

PART I  
HANGMAN, TURN YOUR HEAD  
AWHILE



BUCKINGHAMSHIRE, ENGLAND, 1716

The stolen horse snorted and lathered with sweat as its rider leaned in, pushing it in a fury of flying hooves and mud towards Gallows Hill. The voices of Emmat Bird's parents still rang in her ears as she drove the poor beast on: *Come home with your brother or not at all.*

Branches of alder and maple whipped past, low and leafy. She ducked them, rounding another bend in the road and swearing under her breath as the land began to rise towards the terrible gamble she knew was coming.

The grey April morning ahead yielded a new black spot from the place where the road disappeared into the mist. The spot grew, contorted as Emmat flew in its direction. It was another rider, and as the distance began to close between them, she saw the man was flagging her with an adamant arm.

*Come home with your brother or not at all.*

She didn't have time. She didn't have *time!*

"Oi!"

Now she could see it was a younger man. And one she recognized. Emmat sneered as she reined in the heaving mount.

"Oi!" the man called again, trotting up to meet her. "You're Bird's sister, ain't you?"

"You know me, Thomas Lobb, don't play daft." She had less than no patience for suffering Peter's shiftless friends this day. "Speak quickly or move," she said, "or haven't you heard there's trouble?"

"That's just it," he said, eyes bulging with dismay. "Between Fiddick and I, we must 'ave brought five *times* as much as Old Ketch'll have from the sheriff for stretching your brother's neck."

"You silly bastard, you tried to *bribe* him?" The gelding shifted, restless below as her turbulent irritation seeped into the animal. "In front of the *sheriff*?"

Lobb shook his head in vehement denial. "Sheriff weren't there. Nor the chaplain. Don't know where they are. But the hangman won't be bought, I can tell you that."

*Incompetent arse.*

"Well it's a good thing I haven't come to bribe him now, isn't it? Now move!" Emmat kned the horse and jerked the reins around, crowding the stammering Lobb out of her path and urging the beast into a full gallop again as fast as she could manage.

*Those idiots with their bribes. How long do they think he'd stay appointed hangman if every desperate fool could buy him off?*

Emmat had something besides coin in her pocket, however. A folded bit of parchment bearing a stay of execution from Judge Couch. It was a forgery, of course, but no one needed to know that.

*Come home with your brother or not at all.*

She seethed as the gelding put more and more muddy road at their backs, its great head hammering up and down as the incline of the hill grew and tried its endurance.

Peter, her worthless brother. Never mind that it was Emmat who brought home money to their family's house. Who kept the fireplace lit and the roof in good repair through her own contributions, and

at great risk to herself. It was Poor, Dear Peter who was the Golden Son. Poor Dear Peter who made stupid mistakes and irritated dangerous people, and then expected everyone else to save his neck when he found himself climbing a ladder to bed. And her mother and father expected it, as well—to what advantage, she didn't know.

*Ought to be shipped off to the Colonies. Then we'd have an end to this nonsense.*

The flanking trees gave way as the crest of Gallows Hill emerged from the mist, a great grey knell of finality the light of the sun refused to touch.

She allowed the horse to slow down to a trot as she approached, working to master the lines of her face so they might show calm authority. The wild flames of her hair, a match to her brother's and blasted in every direction by her reckless tear through the countryside, would do little to help, though she smoothed them back with a palm, all the same.

There was Peter, already up on the back of the cart looking small and afraid, while the hangman's horse stood ready to lurch forward at a word. The deadly evergreen loomed overhead, eternity's witness and instrument both, its dangling noose a snare laid by mortality.

And there was the hangman. Jack Ketch himself—or so every unnamed master of the drop was known—the size of a small frigate, hooded and clad in black, jerking the cords pinioning her brother's arms into place. His head came up at the sound of hoofbeats.

Emmat swung down from the saddle, indifferent to the flash of stocking and leg she might show. They were the only three on the hill, and her brows came down as she strode towards the cart.

