

## Prologue

LONDON, 1794



IT was a month after her mother died that Alatheia Sawneyford's father first took her to the coffeehouse. Mr W, the proprietor, sucked in his cheeks: children irritated customers. But Mrs W simply set a small chair below the counter to shield Alatheia from the pictures Mr W favoured for the walls. He called them 'artful'. Mrs W called them nothing at all and would have blushed were she a blushing type of woman. Anyhow, despite the pictures, she never thought of turning the little girl away. With no children of her own, she had love to offer – rough love, maybe, but love all the same – and though Alatheia has long since outgrown the small chair, Mrs W's welcome has never been withdrawn. Mr W can suck in his cheeks all he likes; it pleases Mrs W to encourage Alatheia to look on the Virginia & Baltick as a haven, and occasionally Alatheia chooses to do so.

She is on her way there now, drawing behind her the latest in a long line of stalkers set on her trail by, she guesses correctly, her father. Never certain whether the surveillance is for her

protection or his own, it's nevertheless always a pleasure to identify the wretch so keen to be unidentified. Today's tail is a poor specimen, exuding furtiveness. He might as well carry a sign.

Alathea is about to duck into the V&B when, through the low February cloud and city steam, she sees a crowd gathering at the top of Threadneedle Street. She pauses, then makes her way over and pushes to the front. A young woman is hanging. She is quite dead.

A man parts the crowd with his barrow. Bad luck to touch the hangman or his barrow. Alathea, unshrinking, sees the hangman is in a fury. He doesn't get paid for collecting suicides. 'Robbed of ten shillings,' he mutters, banging his barrow down.

Alathea pokes the corpse with one finger. 'Wire,' she says, with a nod towards the girl's neck. The hangman grunts. Unasked, Alathea holds the dead legs firmly and nods again. The hangman stares, then shrugs, climbs on to his barrow, levers the wire from the gantry and lowers the body. The crowd shuffle forward to have a look, then retreat when the hangman waves his arms. Alathea settles the girl's skirts and contemplates her face.

'Desperate, your friend,' the hangman says, momentarily forgetting his ten bob.

Alathea doesn't contradict, though she's never seen the girl before and wonders about desperation. The girl's hands are quite relaxed, her fingers spread as though to press the final chord on a keyboard. There is certainly evidence of pain in the bloated cheeks and bulging lips, but to Alathea physical pain is something squeezed out and wiped away. Despair, being more entrenched, is more worthy of note. She bends as though to look for signs of it but instead removes the corpse's shoes and tries them on. They don't fit so she returns them. 'Pity,' she says. Then 'Kiss her.'

‘What?’ says the hangman.

‘Kiss her,’ Alatheia repeats. ‘Like this.’ She kisses the hangman full on the lips. It’s not the unexpectedness he remembers, it’s the feel of her tongue. He feels it from top to toe.

‘If a hangman kisses a suicide, God forgives both,’ Alatheia says. ‘Do it.’

Before the hangman can refuse, she is gone, and though their acquaintance has been short, he feels her loss like a view suddenly revealed and as suddenly cut off. He rakes the crowd with his eyes. She is nowhere to be seen. A gloomy day seems gloomier. As he trundles the corpse to its paltry grave, the only thing that cheers him is a notice tied to a horse-post just outside the Bank. It’s a call to arms, brothers. Tax the rich! Power to the people! He counts six signatures. That should be six hangings this year at least. If all done at once, the authorities may ask for a discount. He’ll be damned if he gives one.



## I



THE girls were not consulted. Had they gone to the workshop of the pianoforte maker at Tyburn, things might have been different. As it was, Tobias Drigg, father to Marianne and Everina, made his way to Vittorio Cantabile's workshop alone, although not alone by choice. He could find his way easily enough: ten years after hosting the last wretch's execution, the Tyburn gallows remained, even the destitute superstitious about chopping the famous arms for firewood. Drigg did not want to be alone because whilst he had suggested the venture on which he, Archibald Frogmorton, Gregory Brass and Sawney Sawneyford were now embarked, he was not equipped to see it well begun. Like his friends, his chief interests were cloth, liquor, furs, leather, timber – anything to be bought low and sold high. A pianoforte was not on this list, yet this is what he had been commissioned to purchase. Drigg wished he had never mentioned the thing. He wished he had not even thought of it. He wished he was back in the Virginia & Baltick discussing plundered ships and the mulishness of Yorkshire jaggermen.

One of the gallows' arms pointed to the right, and after a brief meander during which he seriously contemplated abandoning his commission, Drigg found himself in front of two square storeys of black brick, the sullen hub of five narrow warrens. Lean-tos would have softened the workshop's appearance, but nothing touched it apart from the cartwheels that habitually clipped the cornerstones of the three sides where the road passed very tight. On the fourth side the road was wider, so a wooden pavement had been attempted. The building marked a boundary for local robbers. East-side, official thief takers and Bow Street Runners; west-side, devilry. The window and the door were on the east side, as was the attempted pavement. It was a good place for the alehouse it eventually became.

