

# Prologue

## Anno Domini 1514 – Iceland

‘I killed them, Elísabet, I killed them!’

Elísabet heard the sobs tearing at her husband’s throat. She knew Jóhann was desperate for her to comfort him, begging her to assure him that no evil would come from the terrible thing he’d done, but she couldn’t speak. She couldn’t even bring herself to turn and look at him. She stared at her own hand grasping the iron ladle. She watched her reed-thin fingers stir the dried stockfish in the steaming pot, as if her hand was a strange animal she didn’t recognize.

‘I had to do it, Elísabet . . . I had no choice.’

Her back snapped upright. ‘I begged you not to go. Did you listen? No, as usual you . . .’

But even as she turned to confront him, her eyes glittering with fear and rage, her words died away in a horrified gasp. Jóhann was standing close behind her in the tiny cottage, bathed in the mustard light of the fish-oil lamp. But if she hadn’t heard his voice, Elísabet would never have recognized the creature staring down at her as her husband.

His face was a mask of blood. It ran down his cheeks, and pooled in the creases of his skin, staining his pale beard crimson. Blood oozed too from numerous deep gashes on his arms and hands. Even his hair was soaked and matted with gore. If it hadn’t been for his clothes, which she had woven and stitched with her own hand, Elísabet would have sworn he was the ghost of some ancient Viking who’d perished in battle.

Jóhann’s legs buckled beneath him and he sank down on the wooden platform that served as both bed and chairs in

the tiny room. That was enough to jerk Elísabet into action. Although her belly was swollen with child, she moved with a swiftness that she had not managed for weeks, hurrying to dip a handful of raw wool into the water pail and return with it, dripping, to her husband's side. Gently she began to wipe the scarlet stains from his face, but even as she washed the blood away more ran from the wounds to cover the blanched skin. Jóhann, wincing, caught her wrist and, pulling the hank of wet wool from her fingers, pressed it to his forehead. He closed his eyes and, for a moment, Elísabet thought he was going to pass out, but he didn't fall.

'Did you . . . ?' She swallowed hard. 'Did you get the foreigner what he wanted?'

Jóhann reached beneath his shirt, flinching as the coarse woollen cloth rasped over the cuts on his hand. He pulled out a leather draw-string purse and let it fall on to the bed. The purse looked well stuffed, but that told Elísabet little about the value of the coins inside.

'He has the chicks, both of them,' Jóhann said wearily. 'They're alive . . . and strong enough to survive the sea voyage back to Portugal.'

'But to kill the white falcons . . . the last white falcons on this mountain . . . Don't you understand what you've done? Anyone who kills that bird is cursed until the day they die. You promised me, Jóhann, you promised that no harm would come to the adult falcons . . . You took an oath on the life of our unborn child.'

Elísabet touched her rounded belly where only the night before her husband had laid his own warm hand, as he'd sworn to her he would not hurt the birds.

'The foreigner will pay good money for the chicks,' he had told her. 'The falcons will have more young next year and I'll see to it that nothing disturbs them, even if I have to guard their nest day and night. But I must do this. I have to pay back the money I borrowed for the cattle, and with the baby

coming, this is the only way we can survive. What else would you have me do?’

He meant the *dead* cattle, which had all perished the same summer he’d bought them when the cloud of gas from the volcano had poisoned the grass. Four years of misery and hunger for man and falcons alike, when the grass had withered and the ptarmigan, the prey of the white falcons, did not venture into the high valley. Before the poison cloud swept over them, a dozen white falcons had circled in the skies above the river of blue ice. But they had starved to death or flown away to the north, and the single pair that still soared over the frozen river had not laid eggs for three years.

‘Don’t you see, it’s a good omen,’ Jóhann had told her. ‘The falcons have bred once more, that means they know the ptarmigan are returning and the grass is sweet again. With the money I’ll get for the chicks we’ll be able to buy more cattle. The foreigners will give a heavy purse for the white falcons they sell to the royal houses of Europe.’ He laughed. ‘They say that kings will pay more for a single white falcon than for a whole palace.’

Elísabet stared down at her husband’s bloodied head. Last night Jóhann had been so sure that their luck was changing. Now look at him – was this the change of fortune he’d promised her?

‘But you swore to me, Jóhann, on our child’s life . . . Why . . . why have you done this to us? What possessed you to call down such evil on us . . . on your own family?’

