

# SKULDUGGERY

PAUL RUSHWORTH-BROWN

# CHAPTER 1

## MISSING SPARKS

Times were difficult in 1603 and there were shenanigans and skullduggery committed by locals and outsiders alike. Good Queen Bess has died, and King James sits on the throne of England and Scotland. His reign is not without controversy as on the eve of his second Parliament, a Catholic plot against him is discovered. This was to become known as the *Gunpowder Plot*.

England erupted with sectarian violence and the promised religious tolerance of King James was finished. The country was in turmoil as the relationship between James and his Parliament deteriorated. The country faced financial pressures and increasing inflation.

Among the poorer lot, times were changing. Food was scarce, there was widespread poverty and Catholics were tortured and imprisoned for their beliefs. A Bill was introduced to Parliament which outlawed all English followers of the Catholic Church.

Two hundred miles away on the moors of Yorkshire, a family's lives would be forever changed by these events.

The bleak Pennine moors, a beautiful, harsh place close to the sky, rugged and rough, no boundaries except the horizon which in some places goes on forever. Green pastures and wayward hills, the colours of ochre, brown and pink in the spring. Green squares divide the land on one side of the lane and on the other. Sheep with thick wool and dark snout dot the hills and dales. One room cruck cottages scattered,

smoke billow out of some and not others. Dry stone walls divide and fall, a patchwork of green, green and greener. Long grasses whisper while swaying in the chilled wind, waiting for the summer months. As the sun goes down, the silvery beck glistens amongst the ghost-like trees that line the bank. The countryside sings its songs to the beat of the day, a chorus of echoes from the undulating hills. Clouds line the horizon and widen the gap between the blue and the moor.

Thomas Rushworth, a man of medium height, and a face weathered by the punishing wind and harsh burning summer sun of the Pennines, the boyish good looks hardened by winter months, invigorated and alert. Thick dark brown eyebrows crowned honest, deep-set eyes, a straight nose and chiseled chin.

A broad-brimmed straw hat, sweat-stained and tipped slightly, shadowing his relaxed expression. The hat peaked a weathered, leathery countenance and allowed the thickness of the bowl like cut to be seen reaching the nape and covering the top part of the ears. The hat, slightly too big but held down with a worn, sandy coloured broken string at the base of the crown. A shaven shadow, but with a slight nick on his long chin from the old steel straight blade that he used. Long white shirt greyed by frequent washing opened at the top to show bristled chest hair, speckled with grey, peeking through the top. It hid his brawny upper arms, born of hours upon hours in the fields, tapering to the wrist and his rough, calloused hands. A pinkish-red tattered sheepskin tunic frayed at the bottom stretched and secured across his chest with two sheepskin ties. A brown jerkin dyed with madder plant dye and mutton sleeves wide at the top. Tight, dirty, cream coloured hose covered both slender legs from hip to waist, stained from the day's cultivations. The 'codpiece patch', a similar colour to the hose, covered the groin area but Thomas did not find the need to advertise his masculinity unlike some others in the village. Dirtied leather and wool shoes tied at the top gathered loosely around the ankles, and the thick sheepskin soles tried their best to keep out the unfriendly earthen chill. He was not a tall man, but one of confidence, which made him

seem taller. His bearing was upright, although he walked with care, before putting weight down on the foot lest a stone pierce the thin leather sole.

It had been a severe winter, and a ten-week deep freeze had made life intolerable for Thomas and his family. Trees split, birds were frozen to death and travelers told stories of the Thames freezing, stopping river traffic and allowing people to walk across it. Thomas remembered the stories his father told him as a boy about the great drought that had brought king and country to its knees and the memories of the summer of the flooding which spoiled crops and decimated food reserves. Thomas was only a youngster then, but he could still remember the feeling of the pangs of hunger that he had felt when his mother had carefully split what little bread and pottage that they had into small portions for their family of six. 'Better the pangs of hunger than resorting to eating the unimaginable that others in the village had succumbed to,' his father said. He sat there on the hard-uncompromising wooden stool warmed by the central fire, smoking his clay barrel-shaped pipe and silently staring into the flames.