Arms like tree limbs folded over the hangman's chest as she approached, but his stance belied only mild interest. A man accustomed to interruptions while he made to carry out his grisly work, clearly.

"Is the undersheriff not attending hangings these days?" she said, watching Peter's eyes widen with hope at her advance.

"Does it matter?" The hangman's voice was an iron bar dragged through a bed of hot ash and gravel.

Emmat came to a halt, affronted hands on her hips. "It bloody well does!"

*It's probably better he's not here, considering.*

"He's abed with a fever, last I heard," the hooded man drawled.

"And the chaplain? A fever as well, I suppose?" Considering most hangmen were former criminals themselves, snapping at the man might not have been the best idea. But it didn't stop her.

"Haven't had a whiff of clergy all morn," he said, sounding bored beneath the hood. "And if you've come with a bit of golden grease on your palms like the last two, you might as well get back on that horse."

For once in his life, her brother was wise and kept his mouth shut, but she could see his gaze darting between her and the hangman, wild with expectation.

*God damned Golden Boy.*

"What I've come with," she said, producing her brother's last chance with a flourish, "is a writ of stay from the judge. Here."

She thrust the parchment at the man between two fingers, as though levelling a pistol. He reached and took it, unfolding the leaf and bending his head to read. Peter's bound hands wrung together as he squinted in the letter's direction.

There were any number of possible outcomes Emmat had planned for on her furious ride up the hill, but the hangman's dark chuckle as he crumpled the writ was not among them.

"If that's Couch's hand," he said, compacting Peter's salvation with a gloved fist, "then I'm the ruddy King of France."

*Bollocks.*

Her eyes jumped from Peter to the hangman. Back to Peter again.

*Come home with your brother or not at all.*

“Run.”

It was one word, one syllable.

It was a trigger.

Everything happened at once.

Emmat drew the dagger she'd hoped not to draw. Peter leapt from the cart, but, witless sod that he was, lost his balance with his arms pinioned and fell to the ground with a yell. The hangman lunged to put a boot on Peter's back, but Emmat was on him with the dagger.

And then she wasn't.

The man seemed to twist like a falling cat in mid-air, his body everywhere at the same time. A fist was in her hair while other fingers dug into her wrist and sent the blade spinning. Her brother shouted at the jolt of another well-placed boot in his ribs.

“So that's the way of it,” the hangman said, latching into the laces of her stays at her back for a better grip while Peter groaned and curled tighter on the ground. A brisk, rough search cost her the second dagger in the side of her boot, as the hooded man transferred it from her person to his.

“Peter, get up!” she pled, not knowing how unhinged the executioner might become. Her brother struggled to rise, slipping and kicking like a grasshopper missing a leg. The clutching hand at her stays gave a yank and Emmat bounced backwards against the hangman. She blinked into the mist at the impact, and then down at her squirming sibling.

“Forged a letter from a judge. Interfered with a lawful execution. Stole a horse—oh yes, I can tell.” The rasp of the voice came low at her ear, scruffing her where she stood. The threat was there, even unspoken. As if Emmat needed *more* capital crimes added to her tally.

“Emmat.” Peter managed to sit upright, coughing.

“I've changed my mind about bargains today,” the hangman said, ignoring her brother's whimpering. “It's so godawful important to you this one don't swing, I'll make you a trade.”

Silence on the hill. One of the horses snorted and stamped a hoof, she couldn't see which. Emmat knew what was coming.

"You for him. I'll only ask once."

It was a bargain the man had no authority to make, though it seemed a poor time to remind him of it.

Peter stared at her, unmoving as a petrified deer, his mouth hanging slack, copper hair sticking out in muddy disarray.

*Come home with your brother...*

At her back, she felt the hangman's chest expand with his waiting breath. Her jaw flexed. Eyes bored through her wretched brother's to a vision of her parents' faces when she told them Peter was dead. She exhaled.

"Done."

*... or not at all.*

"Very well."

A drop from the noose could not have been more final.

