

CHAPTER 1

Alice Sinclair was six years old when she first saw a man gibbeted. It was the earliest memory she could recall; that blackened, putrid body encased in rusty chains, sticky with tar, its eyes long since plucked out by the crows, swinging gently by the side of the London road.

Little more than a muddy track way in the days before the turnpike act, the road between London and Horsham saw plenty of traffic on Saturday mornings and Alice used to watch the farmers and traders funnel into the town leading livestock and carts laden with corn and chickens in wicker cages. Geese scampered along, herded by their owners; their feet coated in tar and sawdust to harden them for the journey. Both dust and noise was kicked up in large amounts as they headed towards the Market House. Above all of this the corpse of a criminal dangled from its post, occasionally pointed at by an interested passerby but largely ignored by everybody except Alice.

"Why doesn't somebody take him down?" she asked her father one day when they were sitting around the table at dinner.

"They're left up as a warning to others, child," he said. "It's a crime to cut down a gibbeted man. Sometimes they're left up as long as twenty years 'til there's nothing left but bones and rags. Even the tar doesn't keep them that long."

"Poor Robert Muldove," said Alice's mother. "His sister was a childhood friend of mine. It broke her heart when they hanged him down at Southampton gaol."

"A man reaps what he sows if you ask me," Alice's father said after emptying his mug of beer. "Smuggling's a risky business. A man makes his bed and then he must lie in it. Take Robert Muldove. He knew the risks involved. When a man carries a pistol he'd best be prepared to use it and accept the consequences. A Riding Officer was shot dead and now Muldove's soul'll never get to heaven."

"Why not?" asked Alice, wide-eyed.

"When a man's body is rotten through and has been hanging from a post for twenty years, 'tis too late for him to be admitted through the gates of God."

To Alice, this seemed pretty harsh justice. After all, was it not for God and for God alone to say who was to be saved and who was to be damned?

She brought this point up with the Reverend Mr. Campbell who was the local schoolmaster for those children whose families could afford them a simple education. He gave his lessons in one of the cottages by the churchyard and taught them reading, writing and sums.

"Child," the old man intoned, "The execution of criminals is merely the sword of God being used to enforce His will. We can no more contemplate the justice of this than the hangman's rope or the executioner's axe can consider their purposes. The justice of Our Lord is absolute and we are but His tools."

"But should we prevent criminals from entering heaven by hanging their bodies up in chains?" she asked. "Is that right?"

"Of course it's right, girl!" snapped the irritated reverend who was unused to discussing such philosophical matters with six year old girls. "Through God and the gallows, the order of society is kept in check. Fear of the noose and the gibbet keeps the tides of sin at bay. Fear of *damnation*."

Alice thought about this on her way home that day. She understood the reverend's words but still thought that hanging and damning a man for smuggling was a hard thing. She wasn't exactly sure what smuggling was – something to do with taxes, her father had once explained – but it wasn't as if Robert Muldove had set out to murder that Riding Officer was it? She

crossed the road to avoid a large group of older boys from Collyer's; the free grammar school beyond the churchyard who were hooting and laughing at something.

Every day was the same for Alice when she returned to the little cabinet maker's shop on East Street. Her mother would be in the front of the shop, attending to any late customers of the day or perhaps going through the account book, her pen making little scratching noises on the parchment like the scampering of a bird's feet. The coin box would be open on the counter top containing the day's takings. It was never a large amount, not as large as David Sinclair might hope for, but it was enough to keep a family of three in good cloth and fed on three meals a day with a little left over to spend on Alice's education.

Her father would be in his workshop, sawing, hammering and scraping with his plane, always hurrying to finish some item a customer had commissioned based on what they had seen of the ever changing fashions in London. It wasn't just cabinets he made. Tables, clock casings, sideboards and book cases were just some of the items the wealthy families of Horsham desired and almost everything was edged with intricate carvings of flowers and birds in twisted, curling formations.

David Sinclair was a Scotsman by birth although little remained of the broad accent of his countrymen save when he was drunk or angry and both were rare enough occasions for him. Although the Sinclair clan had supported the Jacobite risings against the King in 1715, they had since switched their loyalty to the Hanoverian monarchy. David Sinclair dutifully went to Protestant sermons every Sunday and did his damndest to appear a loyal Englishman. "There's too much fighting over what doesn't matter in this world," he often said around a mouthful of nails as he worked. "And the world would be a better place if everybody learned to mind their own business."