Jóhann opened his eyes, but he didn’t look at his wife. He gazed fixedly into the flames of the cooking fire as a despairing man stares down at the sea before he drowns himself. Finally, and in a voice that barely rose above a whisper, he answered her.

‘We waited until the adults had gone hunting. I’ve never climbed so high up the cliff face before. It was a long, slow climb. Then, just as I was within a man’s length of the nest,

the adult falcons returned. They began diving at me, slashing me with their talons, screaming at me till I was so deafened I couldn't think. My arms were stinging from the gashes and my fingers were so slippery with my blood that a dozen times I nearly fell from the rock face. I realized I'd plunge to my death if I tried to carry on, so I climbed back down.

'The foreigner was yelling at me. I didn't know what he was saying, but I didn't need words to understand he was furious. The Icelander who had brought him to me told me that if I didn't go back up and get the chicks, they would tell our Danish masters that they'd caught me trying to raid the nest. He said the Danes would hang me on the spot.'

Jóhann looked up at his wife, his tired blue eyes pleading for understanding. 'I didn't want to do it, Elísabet, but . . . if I was to have any chance of capturing the chicks and getting back down safely, I had to drive the adults off. I thought if I shot an arrow at one of them, the other would fly away. I aimed for the male, which was flying low. I only meant to clip his wing feathers, but he crashed down on to the rocks. The female circled higher and higher, till I could no longer see her. I was certain she'd taken fright and had gone.

'I started to climb back up to the nest, but just as I reached it she dived at me again. I was slashing at her with my knife, trying to keep a grip with my other hand on the rock. As if she knew I'd killed her mate, she fastened her claws on my shoulder, stabbing at my head with her beak. I was in agony and terrified she would blind me. I lashed out wildly with my knife. I didn't mean to kill her, just to make her let go. Then I felt her collapse against me. But even though she was dead, her talons gripped my shoulder as fiercely as ever.

'When I carried her chicks down from the nest her claws were still locked deep into my flesh. Her dead body was swinging from my shoulder. Even when I reached the bottom, her talons were still impaled in me. They had to cut them out of me, before they could tear her body off me . . .

But I can still feel her talons gripping me. She won't let go of me. She'll never let go of me.'

He was sobbing, and Elísabet knew she should go to him and put her arms around him, but she couldn't. She could see the white bird beating its wings against her husband's face. She could hear its cry of fury. The whole room was suddenly full of flailing wings and the screams of *murder, murder!*

Elísabet fought her way out of the tiny cottage and ran as fast as her swollen belly would allow, but too soon she was forced to stop and gasp for breath. It was summer, but the great river of blue ice that lay below the cottage never melted, never moved. And now the chill, damp air rose up as if every breath she took sucked the cold towards her, turning her lungs to ice. She stared up at the clear blue sky above, but it was empty. Not a single bird flew, not a single cry was heard, as if every creature in the world had died with those falcons, the last falcons in the valley.

A boom echoed round the mountains, louder than a thunder clap. Startled, she stared down at the ice. A huge crack had opened in the frozen river, leaving a hollow in the ice like the inside of a giant white egg. Even as she gazed at it, Elísabet saw a great black shadow running down the valley, staining the sparkling blue-white ice until it was as dark as the bog pools. Terrified, she glanced up. It was only a cloud passing over the sun . . . only a cloud creeping out from behind the mountain . . . only a cloud where there had been none before.

Elísabet gasped as the child in her belly kicked. Tiny fists punched into her, thrashing furiously as if her child was trying to fight its way out. She could sense its fear, feel the small heart fluttering and racing like the heartbeat of a snared bird. But even as she listened to the tiny frantic pounding, she realized there was not just one heart beating in her belly, but two. Two little heads butted her. Two pairs of minute arms thrashed about inside her in their terror. She sank to the

ground, pressing her hands to her belly, gently rubbing their little limbs through her skin, trying to comfort them as if she could grasp those frightened, angry little fists and calm them.

‘They know,’ a voice said behind her.

Elísabet twisted herself around as best she could. A young woman was standing in the shadow of a rocky outcrop. She was taller even than Jóhann and she held her back as straight as a birch tree.

‘An oath sworn on the life of an unborn child cannot be broken without a terrible price being paid. You should not have let him swear on the infants in your womb. If an oath was to be made, it should have been on your own heads, not on innocent lives. Your daughters are marked now. The spirits of the falcons have entered your belly. But I will do all I can to protect them if you entrust them to me.’