In the space of a breath, he was hustling her towards the black mountain that passed for a mare, not a second left for doubt. When she balked at the last moment, he drew her up short.

"You can ride in the saddle or over it. It's all the same to me."

*Bastard.*

She opted for 'in' and he vaulted up behind her as soon as she'd righted herself. It was happening too fast.

The hangman clicked his tongue at the horse and gave it a sharp kick. The cart jerked into a roll and Emmat twisted her upper body to steal a frantic look back at her brother, who knelt now in the mud.

"Emmat!"

A strange man's arm circled her waist, a seal to a costly bargain.

"Don't make this be for nothing, Peter!" she called back to him, craning her neck. "Get up! Go!"

The man at her back pushed on, ignoring the parted siblings' last desperate exchange. He'd tossed her other dagger aside and it was still out there, somewhere among the damp stubble of grass

atop Gallows Hill where Peter remained, wounded and bound. Emmat hoped he could find it and free himself.

That would at least make one of them.



The mare picked her way along the road, in the opposite direction from which Emmat had approached the hill, for what felt like days, though the gradual darkening of the sky told her it could only have been hours.

The hangman spoke not a word to Emmat as they rode, nor she to him. What was there to say? Even if she *didn't* know what he wanted with her—unlikely—she'd find out soon enough.

They stopped exactly once, to water the horse. A narrow stream cutting through a stand of trees quenched their thirst, but the rushing sound of water gave rise to a different need in its place.

"And you're going where?" he said, again in that bored tone as she stepped towards the trees. They were the first words he'd said to her since they'd left her brother to fend for himself on the hill.

She felt her lip curl. "A bit of privacy, if you please?"

There was no reading his face for the hood he still inexplicably wore, but the shift in his stance told her he'd been about to give one reply and then changed his mind.

"You've a forty count," he said at last, adjusting the cinch on the saddle. The rest rang clear as funeral bells. She would not enjoy the consequences of making him wait.

There were fleeting notions of running as she attended to her necessities, but they went nowhere. Which was just about where Emmat had left to go. He could run her down on the horse without breaking a sweat, and there was no telling what sort of mood he'd be in then. Stolid and silent were preferable to a great many others.

Mounted again, the cart trundling along behind, Emmat continued to do her best to angle her upper body away from the hangman's chest at her back. A pointless protest—and beginning to

make her muscles ache—but she intended to manage as little bodily contact as possible. Backed into his groin astride a saddle was not the ideal way to do this, of course, but anything less felt like a tacit approval of the situation.

She could only assume he was taking her to his home, and who knew how much farther that could be? Country hangmen travelled in circuits, and this one could have been anywhere on his, this morning.

Between their abrupt departure from the hill and however far they'd come, day had matured into afternoon and then faded to evening. As much as she tried to avoid it, between the rhythmic plod of the horse, their mutual silence, and the ever-present warmth of the arm he insisted on keeping 'round her waist, Emmat found herself nodding to sleep.

Jolting awake to find him yanking her upright in the saddle again was one thing, and it happened twice. Better than falling off, certainly. But another matter altogether was rocking to groggy wakefulness with her head tucked beneath the hangman's chin, her back curled into the warmth of his chest.

The first time Emmat floated up out of sleep this way, her heartbeat spiralled from a dreamy lull to a deafening tattoo in moments. It was all she could do to maintain a semblance of calm and not spring forward like a hare. Some instinct told her sudden movements would be more trouble than they were worth. Emmat didn't know anyone faster than her with a dagger, and the man had knocked the blade clean out of her hand. *While* subduing her brother.

She peeled herself away from the wall of man at her back yet again and tried to keep her eyes open.

No, Emmat thought, inhaling a deep draught of the damp night air, it was best to conserve her wits for whatever the executioner planned once he brought the cart to a stop. She had her suspicions, and they were neither unexpected, nor pleasant.





