



Chapter One

Friday 25 October 1605

The hangman stood hunched at the top of the wooden scaffold like a hungry black crow. A mob of screaming gulls wheeled above him, but his eyes stayed fixed on the noose as it swayed to and fro in the cold sea breeze.

Tom's heart jolted. He didn't want to watch a man die, but if he ran away now, everyone would know he was a Catholic for sure. He gripped the handle of the pail and steeled himself.

A murmur rippled through the crowd. He craned his neck but his view was blocked by a mass of sweaty bodies.

"Ere. Climb on this, lad.' A pock-faced man next to him seized the pail and turned it upside down. Before Tom could stop him, he'd grabbed him round the middle and heaved him up on to it.

‘No, it’s all right, really, I . . .’ He made to jump down, but the man blocked his way.

‘Your first, eh? Well, you’d better get used to it. There’s plenty more thieving Catholics around here that deserve a good hanging, and make no mistake.’

‘What did he steal?’

‘Two of the constable’s own pigs. Or so he says . . .’ The man gave a sly wink and thumped him on the back.

Tom shuddered. Everyone knew what a bully Constable Skinner was. He bit his lip and forced himself to look out over the swarm of bobbing heads. The mutters around him grew louder and a forest of fingers jabbed the air. He sucked in a breath. A small procession of figures was heading towards the scaffold from the direction of the town gaol. As they neared it, he recognized the sandy hair and red face of Skinner. Trust him to be leading the way.

Stumbling behind him, escorted by two grim-faced men carrying halberds, came the prisoner, head bowed, wrists shackled. Tom’s stomach twisted. Was this ragged, tousle-haired wretch really their neighbour, Henry Cresswell? It must be, because there, ten or fifteen paces behind, was Mistress Cresswell, a white kerchief pressed to her face. And, clinging to her skirts, the Cresswells’ three children – Nicholas, Peter and little Grace.

As the group reached the scaffold, the crowd fell silent. Even the gulls had flown off.

‘Death to the Pope-lover!’ the pock-faced man cried. Others roared their support.

Tom tensed. He should get away now, while he still had

the chance. Before anyone recognized him. But try as he might, he couldn't tear his eyes from the scene. Henry Cresswell jerked to a stop at the foot of the ladder and glanced wildly about him. One of the constable's men jabbed him in the back with the point of his halberd. Slowly Cresswell began to climb.

A lump rose in Tom's throat. He swallowed against it, praying it was all a terrible dream. That any moment now, he'd wake up and find himself back at home in his bed. But the cries of 'Papist devil!' and 'Coward!' told him it wasn't.

The hangman stepped forward as the prisoner reached the top rung. He hauled him into position, grabbed the noose and thrust it over his head. He gave the knot a quick check and stood to one side.

Henry Cresswell closed his eyes. He raised his right hand and made the sign of the cross with blood-stained fingers. The sky darkened and a rumble of thunder sounded. A shadow crept across the square, and for a moment Tom saw his own father standing there waiting to die.

A spike of fear shot through him. He leapt down from the pail.

The pock-faced man swiped at him. 'Hey! Come back. You're missing the best bit!'

'Get off me!' Tom tore free and made to run, but a sudden clatter followed by a strangled cry rooted him to the spot. The silence that followed thrummed against his ears. Then a loud cheer went up. People jostled against him, pointing and laughing, but Tom didn't look up at the scaffold. He knew only too well what he would see.

Instead, taking a deep breath, he tucked his head down and shoved his way back through the heaving crowd. He had almost reached the edge of the square when a piercing cry sounded above him. He glanced up. A grey-backed bird arrowed past him. Swooping over the heads of the crowd, it skimmed the top of the scaffold then soared up until it was nothing but a small black speck in the afternoon sky.

He squinted after it. A falcon? He'd never seen one in the centre of town before. A cunning-woman would call it an omen. His parents told him such talk was nonsense. So why was he trembling? He hugged his cloak to him and ran for home.