The shine of the fire reflected off his face and dried the film of mud that caked his leather and sheepskin foot coverings. The aroma of his manly smells from the day's labour, made more pungent by the heat of the fire, drifted up his nostrils but was quickly overpowered by the recent release of steamy faeces by the cow that lived in the corner of the one room cottage.

He could feel the breeze sneaking through the gaps in the closed shutters, and it reminded him of the daub and wattle repair needed to the exterior of the far wall. A job for the summer after seeding had been done, he thought. He watched a spark fly out of the fire and briefly ignite a piece of straw, forcing the English mastiff to reposition itself to a safer distance from the fire. The flame was quickly extinguished by the dampness of the trodden straw and the wet earthen floor, which at times flooded with the spring rains. All the while Bo, a frisky rat terrier situated himself at one corner of the hearth, one eye on his master

and one on the hay crib, his favourite hunting spot where he could be assured of a scratch and pat, a reward for the erasure of a pest.

His wife silently stirred the pottage in the cauldron, ensuring added grain didn't stick to the bottom. The gutted rabbit snared last night added a wealthy protein to the mix, a treasured prize.

The smoke from the fire mixed with the sweet aroma of Thomas' pipe tobacco, which filled the room that was perpetually smoky. They didn't have a chimney and it was far too early in the season to open the shutters at night. He wondered one day if he would have a chimney.

Bo, hearing a familiar rustle in the hay, pricked up his ears and focused his full attention on the mound of hay currently consoling the cow and one lamb. He lifted himself slightly from the floor, shifting his weight forward he moved slowly yet purposefully toward the sound, but not giving too much away so as not to frighten his quarry.

'Pssst, what is it dog?' he said, with a broad Yorkshire accent.

Bo briefly looked at his master before instinctive focus got the better of him, he wagged his tail in anticipation, lifted his head and bolted towards the slowly moving hump of hay with no thought of the unexpectant lamb who darted clear of the charge to take refuge on the furthest side of the cow who, used to such commotion and unaffected, continued to chew on its cud.

The English mastiff, a huge dog which lacked the agility of his tiny friend, wagged his tail. He watched Bo run and dive snout first into the mound of hay, lunging at the rat. It was almost half his size and almost as long with the tail; seizing it by the mid-spine he flung it out of its cover, being careful not to get bitten in the first instance by its razor-sharp yellowed teeth. The rat, sensing its demise, landed awkwardly but recovered to flee along the bottom of the wall. Bo bounced out of the hay and pounced again, but this time biting harder through the spine, cracking the vertebrae, and demobilising his prize as it flew to land with a thud. The English mastiff barked a sign of support and watched on as Bo tended to his prize.

'REX BEHAVE,' yelled Thomas.

Rex excitedly wagged his tail, but laid on all fours with his head held high in anticipation. Standing over the wet, limp, bloodstained carcass, Bo watched for signs of life. A sudden twitch sent him into a frenzy. Taking the limp carcass by the neck, he savagely thrashed his head from side to side. He lost his grip at the last moment and watched as the rat slammed against the wall. Rex barked again. Bo pounced once more, not biting but sniffing and nudging with his snout to prompt signs of life. He gave his victim one last deep bite on the neck, released and bit again. Satisfied he had completed the task, he stood over the rat and lifted his head for approval.

His master grabbed its long tail and flung it out the door for the village dogs to consume. Bo tried to follow, but Thomas closed the door quickly in anticipation, then scratched him behind the ears as he returned to his stool beside the fire. Rex took up his position at Thomas' feet, waiting for a pat of acknowledgement for his part in the hunt.

The mastiff raised his broad skulled head painted with the black mask that was common to the breed. The dog could hear footsteps, but they were recognisable, so he wagged his tail and put his massive head back down on his robust fawn coloured paw. The latch lifted and dropped and lifted again. The door opened, sending the smoke from the fire curling and scattering toward the rafters as if to flee the sudden chill in the room. Thomas turned, raising his hand in an impatient gesticulation. 'PUT THE WOOD IN THE HOLE LAD!' he yelled angrily.

Wee Tom came running in, quickly followed by his older sister Margaret, who closed the door quickly so as not to acquire the ire of her father.

'Where have ya' been lad?'