There was just enough moonlight to distinguish the humble outlines of a house from the surrounding land. They were several miles outside of Buckingham by now, if Emmat's sense of direction held, and it stood to reason, as well. Decent people refused to suffer hangmen to live amongst them, appointed by the law though they may be. Carrying out capital punishments was ghastly, unclean work, and they preferred its standard-bearers reasonably out of sight.

The single-storey building loomed off to her right by the time the hangman reined the mare to a halt and dismounted. Emmat yawned and blinked wide eyes into the night, still in the saddle while the man moved to detach the horse from the cart. That accomplished, he led the beast around to what was probably a lean-to, as much of it as she could see in the darkness, before bothering to summon her down with a proffered hand.

She ignored the gesture and pivoted out of the saddle on her own, determined to maintain that everything that had happened that day, from the time she set out on a stolen horse with a forged letter, had been her choice, and hers alone.

No sooner than both her feet were flat on the ground then the most pressing of her poor choices had a grip like an iron fetter around her upper arm. The man seemed to like words about as much as bribes, which was to say hardly at all. There was no gruff 'Go' or 'Move along' to prod her: he stepped and she came with him, her heartbeat accelerating as he marched them towards the house.

*You can do this, Emmat.*

But what if she couldn't? She didn't know this man. He could be anything. Do anything.

The angular recess of a doorway darkened a portion of the façade as they approached. A latch shrieked a metallic warning and

hinges whined as the hangman thrust her ahead of him into a space blacker than the surrounding night.

If there were windows, they remained shuttered. If there was a lamp, he didn't bother to light it. When the door thudded closed behind them, Emmat knew darkness.

The room was both confining and cavernous at once in the black. She stood still as a post, arms clutched in to her sides, afraid to take a step lest she trip over some chair or table leg she couldn't see. A rustle of fabric behind her and something soft landed on the floor. Her eyes were wide, darting, but to no effect.

The mass of a body brushed past her right arm and then shifted around in front of her, close so she felt the heat. Her hands drew up in a protective knot at her chest. A heavy male thigh stepped forward, making Emmat step back to avoid its intrusion into her space. The opposite leg followed and she moved again. Then the first leg again, but this time when she retreated in their unlikely dance the backs of her knees met something solid.

Blunt fingertips landed in the centre of her chest and pushed, hard. Emmat toppled, knees bucking, and fell back with a *whump*. It was a bed. And now another person was joining her in it.

*You knew this was coming.*

The bulk of a bent knee pressed into the thin mattress near her left calf. She scabbled backwards, but the other knee followed forward, pinning part of her skirts to the bed near her hip.

A brief, wordless struggle ensued in which the weight of a man straddled her upper thighs while her feet kicked and her hands fluttered around like blind moths, battering ineffectually at an adversary she couldn't see.

He caught one of her wrists, and then both, fixing them as a pair above her head while Emmat growled defiance. Just because she knew it was coming, didn't mean she had to like it.

She refused to cease jerking and twisting in his grip, redoubling her efforts when the free hand began yanking her skirts out from between their bodies.

*He is going to have it. He is. But he can bloody well take it, because I am not going to give.*

The second she was bare, his hand was on her, fingers reckless, seeking. Emmat gasped and bucked. One of the knees shifted from outside her thighs to inside. Then its partner, nudging her open, spreading her to the darkness. To the hangman.

*Oh god.*

There was no preamble. Hand gave way to hot, hard inevitability, rooting for entry. The man had made his bargain, and now he was going to collect.

*You for him. I'll only ask once.*

The echo of his words broke the spell and now Emmat wanted to ask. She went limp beneath him and, to her surprise, this stilled him also, though he remained poised for the plunge.

*"Why?"*

It was one word, the first spoken in hours, and it dropped in the blanketing darkness like a stone to the bottom of a well.

The hangman let her breath be the only sound in the room for long moments before emitting what might have been the single bleak note of a chuckle. When he answered, his voice was wooden wheels rolling over a rocky path, slow and grinding.

"You imagine a long line of women waiting for a chance to be the hangman's wife?"

