



TWO BIRDS, ONE STONE

(April 1679)

Angus M'Kethe lay on his back at the base of a bent tree, his sturdy legs crossed and stretched upward, resting against the gnarled trunk. The tree was an old sycamore tree, and its twisted branches seemed to be groping in all directions, as if frantic to hold its lonely place on the broad back of the wind-swept moor. In his hands Angus held the leather boards of a book, propped open on his broad chest, and his deep blue eyes raced hungrily down the page.

A handful of sheep, in a frenzy of gripping and tearing and gulping, cropped the spring moor grass nearby, and new lambs butted heads in the heather. At regular intervals, marked by the impatient turning of a page, the young man glanced at the sheep, and, when sure that all was well, resumed his reading.

Halfway down the next page, the plaintive bleating of a new lamb crept in on the story unfolding from the pages. Angus tore his eyes from the book and studied his little flock.

High moorland ewes delivered their lambs later in the spring than valley ewes, and just that morning Angus had helped Winnie, the oldest of their ewes, deliver up yet another healthy lamb—her thirteenth, one for every year of her adult life. Her lamb lay sleeping, looking like a tiny patch of

late snow left in a hollow. Rising stiffly, Winnie waddled several yards and lapped the backwater of a nearby stream.

Angus reflected on how much his family was in debt to these timid creatures whose wool clothed them and whose meat, when they could afford it, nourished their bodies. One dark eyebrow raised, he glanced at the sky. It was a gray, drifting sort of day of broken light, but mostly shadows. Plenty of other creatures—anything from crows to wild Highlanders hired by the English to wreak havoc on Covenanting Lowland Scots—might be lurking nearby, ready to snatch one of his lambs. Angus's eyes narrowed into wary slits as he scanned the broad expanse of green and purple moorland and the hovering masses of gray and white slowly churning overhead.

Many an evening around the hearth had Angus listened eagerly as his father and brother told the story of his people's courage and faith when on every side their enemy descended with pillage, fire, and sword. They told of signing the National Covenant in 1638, wherein the faithful bound themselves with blood to uphold the Crown rights of the Redeemer in his Kirk. They told of the English Civil War and eventual betrayal by Parliament; of the restoration of the monarchy and the duplicity of Charles II; of the ejection of faithful ministers, fines, and executions; of their old life at Dalry in Galloway and of their friend and neighbor Ancient Grier; of the Pentland Rising; of the scathing defeat at Rullion Green in 1666; of more death. They told of his father's escape from execution and of hiding in the mines; of the brutal retaliation of Drummond and Dalziel, who swept through Galloway like twin death angels. And they told of the fading strength of dear Ancient Grier, battered as he had been by the king's dragoons and beyond recovery, how the old man had breathed his last, and how, with tears, they had laid him to rest near the

ruins of Dunfarg Castle. And, finally, they told of his family's flight to Ayrshire thirteen years ago.

And now daily reports unfolded of the unprincipled cruelties of James Turner's replacement, bloody John Graham of Claverhouse, a fanatical, armed high priest, commissioned to exterminate the enemies of the King. A gleeful Episcopal crusader, Claverhouse made it known that ridding Scotland of the gangrene of the Presbyterians, by shot and sword, by noose and boot, by rack and thumbscrew, by any means whatsoever, was his only ambition.

An involuntary shudder tingled down Angus's spine, and he rose onto one elbow and studied the moor closely. All looked peaceful—for the moment.

He returned to his book. It was a new book, published in England—just last year, 1678—and loaned to him by his friend, the good earl of Loudoun. With the restoration of Charles II, in 1660, came a sharp drop in the number of books published in Scotland, and the cost of the few available exceeded his imagination.

Angus couldn't exactly explain the quickening of his breath, the twitching of his eyes, and the gulping anticipation that he felt in his mind when he held a book in his hands. Books were like a devouring obsession to him. And this book—well, he'd never read a book like this one. Though written by an Englishman—no small obstacle for a Scot—he could not put it down.

"Aye, then, where was I?" he said aloud, his eyes running down the page. "Ah, here, then."

... he espied a foul fiend coming over the field to meet him; his name is Apollyon. Now the monster was hideous to behold: he was clothed with scales like a fish, and they are his pride; he had wings like a dragon,

feet like a bear, and out of his belly came fire and smoke; and his mouth was the mouth of a lion. When he was come up to Christian, he beheld him with a disdainful countenance, and thus began to question him.

Again the pitiful bleating of the new lamb broke in on the tale. But this time another sound caught his ear: the sassy cawing of crows.

“Foul fiends, all,” he said under his breath.

In one fluid motion Angus closed the book, swung his legs down off the trunk of the tree, rolled over, and grabbed a yew bow strung and ready at his side. Silently, he stood, every muscle at full alert. He planted his feet, selected an arrow, and after wetting the feathers, he fitted the shaft onto the string.