Elísabet stared aghast into the eyes of the stranger, eyes that were as grey and dark as a winter’s storm. She saw something else too in that handsome face, a tiny ridge beneath the nose where a groove should have been.

‘Get away from me,’ she screamed, desperately trying to scramble to her feet. ‘I know who your people are. You’re evil, wicked, every last one of your tribe. You’re child killers. Everyone knows what happens to the children you steal from decent people like us. I won’t let you near my babies. I won’t let you take them, do you hear? Get away from us!’

Her eyes wide in terror, Elísabet backed away, desperately making the sign of the cross over herself and her belly as if this would drive the stranger off.

But the woman regarded her impassively as she might have watched a screeching gull riding the wind. After a long moment, she reached beneath her shawl and unlooped a long knotted cord of white and red wool from about her waist. She drew the cord three times through her right hand, before holding it out to Elísabet.

‘This will help ease the birth and undo some of the harm

that has been done. Loosen one knot each time the pains come upon you.'

Elísabet backed away, holding her hands behind her as if she feared the cord might fly into them unbidden. 'I don't want it! I won't have it in my house. I'd never take anything you or your filthy brood have touched.'

The stranger's placid expression did not change, but she tossed the cord on the ground between them. The scarlet and white cord lay among the rusty grass stalks, limp, inert. Then the stranger lifted her hand and without warning the cord reared up in front of Elísabet and slithered towards her. But even as she cried out, it burst into flame and vanished into smoke.

The woman lifted her head and her eyes were as sharp and hard as the black rocks on the mountains of fire. 'Remember this – in the days that are coming it is not my people you should fear. You have cursed your own babies and day by day, as they grow, so will your dread of them, until you and all your people will become more terrified of your daughters than of any other creatures on this earth. When that day comes, we will be waiting!'





## Chapter One

### Anno Domini 1539

The queen of Spain once had a dream, that a white falcon flew out of the mountains towards her and in its talons it held the flaming ball of the sun and icy sphere of the moon. The queen opened her hand and the falcon dropped the sun and the moon into her outstretched palm and she grasped them.

The falcon perched upon her arm and spread its wings. And, as it stretched them, the white feathers grew longer and wider until they enveloped the queen like a royal mantle.

Then the queen dreamt that a traitor had entered her presence and at once the white falcon rose and flew to him. It alighted on the man's shoulders and the talons of the falcon were so strong and sharp they severed the man's arms from his body. Streams of blood poured out from his body and the queen knelt and drank the blood of the traitor.



# Lisbon, Portugal

*Enter* – a term meaning to give a falcon the first sight of the prey which the falconer wants it to hunt and kill.

On a bleak winter's morning in Lisbon, in front of a howling mob, Manuel da Costa was burned alive. Only he died that day, a lone, pathetic figure on the pyre. He was a poor man, an insignificant man, a man that few would have troubled to mourn. But hundreds of men and women who even then were huddling behind closed doors would have chilling cause to remember Manuel's death. And all through the bitter, blood-soaked years to come they would whisper into the darkness how on that winter's day and in that very hour the devils of hell were made flesh and dwelled on earth.

If young Manuel had only kept his head down, averted his eyes, held his tongue, if he had just kept walking, he might have stayed alive. And if he had survived, who knows, maybe the thousands of others who came after him might have lived too. But Manuel had no warning of the nightmare that was about to ensnare him. How could he?

So, just as he did every day, one February morning, shortly after dawn, he closed the door of the tiny room he rented and hurried through the narrow, twisting streets of Lisbon. Even a passing stranger would have spotted Manuel's occupation at once, for though he was only in his twenties his chest was already as round as a barrel from years of blowing glass and his olive hands scarred with a hundred healed burns.

With his head hunched down against the wetted wind, Manuel would never have noticed the small crowd gathered

at the far end of the square in front of the church had it not been for a small boy who ran headlong into him. With a curse worthy of a sailor the brat dodged around him and scamp-ered across the square. Only then did Manuel lift his head to see what was attracting the lad. The crowd was swelling fast, with men, women and children hurrying towards it in twos and threes. As they joined the gathering, they simply stood and gazed at the church as if it was the most astounding thing they had ever seen.