Drigg rat-tatted on the door. No answer, except for jeers from a crowd of beggars. Drigg pushed the door open and took a moment to shut out the street. For a second, he could have been in the V&B – that tallow tang – then his eyes readjusted and he found himself contemplating a scene of destruction. Of the fifteen or so instruments in the workshop, few were whole. Two single-manual harpsichords had vomited their innards, and from a spinet, a spew of shrivelled veins. Another, skeleton cracked, had lost two legs and was frozen in a crippled buck. Others were covered with shrouds. Over the lid of a lion-footed clavichord, keyboard missing, implements to pluck, hit, squeeze, stretch and force were spread in the manner of an orderly torturer. Directly in front of Drigg was a large desk, a stool behind it. Set in the right-hand wall a fireplace, fire unlit.

Drigg shuddered. Overlaying the smell of tallow was a smell much more fungal – an undertaking smell, he thought, venturing past the desk, dodging the shrouds and further unnerved by the draughts that caused a permanent whispering and twanging, as though a concert was either finishing or just about to start.

Drigg stiffened his spine. ‘Halloa! Halloo there!’ He could feel dust spores in his throat and his nose prickled.

From somewhere emerged the proprietor, balding, thin as drawn steel and draped about with wire and ivory, felt and pivots, jacks, stops, mutes and pins. His hammer was poised for a burglar.

Drigg blurted, ‘I wish to buy a pianoforte.’

Cantabile at once recognised a City creature, a coffeehouse man. Lloyd’s? No, no Lloyd’s man came here. Garraway’s? No banker’s sheen. Batson’s? Possibly, though Drigg lacked a saw-bones’ smugger. Cantabile kept the hammer raised. The Bedford? A man who shouted ‘Halloa!’ supping with poets? No. The Virginia & Baltick. That was it. Plain as plain. A V&B man. Cloth and furs. Thick thread and dead animals.

Cantabile did not see himself as a vendor of keyboard instruments. He was a musical craftsman like his late father and, also like his late father, had achieved renown in their native Milan but no fortune. London had promised more discerning customers, but in this Cantabile had been disappointed. Sales had been good – his reputation preceded him. It was the customers who appalled. It became painful to part with creations over which he crooned and laboured, to imagine them under the thumbs and fingers of buffoons, money grubbers and imbecile girls. He drove harder and harder bargains. Shortly before customers refused to buy from him, Cantabile refused to sell. Only when starvation threatened did an instrument depart. Cantabile did not care who saw him weep.

Starvation threatened today, but he moved sideways and gently closed the lid of the pianoforte he was currently refining. This pianoforte was not a work of art, it was a work of genius. Under-dampers of brass and a sounding-board of seasoned beech achieved resonances beyond anything Broadwood or Erard could boast. Innovation, materials and the dexterity of a

master combined with uncanny precision so that every grain and splinter, block and hammer, string and pad, screw and hinge was perfect. Cantabile had gilded the small rose in the middle of the sounding-board as tenderly as an artist paints roses in a woman's cheek. He loved this instrument without reserve. It contained more of him than his child. It was, indeed, the child he should have had. He stroked it with spread fingers. Not a hint of the V&B should taint it.

Drigg gave it no more than a glance, since it was brown and unattractive. Cantabile saw the dismissal and took umbrage. This beauty, this divinity, passed over as nothing by a V&B man! He reached for the pistol under the counter, but stopped himself. He had a better weapon at his disposal. 'Annie, Annie!' he thundered.

His daughter materialised. Drigg was knocked backwards. Under her cap, Annie boasted lustrous chestnut hair. From wide forehead to sculpted nose, she was pretty. Below the nose, catastrophe. A hare lip created a whole new gummy feature in her chin, and Annie gave Drigg the full benefit.

Cantabile grinned. Ah, Annie. She was beyond price. He had vomited when she was born and ordered her swilled away with the afterbirth. His wife objected. The baby was a baby, she said, her baby. In a moment he counted as cowardice, Cantabile gave in. He had had no peace since. He did not get over his daughter's deformity as his wife had. The stabs of tenderness which caught him unawares mocked him when he looked at her face: a book with split pages, beauty above, monstrosity below. And ridiculously unstable. Annie's mouth drifted. He could not stand the smudginess of it. It tore him up, what the girl was and what she might have been. When Annie was three, he had sought help, but surgeons were afraid of adding to the damage. A hare lip was not dangerous, they said. Dangerous? Of course it was not dangerous! It was horrible. Was that not as bad?