"Wife!" Emmat thrashed again, jolted out of her lull. "What wife? Was there a ceremony I wasn't awake for? A chaplain?"

"You're right," he said, as though he hadn't considered this. "I suppose this'll count as fornication, then."

He was inside her. To the hilt.

A strange man held her spread; thighs apart, wrists pinioned. His impaling cock nailed her to the bed. He began to move.

Emmat's breath became a length of rope, burning in and out of her throat in a long line that tied her tongue and drew her belly up tight.

The hangman took her. A man who stretched necks and

watched the feet dangle and jerk. A man whose face she'd never seen.

With no particular amount of hurry, he sheathed himself as far as he could go, stretching her around his girth, claiming his part of the bargain. Emmat gasped and he withdrew, only to plough into her again, burrowing deep as though he belonged.

He found a rhythm and settled in, leisurely at first, but picking up speed. Tight grunts of effort joined the all-too-real, all-too-wet clapping of intimate flesh, every damning sound louder for the black silence surrounding them.

The lack of light heightened all her senses now, and as she squirmed under thrusting hips, pinioning arms, the potent stink of man made her lip curl.

"You reek, Jack Ketch. Do you know that?" It was a small revenge, to insult him, but Emmat took it, quills out like a porcupine. "Have you ever taken a bath in your life?"

"Then hold your breath."

He redoubled his efforts, pounding her now, reminding her of just how little her opinion mattered. She heard his breath quicken and felt his cock go harder, still. How had she forgotten this part?

*Oh no, he can't! He—*

—came into her with a growl, seating his pubic bone against her mound, loosing pulse after pulse of hot seed into her womb.

Emmat had endured most of the violation in relative silence, but this brought an actual wowl, her head thrown back by the force of her dismay.

The man on top of her sluiced his spent prick in and out several more times, and she felt the fluid destruction leak out, trickling between her cheeks. Worse, when he collapsed, releasing her hands, his right leg remained between hers so her sopping, raw cunt had no choice but to kiss the muscle of his upper thigh. She could feel his slick erection subsiding as he breathed satisfaction at her ear.

She lay there, limp, her sex aching with the heartbeat-thrum of use. Her eyes stared in the direction where she might find a ceiling,

had any sort of lamp or candlelight broken the shrouding black inside the room. His arm spanned her ribcage like a fallen tree, which was fitting, as Emmat wandered lost in a forest of dread.

*The hangman. I've been ruined by the goddamned hangman.*

Was it her first time? No. Of course not. One didn't travel the circles Emmat had for any length of time and continue to lead a virtuous life. But bedding an executioner was another matter altogether.

Whether he'd taken her or she'd given herself—a matter debatable in light of her agreement to, ahem, 'fall on the sword' for her brother—was entirely irrelevant. Men who worked at such a morbid trade made their homes outside the populations they served for a reason: no one wanted the stink of death hovering on the air. Even the poor bastards recruited to help *build* gallows needed to be cleansed and blessed by the priests before they returned to their families. Hangmen were almost as undesirable as the criminals they sent to the grave and everyone who came in contact with them carried their taint.

And now Emmat lay, skirts still bunched at her hips, the damning token of their bargain still seeping out of her. Now it was not merely a matter of when and if she might escape, but how well she could keep the truth hidden if she did.

In the stillness of her unease, Emmat felt time stretching, interminable. She remained paralysed, sunk into the prickly mattress for so long the mean odour of sweat and sex from the hangman vanished. Her nose must have judged it too much work to bother, and decided to give over. Then, like a beast calling out in a distant wood, came the snoring.

The sound made her heartbeat quicken again, and thoughts that had been winding down began to twist back up, whirling tighter and faster in the dark.

Peter was alive, wasn't he? Emmat had done what she'd set out to do. Ketch had secured a night's relief from it yes, but he would forget her in a week. Never mind that horrible business about

'wives'. Drifting frets hardened into resolve. As far as she was concerned, this bargain stood fulfilled.