Manuel hesitated, torn between curiosity and his fear of being late for work. Curiosity won. He hurried across the square and joined the back of the crowd. An old woman, dressed in widow's black, was trying to elbow her way to the front. Manuel knew her. She occupied one of the tiny squalid rooms two houses down from his own lodgings. He wasn't surprised to see her here. If there was any trouble or misfor-tune anywhere in the neighbourhood she was always the first on the scene. He sidled closer to her.

'What's everyone looking so thunderstruck for?' he whis-pered, then, just to bait her, he added with a grin, 'You'd think the Virgin Mary had farted in the middle of Mass.'

The old crone turned and glared furiously at him, crossing herself rapidly.

'How dare you speak so of the Blessed Virgin? If your poor mother was alive today it would kill her to hear such wicked words on your lips.'

She hobbled around to the other side of the crowd, dart-ing poisonous glances at him. Manuel grinned broadly at the outraged expression on her face. That would give the old witch something to complain about.

A man standing on the other side of Manuel pointed through the heads of the crowd to a notice pinned to the door of the church.

'What's it say?' he demanded.

Manuel shrugged. He'd never learned to read much more

than his own name, but even if he had been a scholar, at that distance it would have been impossible to make out the words.

The question was taken up by others who were unable to get close to the door. They began insisting that those at the front should either move aside or tell them what had been nailed up there. So, in scandalized tones, the ripple of the words spread back through the crowd, passing from mouth to mouth until it reached Manuel's ears.

*The Messiah has not yet come. Jesus is not the Messiah.*

Manuel was as shocked as any in that crowd. It was one thing to make jokes, but what was nailed on that door was nothing short of blasphemy. Even as the words spread through the crowd, an angry buzzing began. Strangers and neighbours alike were demanding to know who could have committed such an outrage.

Manuel felt a cold shiver of unease. It never took much to inflame a crowd in Lisbon. If a few hotheads started whipping up the anger of the mob, they would turn violent in minutes. And he knew only too well whom the crowd would turn on first. Somehow, the Old Christians of Lisbon could always tell if you were a Jewish convert. They could scent the presence of a New Christian and would attack with the savagery of a pack of wild dogs.

He broke away and hurried off in the direction of the glassblowers' works. As he scuttled through the streets he passed two more churches and saw to his disquiet the same heresy nailed to their doors and other angry mobs beginning to gather around them.

By noon everyone in the city knew that the blasphemous proclamation had been pinned not only to every church door in Lisbon, but also on the very door of the great Cathedral itself, and King João had offered a reward of 10,000 silver crusados to anyone who could discover the author of this evil.

That night when Manuel returned to his lodgings, he found the house packed to the rafters with frightened men and

women. Men and women like himself who were *Cristianos Nuevos*, New Christians, or, as the Old Christians mockingly called them, *Marranos*, meaning pigs. They were Jews fled from Spain, or their descendants, who had been forced to convert to Christianity, and now practised the Catholic faith. But to the Old Christians they were filthy foreigners come here to take their jobs, their homes and their women, and no matter how much the New Christians swore they were now good Catholics, they still remained what they had always been in the eyes of the Old Christians – Christ killers.

Manuel squashed himself into the darkened doorway of one of the rooms. Jorge, the physician, was holding forth amid a crowd of men all murmuring nearly as loudly as the crowd outside the churches.

Jorge held up his hands for silence, raising his voice to make himself heard.

‘There is no cause for fear. The Pope issued a bull declaring all New Christians free and cancelling all the charges brought against us. He’s forbidden the Inquisition to act against those of us who were forcibly converted or against the children of converts.’

‘But for three years only.’ Benito’s white beard trembled as he rasped for breath. ‘Those three years are now ended. I have lived through it all before in Spain, trust me, you cannot rely on the promises of kings or popes. It will happen here, as it did there. Our people will be rounded up and murdered one by one till not so much as a newborn infant remains alive.’

He swept his clawed hand around the room. ‘Are you all so blind? Don’t you see they will blame us for these notices on the churches; who else will they blame? Who else do they ever blame? Every Catholic in Portugal will soon be screaming for our blood. The king will have all the backing he needs to unleash the dogs of the Inquisition. It is no secret he hates us. He is looking for any excuse to purge Portugal of us.’

Who knows, maybe King João himself nailed the notices to the churches deliberately to turn his people against us.’

At that, several of the men leapt to their feet, shouting at the old man to be quiet. Weren’t they in enough danger already without him adding the charge of slandering the king to their troubles? They glanced anxiously over at the shutters. They were fastened tightly, but all the same, you never knew who was listening outside on the street.

