. It was pointing out of the village, in the direction of Covey Wood. I made a promise to myself in the night country, then. I promised I would follow the boy to Covey Wood. Then I went back to bed.

"Come the morning, I'd forgotten all about the beautiful boy and his gifts and even my promise. You know how the night country is."

Mr Keeper's eyes gaze deeply into hers. He seemed to lose himself for a moment.

"Oh, yes, little thing. I know how it can be. I know it very well."

"When we'd cleared up the breakfast and Apa had gone to the fields, I decided to go for a walk. I found myself wandering to the meadow and saying hello to some of the animals. And then I walked around the high cornfield to the borders of Covey Wood. I remember thinking how dark it looked inside and how the wind flapped the leaves of the cornstalks ever so gently. The day felt lazy outside of the wood. But the breeze didn't seem to penetrate the trees, so inside the wood all was silent and still. I was frightened to go in there."

"But you went in nonetheless, little thing."

"I did. I know I had a choice. I could have turned around right then and headed down to the river to skim stones and paddle my feet in the pools. But I had this feeling in my chest, Mr Keeper, like it was full up to burst. I didn't understand it at all. But I had a sense I'd find the answer in Covey Wood. Seems silly now, that does."

"There's nothing silly about it," says Mr Keeper. "It was the night country breaking through into the day. It wanted you to return to the darkness even in the light. It wanted you to enter shadow. And, more than that, it wanted you to keep your promise. When you speak, little thing, the world listens. The Great Spirit, the Earth Amu and every other living thing hears

your voice. Never forget that."

He takes a pouch from one of the many pockets in his boilasuit and a pipe from the top of his sack. He fills the pipe with a moist-looking herb and lights it with a burning stick from the stove fire. Once he has resumed his position on the stool and blown a few puffs of strange-smelling smoke at Megan – deliberately, she thinks – he says:

"What was your decision?"

"I walked towards the wood and the nearer I got, the more puzzled I was by the shadows in there. Or the light. It's difficult to explain. Inside the wood, it was a different day to the day it was outside. The wood was… charmed somehow. But it was dangerous too."

Megan sighs.

"I'm trying not to miss anything out, but it's hard to describe."

Mr Keeper blows a big smoke ring and pops three smaller ones through it before they all unravel.

"You're doing fine, little thing. I can tell you're keeping your promise, so don't worry. Once it's all out and we've talked about it, you'll feel better. You'll feel *clearer*. Right now it's all still muddy, isn't it?"

"Muddy. Yes, it is."

Megan stands up and fetches water from the ewer. Even now she stands on the threshold of the forest and does not want to enter. Mr Keeper is patient. She offers him water but he declines with only a tiny shake of his matted head. Megan resumes her place on the chair and continues.

"The air inside the wood wasn't cool like I'd imagined it would be. It was warm, as though the sun had made an oven of it. It was a lovely feeling to be so… embraced. Entering the wood was like being welcomed into the arms of strangers in a distant land. It's funny, Mr Keeper. I've been in Covey Wood a hundred times but I've never felt like that before."

Megan takes a sip of water and replays the events, making certain that this part, most of all, is as accurate as she can

possibly make it.

"Time felt strange. Falling leaves took forever to touch the ground, then moments later, I'd notice the sun had shifted. I found a fallen tree. The roots were exposed and the way they met the trunk made a natural place to sit. All I wanted to do was watch the magic of the wood in comfort for as long as the spell lasted. I climbed up and it became my throne. I sat like a princess surveying the territory that might one day be hers.

"Everything the sun touched lit up from inside and suddenly it was brighter in the wood than it had been under a clear sky. It doesn't seem possible now. The leaves of the oak trees glowed and where the shafts of sun touched the ground, those places were like pools of molten gold. I was tempted to dip a toe, but everything felt so fragile I stayed as still as possible. I didn't want to break the spell.

"My body felt strange too. The fullness in my chest was only part of it. The crown of my head was fizzing like a pint of ale and warmth spread down from there all the way to… well, all the way down. Everything was tingling, and then a buzz started. I thought it was a swarm of bees coming through the wood but the buzz was inside me. All the way through me. And the buzz got harder and stronger and I got scared it might do something to me – hurt me somehow.

"The moment I got frightened, some of the light went out of the wood and the buzzing went away. The whole thing was a trick to get me alone and far away from the village. Far enough that I'd be easy prey for that… man. That… thing."

Mr Keeper taps out the used herbs from the bowl of his pipe into his hand and places them into one of the many pockets of his boilasuit. Megan frowns at him.

"Ash can be sacred too," he says, as if that is some kind of explanation. "Now do tell, little thing. Tell me about this man. This *thing* that you saw. Leave nothing out, mind, or you'll be breaking your very important and significant promise."

"I've told you. I won't break my promise. Otherwise I wouldn't have made it in the first place."

Mr Keeper nods. Almost a bow. She finds, to her surprise, that she is happy to have pleased this man who, until a short time ago, had been no more than an odd character in the village. Not a stranger exactly but an unknown force. And he is powerful, she realises now that he is sitting so close to her. She also realises that much of his power comes from his ability to hide it from people. Now, Megan feels quite sure, he is allowing her to see what he's really like. It makes her feel special.