'Running on the green.' Young Tom paused in front of the hearth and looked to find the mastiff, who lifted his head. He let out a slight giggle and ran to where the dog quietly laid. Young Tom sat on the dog's back and grabbed his ears. The dog lowered his head and patiently grumbled, allowing the young one to have his way. Tom bounced up

and down on the dog's back while a slobbery line of dribble fell from the corner of the dog's shiny lip and pooled on the dirt floor below him.

'Leave the poor beast, Tom!' shouted his father.

Margaret walked over and lifted Tom balancing him on her hip. 'Come on brother it's almost suppertime.'

*It wouldn't be long before she had one of her own God willing. But who would want ta bring up a child in this world?* thought her father. His other daughter had already participated in the naming ceremony and now lived away. He rarely saw her because Haworth wasn't the most accessible place to get to, especially in winter, but he thought of her often and prayed for her happiness each night.

Agnes spooned some of the three-day-old pottage, to which she had added grain, peas, beans, and onions from the garden. A piece of dark rye bread was placed on top of the bowl and handed over to the master of the house.

'Ta wife, I could eat the lord's horse all ta myself,' he said with a mischievous smile.

'Husband, I don't think Lord Birkhead would be happy about his missing horse,' she replied without a pause, smiling cheekily.

'Well, if he gets any fatter, the horse will be crushed by his girth, so better the beast be used for a grander purpose.' All who heard laughed at the imagined sight of the horse falling foul to the weight of the lord of the manor. All except Grandma Margery, who sat with her back to the far wall, away from the chill emanating from the door. She was fighting hard to keep her eyes open, the relaxation of the muscles in her neck allowing her chin to drop and be jolted back into contraction less she misses the evening meal.

She noticed the rest of the household laughing and leant forward 'What did you say son? I didn't hear,' she said with growing impatience and a curious look.

*The poor dear's hearing is all but gone,* thought Agnes. *She couldn't have that much longer left, but she is a wily old wench that one and she sees and hears more than she makes out.*

‘It’s alright Margery, Thomas were just enlightening us on the health of the lord o’ the manor.’

The old woman, never backwards in letting her thoughts be known, ‘Lord o’ the manor? That bastard worked thy father to ta grave he did! ‘Without as much as ta muchly for 20 years of service, he couldn’t even pay his respect at his funeral. He knew he had the king’s evil, and he still worked him from dawn to dusk while he wasted away. No royal touch ceremony for him.’ Her face wrinkled in a scowl.

The excitement had taken its toll, and she began to cough, a chesty rasping cough causing her breathing to labour. She finally cleared her throat and spat the phlegm into the fire. It landed on the hearth rock and started to bubble; the circumference of the red-green blot dried as she sat back to gain back her energy expended during her rant.

She wiped the remaining spittle from her chin with her sleeve and watched as Thomas broke bread and dipped it into the bowl, quickly stuffing it into his mouth to ensure no drips were wasted. He retorted and opened his mouth as the steam emanated and his face went red and contorted from the hotness of his first bite. Thomas quickly waved his hand in front of his mouth, fanning, trying hard to cool the hot morsel of soaked bread which burned the roof of his mouth. He could already feel the loose skin forming and he knew it would be a day before he could jostle the loose dead skin from its place with his tongue.

‘God wife are you trying to kill me? It’s hot enough ta start the blacksmith’s forge.’ He declared while taking the clay tankard of ale from Margaret who, smiling, had reacted quickly to her father’s dilemma.

He guzzled the ale, soothing the roof of his mouth, but the area still stung when he touched it with his tongue.

‘Maybe you won’t be in such a hurry ta scoff down thy dinner in the future, son,’ Margery whispered.

Unperturbed, Agnes stirred the pot and replied, ‘Well ‘usband what did you expect? It came from a hot place. Would you rather it cold?’

She poured some of the stew into another bowl for wee Tom, blowing on it to cool its intensity.



Tom ran over to climb up on his father's lap. His father quickly placed his bowl on the stump beside his stool, grabbed him around the waist lifting him to blow raspberries against the skin on his stomach, much to his pleasure. He giggled, so his father did it again before sitting him down on his lap, roughing up his hair tenderly. Agnes handed her husband the wooden spoon and the bowl.

