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Opening extract from

The Crow Talker

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"Some of the victims were found with tooth marks on their bodies. Others had been dropped from great heights or were bloated with poisons found in their blood. To this day, no one knows what – or who – was behind the strange series of murders that swept through Blackstone that fateful summer."

The Mystery of the Dark Summer by Josephine Wallace, Head Librarian, Blackstone Central Library



Chapter 1



The night belonged to him. He wore its shadows, tasted its scents. He savoured its sounds and silences. Caw leapt from roof to roof, a boy witnessed only by the white eye of the moon and the three crows that soared in the dark sky above him.

Blackstone sprawled like a bacterial growth on all sides. Caw took in flashes of the city – skyscrapers rising to the east, and to the west, the endless slanting roofscape of the poorer districts and the smoking chimneys of the industrial quarter. In the north loomed abandoned tenements. The river Blackwater was somewhere to the south, a roiling sludge carrying filth away from the city, but never making it any cleaner. Caw could smell its fetid stench.

He skidded up against the dirty glass panel of a skylight. Laying his hands softly on the glass, Caw peered

into its soft glow. A hunched janitor wheeled a mop and bucket through the hallway below, lost in his own world. He didn't look up. They never did.

Caw took off again, startling a fat pigeon and skipping around an ancient billboard, trusting his crows to follow. Two of the birds were barely visible – flitting shadows black as tar. The third was white, his pale feathers making him glow like a ghost in the darkness.

I'm starving, muttered Screech, the smallest of the crows. His voice was a reedy squawk.

You're always starving, said Glum, his wing-beats slow and steady. *The young are so greedy.*

Caw smiled. To anyone else, the crows' voices would merely sound like the cries of regular birds. But Caw heard more. Much more.

I'm still growing! said Screech, flapping indignantly.

Shame your brain isn't, Glum cackled.

Milky, the blind old white crow, drifted above them. As usual, he said nothing at all.

Caw slowed to gather his breath, letting the cool air fill his lungs. He took in the sounds of night – the swish of a car across slick tarmac, the thump of distant music. Further away, a siren and a man shouting, his words unclear. Whether his voice was raised in anger or happiness, Caw didn't care. Down there was for the regular people of Blackstone. Up here, among the skyline silhouettes... was for him and his crows.

He passed through the warm blast of an air-conditioning vent, then paused, nostrils flaring.

Food. Something salty.

Caw jogged to the edge of the rooftop and peered over. Down below, a door opened on to an alley filled with rubbish bins. It was the back of a 24-hour takeaway. Caw knew they often threw out perfectly good food – leftovers, probably, but he wasn't fussy. He let his glance flick into every dark corner. He saw nothing that worried him, but it was always risky at ground level. Their place, not his.

Glum landed next to Caw and cocked his head. His stubby beak glinted gold, reflecting a streetlight. *You think it's safe?* he asked.

A sudden motion drew Caw's gaze; a rat, rooting in the rubbish bins below. It lifted its head and eyed him without fear. "I think so," Caw said. "Stay sharp."

He knew they didn't need the warning. Eight years together, and he could trust them better than he could himself.

Caw swung a leg over the lip of the roof and landed softly on the platform of the fire escape. Screech swooped down and perched on the side of a bin, while Glum glided to the corner of the roof, overlooking the main street. Milky dropped on to the fire escape railing, his talons scratching the metal. All keeping watch.

Caw crept down the steps. He crouched for a moment,

eyes on the back door of the takeaway. The smell of food made his stomach rumble violently. Pizza, he thought. Burgers too.

Caw fished inside the nearest rubbish bin, and found a yellow polystyrene box, still warm. He cracked it open. Chips! He shovelled them into his mouth. Greasy, salty, a little burnt at the edges. They were good. The acid vinegar caught in his throat, but he didn't care. He hadn't eaten for two days. He swallowed without chewing and almost choked. Then he crammed more down. One chip fell from his hand and Screech was there in a second, attacking the scrap with his beak.

A hoarse cry from Glum.

Caw flinched and cowered beside the bin, eyes searching the darkness. His heart jolted as four figures filled the end of the alley.

"Hey!" said the tallest. "Get away from our stash!"

Caw scrambled back, holding the box to his chest. Screech took flight, his wings slapping the air.

The figures stepped closer and an arc of streetlight caught their faces. Boys, perhaps a couple of years older than him. Homeless by the looks of their tattered clothes.

"There's enough," said Caw, nodding towards the rubbish bins. He felt awkward, talking to other people. It happened so rarely. "Enough for all of us," he repeated.

"No, there's not," said a boy with two rings in his upper lip. He walked ahead of the others with a shoulder-