‘Enough, enough.’ Jorge waved the men back to their seats. ‘Benito has a point. There are some who will try to blame us. So it is up to us to make certain we are not blamed. Now listen,’ he said, lowering his voice to a whisper, ‘tonight . . .’

But Manuel did not wait to hear what they would do tonight. He’d grown up in this community and he knew that the old men would still be arguing about what they would do ‘tonight’ come daybreak. All he wanted to do was sleep. Dawn would come only too quickly and, with luck, by then the people of Lisbon would have found some new scandal to divert them.

But the following morning found another notice pinned to the Cathedral door. This time the crowd that rapidly gathered around it read the proclamation:

*I, as the author, declare that I am neither Spanish nor Portuguese, but I am an Englishman, and even if 20,000 gold escudos were offered, my name will never be discovered.*

The crowd read it, but they did not believe a single word of it.

Two nights later, Manuel woke with a start as the light from a lantern shone full into his face. Even as his mind registered the fact that this was the middle of the night, a wave of cold fear washed over him. As his eyes struggled to adjust to the light, he was dimly aware of four hooded figures looming

over him. He could hear their breathing like the hissing of snakes.

Manuel tried to scramble out of bed, but his legs became entangled in the bedclothes and he tripped, sprawling at the feet of one of the black-robed figures. The man stared down at him as if he was a beggar whining for alms. His face was concealed by a pointed black hood, and in the lamp-light his eyes glittered through the slits, the eyes of a cobra rising to strike.

‘Manuel da Costa, by order of the Grand Inquisitor you are to accompany us for questioning.’

Sheer terror washed through Manuel, almost emptying his bowels. ‘No, no, please, you have the wrong man. It’s a mistake. Why would you want to question me? I know nothing. . . I swear, by all the Holy Saints, by . . . I . . . I am a good Catholic. I go to church regularly every week. I never miss Mass. Never miss confession, you ask anyone.’

‘A good Catholic does not blaspheme the Holy Virgin.’ The hooded man raised a warning hand as Manuel opened his mouth to protest. ‘We have a dozen witnesses who will swear they heard you mocking the Virgin even as you denied with your own hand that her Son was the true Messiah.’

They dragged Manuel down the stairs – they had to, for his legs had buckled and he couldn’t manage to stand, much less walk. From behind the many doors they passed along the street there came only the sound of silence as heavy as a stone coffin lid. All lights were extinguished. All shutters closed. All doors barred.

Only the old widow, her eye pressed to a crack in the wood, watched and chuckled. Ten thousand crusados they’d promised her. It was a fortune, more than enough to move away from this street of pigs into a respectable district and live in comfort for the rest of her life. They had explained

that she would only get her reward if the accused confessed his guilt, but she didn't have the slightest twinge of concern about that.

And Manuel did confess, of course . . . after his muscles and tendons had been ripped from his bones on the rack; after every joint in his limbs had been slowly dislocated by the ropes biting into his thighs, shins, wrists and ankles. Day and night without sleep, they whispered, shouted and cajoled, until they had even him believing that he must have nailed those notices to the church doors.

But, as his inquisitors said, his admission of guilt was not enough, not nearly enough to demonstrate his repentance, for how could one man alone have nailed those notices to the churches all over Lisbon in one night without being seen? Manuel must have had accomplices, unless the Devil himself aided him. He had only to name those men and his suffering would be over, his pain ended. They would let him rest.

*Give us a name, any name, that is all we want – JUST ONE NAME.*

He could have named his friends, his acquaintances, even his enemies, especially his enemies, most did. He could have uttered any name at all that surfaced in his pain-crazed mind, uttered it without even knowing if he was dreaming or speaking it aloud. But although Manuel prayed with every fibre of his being for an end to his torment, his inquisitors could not make him name another soul. Now, that kind of defiance takes a rare courage.

In the end, they carried him to the square. There, in front of a blood-crazed mob, they sliced through his wrists, separating skin and flesh, muscle and bone, severing the hands with which those foul words had been written. In truth he scarcely recognized the pain of the knife, for what was left

of his limbs was already half-dead from the rack. He had thought himself in so much anguish that he could feel no greater torment, but when they tied him to the stake, and he felt the burning flames licking around his body, he knew that he could. The Inquisition had, as always, left the most exquisite agony to the last.