"So. Tell me what you saw and then we'll know, won't we, little thing? We'll know how we must proceed."

That's the first time in all of this – since the dreams, since the walk, since seeing what she saw and even since being alone with Mr Keeper – that she's felt all this has some inevitability about it. Things have been set in motion and now she must deal with the outcomes. What they might be she can't imagine, isn't sure she even wants to. From inside her a tiny voice says, This is what it means to grow up.

She doesn't really know if it's her voice but she knows it's true. No wonder she's afraid. She had no inkling when she woke up this morning that she would be taking her first steps into womanhood before the day was out. Her tone is suitably affected by the possibility.

"A cloud must have passed over the sun because the wood turned dark. The heat went out of the day. But I didn't even have time to shiver before that cloud passed and the sun was back, pouring into the wood through every crack in the canopy. But it was different afterwards. Things weren't on fire from the inside any more. Nothing glinted. Everything magical had fled. All that remained with me was the swollen feeling behind my breastbone, and that was just uncomfortable.

"And then he… it… appeared.

"He arrived like a player stepping from the wings of a stage. And for a few moments I wasn't frightened. I just watched him. He could have been a fool or a character in a comedy.

"He was there for me. That much was clear. He faced me, took off his tall, flat-topped hat and bowed my way. Bowed

very low he did, as though mocking my thoughts of being a princess. I thought I was in my own little world but I wasn't. Not at all. I suddenly felt like it was his world I'd stumbled into, made myself at home in, elevated myself in. I was embarrassed and I was angry.

"He stood in a patch of brightness, a shaft of sunlight just for him. And the more I looked and the more I realised what I was seeing, the more my anger and embarrassment turned to fear.

"It was a man. At least, I thought it was to begin with. He was tall and thin with a proud chest. He wore black from head to foot: the black hat, of course, and about his shoulders a coat of black plumes which dropped to below his knees. The coat was open, though, and I could see his tight black trousers over his slender legs. The bottoms of his trousers splayed out over his boots, making them seem huge. At his cuffs, too, sprouted sleek black feathers and the sun, gone cold somehow, caught them and twinkled there like quartz on velvet. The feathers obscured his hands. His black hair was long and silky, like it was wet. And his face…"

Megan puts a hand over her mouth as she remembers.

"I imagined all this, didn't I, Mr Keeper? I fell asleep on the fallen tree and dreamed it."

Mr Keeper is silent for a time. Perhaps Mr Keeper will stand up now, heave his pack onto his shoulders and leave, having satisfied himself that Megan had nothing important to tell him. That Megan – "little thing" – isn't ready to grow up yet. That was what this is about, isn't it? Her growing up? Her not acting like a little girl any more?

When he speaks, he is kindly.

"You'd every reason to be afraid. You can't see such a thing and not be. But fear is only a sign of something else, a marker on a path. You mustn't let it rule you. You mustn't let it push you off course. Finish your story. Take your time."

Megan meets Mr Keeper's gaze and holds it for the first time since he entered her family's cottage.

"It wasn't the face of a man. I don't know what it was. I saw so much in his expression that his features weren't clear. He was full of sadness and rage and knowledge. He was kind and compassionate and mysterious. But how could he be a man? One moment his face was human, the next it was animal – a bird face, with a beak and sleek feathers and all. And his coat extended behind him as though it was his tail feathers and he stooped forwards a little and took a few steps towards me and he looked for all the world like…"

She weeps the words into her hands. She knows what she's said but she hopes Mr Keeper hasn't heard her. He hasn't.

"Be clear, little thing. What face did he show you?"

Megan sits up straight and takes a deep breath. She doesn't hide her tears from Mr Keeper any more.

"He was a crow. A huge black crow, and somehow he'd made me think he was a man. He tricked me, didn't he, Mr Keeper? The devil's come to our village and he's tempted me into the woods. It's Black Jack out there, isn't it? Come to take my soul? Come to take me away from everything I've ever loved. Why? Why me? I swear I've never done anything wrong, Mr Keeper, I swear it to you. You know I keep my word and I tell you it's true."

Megan is babbling. She stands up from her chair in utter dismay and looks around, but she knows there's no place you can hide from the devil. When he comes calling, it's your time and that's the end of it.

Mr Keeper is smiling. If she didn't know better she'd say it was scorn he wore there, hanging between those hateful wrinkles.

"Black Jack comes for my soul and you think it's funny," she shouts, and then she's weeping again. "Great Spirit, what am I going to do?"

"What you saw today was the Crowman. Black Jack, the Scarecrow – they're his guises too, little thing, but he showed you his black feathers. He's come to give you a message. I think it's time we went and found your parents. But don't you

fret. This has been a good day. Not just for you but for the whole village. It's not often we get a visit from the Crowman."

Mr Keeper stands up.

"Come on, little thing. We must find your apa and amu and tell them the news. There's much to do."