But Alice had vivid memories of her father, after several glasses of wine on some Christmas or New Year's Eve, standing her on a table top and teaching her an old song of his homeland; 'There'll Never Be Peace Till Jamie Comes Hame'. It had delighted him to hear her sing and parrot the Scottish dialect even though she didn't understand the words. She remembered her mother scolding him for teaching her 'that bad song' but her disapproval only fuelled father and daughter's joy in repeating their performance whenever there was cause for celebration and the parlour was filled with her father's rosy-faced friends holding full glasses.

The sign that dangled from its large iron bar above the bay window of the shop was a source of pride for Alice. It was an oversized saw complete with a chubby hand holding it. She was only little when her father had carved it but remembered it as clear as day. The endless nights he spent shaping it and then painting on coat after coat; slate grey for the blade and a pinkish colour for the hand. She had asked him why he was making a sign for the shop. He replied that it was so those people who were never fortunate enough to have had an education and so could not read, would be able to tell that it was a cabinet maker's shop and not a bakery or a cobblers.

The sign went up to join the others that swung like pendulums over East Street; the mortar and pestle of the apothecary, the bobbin and shears of the stays maker and way down on the corner, the clean shaven face and black mane of William of Orange who proudly indicated the presence of the King's Head inn. Beyond the King's Head lay the Market House where Alice would walk with her mother and shop for vegetables or meats. There would be vendors selling hot and cold viands and sometimes they would join the crowd and watch the tooth extractor pull the rotten teeth out of some poor wretch out on the street.

On hot days she would watch the great families like the Tredcrofts, the Hursts and the Shelleys swanning down the Causeway or up on Denne Hill with their flowery stomachers and hooped petticoats and parasols held up to protect their pale skins from the sun. Some of them she recognised as her father's customers and would point them out to her friends with much pride. They looked like great exotic birds, all colour and shine and put her in mind of the

ladies in her favourite storybook in the schoolhouse; *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory. The women in that book were so beautiful it took knights in armour polished like mirrors astride horses adorned with flowing, coloured trapping to rescue them. On other days children would run out into the countryside with sharpened sticks, hunting for hedgehogs who, it was said, suckled on the udders of the cows and soured the milk. The churchwarden gave one penny for a dead hedgehog.

But the sunny days of childhood and the pleasantries of town life were always overshadowed in Alice's mind by the creaking gibbet on the roadside and the grisly remains encased within. They were a telling hint that the world was not all green meadows and sun-warmed cobbles that rang with the laughter of children at play. There was darkness out there where bad things were done to wicked men. That frightened Alice some nights when she lay awake in bed listening to the silence of the street outside her window.

CHAPTER 2

Alice reached her sixteenth year in the spring of 1746. The previous year had seen Prince Charles Edward Stuart, grandson of the deposed King James, land in Scotland to reclaim the English crown. Rallying support from the Scottish clans who enthusiastically embraced the idea of a restored Catholic monarchy, Bonnie Prince Charlie as he came to be known, marched on England to wage war on King George II. The King's own son, William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland, met the Jacobite troops at Culloden and smashed their resolve. Come spring, the redcoats were still scouring the Scottish Highlands for rebels while Bonnie Prince Charlie flitted about the Hebrides, hopping from island to island with a price on his head.

These events were the source of much talk in the villages and towns of southern England. It was not unknown for men in the south to voice support for the Jacobite cause. King George II had retained his father's moniker of 'German George' and was the scorn of most Catholics, many of whom could be heard to raise a glass to the usurped House of Stuart late of a night.

Such troubles were a million miles away from the young, excited mind of Alice Sinclair. July was the month of the Horsham fair and the whole town was filled with noise and colour. North Street down to the Market House was lined with stalls and booths where beer and delicacies could be bought and the poorer children of the town stood around with their noses in the air, snorting down the delicious smells of pastries and cooked meats, lamenting their empty pockets.

On the common a sheep fair was held and there were many other stalls set up where craftsmen and traders, both local and from afar, sold their wares. A whole ox was roasted on a spit and there were games and diversions like boxing and a Punch and Judy show. There were circus tents also and Alice always liked to go and see the Wild Beast-man as well as living skeletons and fat ladies.

That year a group of gypsies had camped near Farthing Bridge on the road to Slinfold. One of these was a fortune teller who had set up her table where she laid out cards and determined people's future for small coin. Several other gypsies hung around, smoking their clay pipes and laughing while a happy mongrel of a dog with a red bandanna around his neck leaped and capered about amid all the excitement.