Agnes looked on contentedly, smiled and then frowned, remembering his sickness as a baby, and she thanked the Lord for his mercy.

Agnes served young Margaret, who took the bowl to Mother Margery, who had temporarily dozed off. Her hair covering wimple was lying crooked on her forehead as she leaned her head back against the wall. Her eyes were closed, mouth open as she breathed a deep, chesty breath. A deep, guttural vibration emerged from her throat. Her thick woolen kirtle bunched at her feet, holding a collection of straw attachments.

Young Margaret touched her on the shoulder. 'Grandma, you awake? Here's thy tea 'n ale.'

'Of course, I'm awake daft lass, did you think I was dead?' As she tried to nod the grogginess away. 'Not yet. Soon, but not yet.' Grandma straightened her wimple, sat up straighter, well as straight as the curve of her back would allow, took the bowl and began to blow on it, coughing again as she did.

She took her first spoonful. 'Delicious Agnes, even better than yesterday and the day before that,' she proclaimed while lifting the wooden spoon to her lips to blow on it before placing it in her mouth.

With an utterance that only Agnes and Margaret could hear, she mumbled, 'Might need to stoke the fire a bit prior to serving. Hot pottage keeps the chill away.' Looking down at the bowl cheekily to erase suspicion from her son.

Thomas looked over to see Margaret and Agnes smirking at Grandma, trying hard to keep a stiff upper lip. He couldn't hear what she said, but he knew that he was the bane of her muffled colloquy.

'DON'T GIVE US ANY CHEEK MOTHER OR ELSE I'LL HAVE YA' SENT TO THE DUCKIN' STOOL!' Thomas roared in

a threatening tone but then became quiet and complacent seeing the humoured sparkle in the eyes of his wife and daughter.

Margery looked at him, grunted a sound of inconsequence and took another spoonful, winking at young Margaret.

‘Dead, she’ll probably outlive us all,’ mumbled Thomas, noticing Agnes’ contempt for his lack of respect, judgment and lack of empathy.

Thomas watched his mother through the smokiness of the fire. The lines on her forehead told many a story like the rings of a tree. The Reformation, the Black Death, The War to which she still remarked being always loyal to the House of Lancaster. Her praise for good Queen Bess.

He heard the bell of compline ringing, a reminder of prayers and the coming of night, and it reminded him of the coming day’s work.

Wee Tommy still sat on his father’s lap; his father helped him guide his spoon into his mouth, albeit more liquid dribbling down his chin than making its target.

‘Gew on son, get ta ya’ mother.’ He set him down and gave him a pat on his behind, watching him proudly as he walked over to her.

Grandma had finished her pottage and sat there leaning forward, wooden bowl and spoon still in her lap and a tankard of ale still half full dripping its contents because of the angle that she held it.

## CHAPTER 2

# THE OLD WOMAN'S SECRETS

While Agnes fed the wee one, Thomas sadly reminisced. He looked over at his mother, remembering the difficulty she had faced in his father's last days. Weeding the hide through the day, cooking, washing, and tending to father through the night. She was much younger then, but firm and of high morals and wished no ill of her husband. As a young lad, he often wondered if they loved each other because they never showed any affection outwardly. The question was answered many years later when his father got the sickness; he could hear his mother quietly weeping in the darkness of the night and his father trying to console her between raptures of coughing and wheezing.

By day he continued to work the fields, often kneeling in the dirt trying to fight against an uncontrollable fit of coughing. You could hear him trudging home through the mud, a constant drizzle making it difficult for him to see. His cold, wet clothes clamped against his feverish skin. Eyes deep in their sockets darkened by rings of tiredness, foreboding and worry, for he knew not what would become of his family once he was gone. He would stagger in out of the weather and collapse on the bed, often spouting delirious ravings as mother undressed him and dried him as best as she could.

Often, he wouldn't get up again and remained there to battle the growing ache in his chest, coughing to try to get some respite from his clogged airways.