It was her ankle that turned first. The foot rotated to the side, slow as dripping sap, and the leather of the boot she'd never shed slid under a male shin. Her lips thinned tighter than a mussel shell with effort and prayer until the entire, nerve-wracking extraction of her right leg was complete. The quiet, regular rasp of snores never faltered.

Now her left leg reached for the floor, bent at the knee, straining like a vine seeking anchor. When her boot sole made contact and Emmat had some way to brace herself, she began the painstaking slide out from under the sprawling arm.

Snakes shedding their skin did so with less care and deliberation. Her brow grew damp as she pulled herself, inch by anxious inch towards the edge of the bed. When her outer shoulder was free, and she could get her fingertips down to meet the wood of the floor, Emmat used the new point of balance to draw her body further, freer, still.

The hangman snorted. Took a deep breath—the kind that would be accompanied by a yawn or a stretch.

Emmat froze. Her muscles sang in hot protest at the weird, crab-like stance she held, two limbs touching the floor, one leg free on the bed, the other still partially buried. She wanted to squeal and stamp. She could not hold on like this—she couldn't!

*Please, oh please oh please ...*

Another loud snore. An opening flourish, and then the rasping song of the hangman's sleep continued.

*Oh, dear god.*

Smooth as an oiled newt, she had the last of her right arm free. Emmat rolled from the bed and crouched on her hands and knees for a moment of silent, exhausted relief on the floor.

*Don't mess about, woman. Get out of here.*

Shaking knees pushed her up and she grimaced as her skirts fell back into place. There would be no undoing what was done. The

consequences, however, she could worry about somewhere else. Somewhere far from here.

Emmat did her best to remember the direction from which he'd thrust her into the room and rolled the soft leather of her boots from heel to toe back towards the place she imagined the door to be. Her fingertips found a wall, trailed sideways, sideways...and met the doorframe, the latch.

She remembered the metallic squeal it had made on their way in and ground her teeth, shook her head. Perhaps if she spat on it, the thing would turn—

“Death is forever, you know.”

Sudden wide eyes didn't make the room any brighter. They hadn't since the beginning. Her heart did its damndest to dash itself to death on the cage of her ribs.

A fleeting hope for the ramblings of a man asleep was just that: fleeting. The voice had come clear and alert, yet casual. Almost conversational, as if what Emmat was doing at the door was incidental.

She dropped her hand. Exhaled.

“Are you planning to murder me, as well, then?”

Even quiet, her words rippled out into the room.

“You traded yourself for your brother's death,” he said. “You expected one night would be a fair exchange for an eternity?”

It was as if a fist had landed in her gut.

*So he doesn't intend to forget in a few days.*

Emmat stood there like a fool, absorbing the darkness, the disaster.

But her hand went back to the latch. *Right.* Perhaps a mad chase through the countryside would make a fitting end to her stupidity.

“You can run if you like, Red Bird.”

Fists came in pairs, oh yes they did. The second one landed, winding her.

*He knows. He knows who I am.*

“As of this morning,” he went on, “your brother’s a dead man. At least as far as the sheriff knows. No one will be looking for him.”

Emmat swallowed, her eyes hot, prickling.

“Unless I tell them.”

The corners of her mouth threatened to turn. There was too much saliva in her mouth, too much heat at the tip of her nose, her cheeks. The man was relentless.

“And you’ll be a pretty prize for the law as well. Won’t you?”

Yes. Yes, she would.

How had he even known they were siblings? It must have been the hair. It was always the hair. The man had probably put that together with her brother’s last name and matched the pieces back on the hill.

He let her stand in it for a while, the door right there, latch in hand as she turned over all the implications. Leave and damn them both, her parents to mourn two instead of one. Stay and damn herself.

*I hate you. I bloody hate you, do you hear?*

Who it was, exactly, she hated, remained unclear.

“Come back to bed.”

Her chin tightened, wavering.

She turned from the door, stepped towards the dark call of unfortunate choices.

*Damned, then. That’s what I’ll be.*