Alice had always been fascinated by gypsies. Their colourful clothes and nomadic lifestyle seemed to make them a different species to the residents of Horsham that she had grown up with. They possessed a mystique; a quality which seemed to be wholly lacking in the simple townsfolk she knew. It was almost as if they had magical powers that ordinary people could not hope to attain. This was demonstrated no better than in the fast hands and keen eyes of a juggling boy.

He was a little older than her and had dark hair that matched his eyes and skin burned brown by the sun. He tossed the colourful balls around with expert skill, seeming only to brush them with his hands to keep them moving. He even took his eyes off the balls to throw a wink at Alice.

She blushed. No boy had ever winked at her before. She was even more startled when one of the balls came hurtling her way and she had to drop her basket to catch it. But catch it she did and the gypsy boy smiled, snatching the two remaining balls out of the air with one hand.

"Nicely caught, miss," he said. "You'd make a fine juggler with a little practice."

He had a soft voice with a strange accent unfamiliar to Alice's ears.

"I don't think I'd ever be able to do what you do," she said.

He shrugged. "It's easy if you know how. Want me to show you?"

Alice nodded.

"You always start with two, and then, when you're good enough, you can start to use three balls or even four."

He placed one of the balls in her open hand. It was warm and soft. Then he took her by the wrist with a gentle but calloused grip.

"Always keep your eyes on the balls and throw with your elbow not your wrist."

He released her hand and she threw one ball up in a narrow arc and caught it in the other hand which still held the second ball.

"Good, now try it again and when the ball starts coming down, throw the other one and see if you can catch them both."

Alice did so. She caught the first ball but forgot to keep an eye on the second and it missed her hand and went rolling across the grass. She ran after it, flushing at the gypsy boy's laughter.

"Alice! What do you imagine you're doing?" came the shrill voice of her mother.

She hurried to give back the balls to the boy and smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, I have to go. But thank you."

He winked at her again and she hurried off towards her frowning mother.

"Stay away from those boys, Alice," her mother chided as she led her by the wrist through the crowds. "They're always up to no good. Decent folk know better than to have any dealings with them."

Alice said nothing. She had never understood people's distrust of the gypsies. To her they seemed like the nicest and friendliest of people. But as usual she felt alone in her views.

Less than a week later, Alice's mother sent her to pick up some sausages from the butcher on West Street. It was a gloriously sunny day and the cobbles glowed warm beneath the feet of the traders and customers doing their daily rounds.

At the butchers she found a long queue and could barely see beyond the towering hats and wobbling wigs of the women in front. There seemed to be some sort of commotion in the shop and the owner, Mr. Jenkins, was bellowing at some unfortunate in a most irate manner. The object of his tirade turned out to be a small and very scruffy dog with a red bandanna around his neck.

"Blasted thing!" Mr. Jenkins shouted. "It's been hanging around the shop all morning on the earhole for scraps. If I turn my back for a second I know he'll be after my sausages or chops for that matter. Be off with you, you wretched thing!" and he aimed a kick at the poor creature that narrowly missed connecting with its rear end.

"Where's its master?" one of the women – Mrs. Campbell, wife of the Reverend – demanded. "The thing ought to be drowned if it's got no master."

"Oh, no!" cried Alice. "It has a master, I'm sure of it! Maybe it just got lost. I'm sure I saw it at the fair last weekend. I think it belongs to the gypsies."

"Like as not," said Mr. Jenkins. "And I'll wager that it has its masters' thieving ways too. Go on, be off with you!"

"If you let me buy some sausages quickly, Mr. Jenkins," Alice said, "I'll take the dog back to its owners for you."

The butcher harrumphed at this but agreed and was met with no protest from the long line of other customers who were more than happy to see the back of the small scavenger. Once Alice had paid for the sausages and stuffed them into her basket, she asked Mr. Jenkins if he had a small length of string to be used as a lead. This she tied around the dog's bandanna. The dog didn't seem to mind and she ruffled the shaggy fur between its ears before setting off down the street, basket swinging in one hand and makeshift lead held tightly in the other.

"Will your mother be happy to hear that you have gone off visiting the gypsies?" called out Mrs. Campbell from the doorway to the butchers.