His persistent choking cough was always followed by the splatter of blood in the rag that mother, Margery, continually rinsed and gave back to him. The wakening, delirious ravings and night sweats, the chills, chest pains and shortness of breath and the irreversible weight loss. His mother tried to feed him broth, but most times it would end up coughed over mother and dribbling down his chest. This all ended one night when the coughing stopped, and the wheezing quietened, eventuating in dark, solemn, peaceful silence.



Not much had changed for Tommy, now all grown and called Thomas, son of Thomas, after his da. He thought back to the times as a youngster. His father and mother had to tend to the fields for the lord from sunrise until sunset, pruning, weeding, scaring birds in spring, harvesting and ploughing in summer and smoking and weaving in autumn. They had to spread manure to prepare the fields for the crops, prune branches, harvest the hay, and cut the wheat. Not to mention collecting the brew from the lord's favourite cottage to appease his alcoholic tendencies and wash down the pheasant and imported wine.

They were good times and bad, happy times and sad. Around harvest time, father would often carry him on his shoulders through the fields on a Sunday after church. He would swing him around by the hands so that his feet acted as a sickle to cut down the wheat. They would play hide and seek in the long wheat stalks. He was always able to sneak up on him, but he knew his father allowed him to, laughing and acting surprised when he did.

He never spoke much of his family, saying that they moved up here from Mould Greave when he was a very young lad. He said that his father left for war one day and didn't return, even though his mother waited and waited. One day she got the sickness and passed, leaving him and his elder brother and sister to fend for themselves.

Thomas was only seventeen when his father passed, but he could

still remember looking through the gap between the black loose-fitting curtain and the wattle wall, put up to separate the living from the dead. His last sight was one of sadness, as his mother Margery and her cousin silently dunked cloths in cold water and gently wiped the soil of a lifetime from his body. Margery was solemn but did not cry as she realised the living hell that had tortured her husband for the previous three months and now she knew he was at peace.

He laid there outstretched on a makeshift bench put together with some locally sourced planks. He was completely naked except for a loincloth which covered his more modest parts. The once muscular physique had wasted away and the bones of his ribs protruded through the pale, loose skin. The muscle in his arms had deteriorated, and now unapologetically sagged loosely to the table. His unshaven face was turned slightly, and his hair messed and wet where his mother had wiped the grime from his forehead. Silently, he continued to watch as they wound his body in a winding sheet, covering his face, and tightened by a knot under his chin.

His mother Margery and her cousin knelt beside the body and clasped their hands together in unison, later joined by relatives, neighbours, and friends who guarded the corpse throughout the night. Two candles flickered, the shadows dancing on the black cloth that donned the walls. There they would remain until the vicar from Saint Michael and All Angels' chapel arrived to administer last rites and sprinkle holy water.

They would bury him on the grounds of Saint Michael and All Angels; however, as much of the church's land had been acquired by the noble right of King Henry VIII, and distributed to the wealthy, ground space was in shortage. An older grave site would be dug up, the bones removed, and there his father would be placed.

After his father had passed, the copy-hold inheritance of the hide automatically passed to Thomas being the eldest son; his mother attended the manor court in Haworth with him. All the other freeholders and copyholders tenanted to his lordship would be there

also. Here, his tenancy would be accounted for and recorded on the Haworth manor court roll of Martin Birkhead, Esquire, as a proof of the right to the tenancy. He would swear an oath to Lord Birkhead, lord of the manor of Haworth, in exchange for yearly labouring services on his lands to the south-east of Haworth, a patch of non-arable land called Hall Green.

They left after the day's work, digging in the horse manure and human faeces, made harder by the constant drizzle. This valuable fertilizer had been collected over the course of the winter. They walked through the furrowed fields a dog barked in the distance, past the manor house at the foot of Main Street with its large cut ashlar gritstone and deeply recessed mullioned windows. The manor stood out in all its splendour amongst the nearby cruck houses. They walked up, up, up Sun Street, muddied and slippery underfoot.

The cottage merchants along the road sold all manner of items, from vegetables to wimples, but they were in the process of packing up for they too had to attend the court. They looked over the expanse of open Pennine countryside and moorlands on one side of the road. The sun was going down and cast shadows from trees on the other. The church tower of Saint Michael and All Angels was a continual reminder of the distance and steepness of the climb to the square.