To the average person crows might not seem like a shepherd's menace, but Angus knew better. He'd seen a mob of crows sweep down on a newborn lamb and, before the frantic ewe could clamber to its defense, peck out the eyes, and with their strong beaks, rip the helpless lamb open and fall to on the tender pulsing innards. And just this moment, three crows—black devils from hell—circled just above Winnie's newborn. He could run out waving his arms and shouting; that worked for a few minutes. But, though the crows were fully fifty yards away and in flight, Angus preferred his bow. What good was a claymore from this distance? No, Angus had come to prefer the bow to any other weapon. To him, there was no other weapon.

Eyeing the plunging and dipping flight of the crows, he waited. Then with a flash of sunlight as it twisted its wings, one of the greedy birds dived steadily toward the lamb. Angus drew the string and raised his bow. Squinting down the shaft, he calculated wind speed and, from long practice, the trajectory of his arrow—and let fly.

His aim was true, and the arrow passed cleanly through the crow's body. It fell lifeless to the ground. Lingering for a moment, a single black feather hovered in the air—and then floated gently to the ground.

No sooner had the arrow left the string, and Angus fitted another and readied himself. The two remaining crows faltered.

“Not sure what ye're about, are ye?” said Angus under his breath. If they looked the situation over and decided to fly away to easier pickings elsewhere, Angus was reasonably confident he could bring one more of them down as they retreated. Scowling, he brushed a strand of dark, peat-colored hair from his eyes. The pair circled warily. Then they turned as if to fly away.

For an instant, Angus hesitated; after all, they were leaving.

Then that pitiful bleating of his newborn lamb broke in on his concentration. His eyes narrowed, and like a flash, Angus drew, aimed, and shot.

Time slowed to a crawl as he watched the flight of his arrow. His shot was true. He nodded with satisfaction as his arrow passed cleanly through the nearest bird. But what was this? At precisely the same instant, the second bird came in line with the first. And as the first bird dropped, his same arrow passed with a shudder through the left wing of the second crow. The first bird died in flight. The second screeched and veered sharply left. Then, amidst flying feathers and contortions of wings and body, it tumbled into the heather.

As Angus strode toward where the bird had fallen, he saw a black flurry rise from the heather and drop again. The bird was still alive and frantic to get away. A sudden twinge of remorse arose in Angus's mind. He slowed his pace. They *were* turning to fly away, he mused. Should he have let them go? But crows are crows, aren't they? He thought he knew the answer. His pace slowed further.

Two years ago Angus had shot his first crow in flight just as the bird was about to land in a beech tree. He had swelled with delight as it fell to the ground: he'd been trying to hit one for years. Then he spotted the nest. With dread rising in his heart, he climbed the tree. When he reached it, a single baby crow, expecting to see its mother, flinched in horror as it stared at Angus's broad face. Then it opened its pathetic little beak expectantly. Angus had nothing to give it. Thereafter, almost as if performing an act of penance, he doted on the little bird. He was not entirely sure why. He'd always thought he hated crows—lamb killers, they were. But he even gave this one a name, Flinch. And when the raven-hued bird was strong enough, he put it in the family dovecote with the pigeons. Maybe they would have a good influence on the crow.

Now, after two years, Angus rarely even thought of Flinch as a crow. The bird had seemed to develop more of the gentle manners of a pigeon than the harsh ones of a crow—well, more or less. Angus had to smile as he thought of the now full-grown coarse black bird perched alongside the gentle pigeons, their soft cooing broken at intervals by its jolting, raucous caws. Angus did wonder what he would do with Flinch. It couldn't carry important messages as he hoped one day to teach the pigeons to do. What good are crows, anyway? Sure, they clean up after the dead. He'd been reading about birds in another book the earl had lent him, and for some time now, he'd been talking to Flinch in hopes that the bird might eventually mimic his voice and talk. But so far, it just clicked and cawed nonsensically back at him—like any other crow.

His steps heavy, Angus neared the fallen bird. With a desperate beating of its good wing, the creature made a pitiful lunge upward, only to fall exhausted on the moor. Angus drew closer. Its wing and side glistened oily black with blood, and feathers littered the ground all around it. Again he thought of Flinch.

“I’d hadnae quarrel wi’ ye,” Angus said aloud, “if ye’d left my lamb alone. Ye’ve gone and brought this on yer own self. And if I left ye to mend . . .” His voice trailed off. It would come back after his lambs, that much was sure.

Part of him felt miserable. He knew this crow would die. An angry flush rose on his cheeks, but he couldn’t make out if he was angry at the crow, at himself, or at something more.

Then he reached down and lifted a large stone. Weighing it pensively in his hands, Angus glanced back at where Winnie nuzzled her lamb. Oblivious to the treachery it had just escaped, the lamb waggled its wooly tail with contentment.

His teeth clenched, Angus turned, raised the stone with both hands, and held it poised over the dying crow.