"Oh yes. I'm only returning their dog to them, after all!" Alice called back and turned quickly so that Mrs. Campbell did not have a chance to reply.

Ducks paddled and dipped about beneath Farthing Bridge and the dust of the recent coach to Slinfold settled on the road as Alice made her way towards the gypsy camp on the

grassy slopes of the river. It was a sprawling collection of tents and caravans. Horses roamed nearby, un-tethered and allowed to graze freely. Women washed pots and clothes down in the river while children played naked, shouting and chasing each other around.

"Can I help you miss?" asked an elderly man around his pipe.

"I..., I found this dog," Alice began. "I think he belongs to one of you."

The man looked at the dog who sat on its haunches, wagging its tail in excitement. He laughed and turned to shout something to a group of men who were lounging around the steps to one of the caravans, basking in the sun. Alice didn't catch what he said apart from the last bit; "...gadji here to see you!"

Alice felt herself blushing again as the owner came forward to claim his dog. It was the juggling boy, a broad grin on his lips. The dog strained at the lead and barked in protest at being held. Alice felt the string slip from her fingers and the dog bounded up to its owner who knelt down and clasped it with both hands, allowing it to lick his face.

"Oh, he's yours, then," said Alice in a voice that she hoped sounded casual.

"Thank you, gadji," said the boy. "Blasted mutt is always a running off and getting lost. Where did you find him?"

"At the butchers trying to scrounge sausages."

The boy threw back his head and laughed, the light playing on his long dark hair. "That sounds about right. My name's Emilian." He held out his hand and Alice let him take hers. She curtsied as she had been taught to do. "I'm Alice."

"Alice..." said Emilian slowly, as if testing the word in his mouth. "A fine and pretty name to be sure. And, if you don't mind me saying, a very fitting one too. Tell me, Alice, what reward shall I give you for bringing me my dog?"

"Oh, there's really no need..." she began but the boy held up a hand to halt her.

"We Romani always pay our debts and never leave a favour unanswered for. Or a slight for that matter, but that's of no consequence. Now, what shall I give you?" He made a great show of looking in his pockets, of which he seemed to have a good many, and rummaging about his person which embarrassed Alice no end. "I know!" he exclaimed at last. "How about a riddle?"

Alice looked blankly at him.

"I ask you a question and you tell me the answer," he explained.

"I know what a riddle is," said Alice.

"Then I'll begin. Let's see... A baby's prerogative, a lover's privilege. Worthless when bought but a joy when given. You can take it with you, but cannot give it to another."

Alice tried to think of an answer but couldn't concentrate. She noticed that Emilian was standing very close to her now. "I give up," she said.

"Good," he replied. "Because I was looking forward to giving you the answer myself." He took hold of her hands and leaned forward. His lips touched hers and she felt their warmth pressing against her mouth. Part of her wanted to shrink from him but another part was drawn to those lips and wanted to cling to them forever.

He drew away, smiling at her confusion. "A kiss is the answer," he said at last.

"I... I have to go," she said. "My mother will be wondering where I am." She reached down for her basket and turned away, hurrying towards the road. She looked back. Emilian was watching her, a playful smile on those lips that had so recently touched hers. She felt as if something had just been stolen from her. Or had it been given? Her mind was all confusion and she quickened her pace, wishing that the road to Horsham was shorter.

She caught hell when she got home. Upon being asked where she had been and what had taken her so long to buy some sausages, Alice told her mother the truth, minus the part about the kiss.

"Didn't I tell you to stay away from those people?" her mother demanded. "Well, didn't I?"

"I was only returning their dog," Alice protested. "I couldn't leave it to starve in the sun."

Jane, Alice's two-year-old sister, gave up a wail and her mother scooped her up in her arms and soothed her.

"Dogs are dogs, lass," said her father. "I never seen a mutt that didn't know its way home. You should have let it be. What's a gypsy mutt to do with us?"

"Why do you hate them so much?" Alice demanded. "They seemed perfectly nice to me."

"I don't hate them," snapped her father. "They're just... just different. They stick to their own kind same as we. And I'll remind you to keep a civil tongue in your head when addressing your father."

"I just think it's all so unfair and... and silly," said Alice on the verge of tears.

Her father planted his fists upon the table and leaned in close. "From now on," he said, "you're to have nothing whatsoever to do with that gypsy band. You're not to set foot in their camp again, d'ye hear me, Alice Sinclair?"

Alice nodded, refusing to meet his eyes.