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## PROLOGUE



he smell of oil was all around him, sharp and yet cloying. He had splashed it about the stage until the can was empty, taking care to make sure its grim centrepiece in particular was thoroughly doused.

Sometimes you do not choose the part. Sometimes it is the part that chooses you. A life in thrall to the theatre ought to have prepared him for that. The course of his future had changed in a matter of moments. Though he could not have conceived of it mere hours ago, the new path before him was clear: what he had to do, who he had to become. The role he had to play.

He was grateful that the body had stopped twitching. It seemed strange to say, but he bore the dead man no ill-will. He wished it could have gone differently, wished their fates had not become entangled. However, he had been given no choice. The man had come here and confronted him with a direct accusation. More than an accusation: they both knew the truth of what he had done. It was pointless to pretend otherwise.

What followed had felt repulsive and yet inevitable, an action he was compelled to pursue. But once that compulsion was spent and the act was done, he understood that in carrying out this fatal deed, he had killed himself also. He was undone by his own hand, everything he had worked towards and striven for destroyed. It

appeared his whole world was at an end, his situation hopeless. Then he had looked again and remembered where he was.

The theatre was where he had spent so many of his happiest times, and it had given him one more gift. He loved it because it was a place of infinite escape and of boundless possibility, thus reminding him that he was the kind of man who could always clothe himself anew.

He stepped away from the stage before striking the match, flicking it onto the boards.

He was not ready for the ferocity with which it caught. With precipitate terror he realised that his sleeve was alight, the heat immediate and relentless. He threw himself to the floor, quickly shedding the jacket and tossing it away. Some of the oil must have splashed back onto it as he shook the can. Fortunately, he had not got any on the hat.

The rising flames held his gaze longer than was prudent. He watched the scenery transformed in tongues of orange and red, Elsinore engulfed, until one of the flats collapsed onto the already burning body. He needed to satisfy himself that it would be truly consumed, but having seen that, it was time to leave.

He exited through a side door into the darkness of an alley, aware he could not afford to be seen upon the street. Not yet.

He knew he needed to make haste, for he now had a journey ahead of him, one from which he could never return. Despite that, he tarried just a moment at the corner, unable to look away quite yet as the smoke billowed beneath the theatre's colonnade and the flames lit up the night.

EDINBURGH

APRIL 1853



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## ONE



aven's heartbeat surged as he woke to the sound of screaming and a presence at the end of his bed. Not screaming, wailing. He recognised his mother's cries, mournful and distraught, while the cause of them loomed in the half light. His father was not dead. He was standing mere feet away, returned to avenge himself upon the son who had stood up to him.

Then both sound and image shifted, resolving themselves into more rational truths. What he could hear was the crying not of his mother, but of a child, the familiar discordant symphony that for almost two years had punctuated his days and his nights. The menacing shape was simply the coat he had hung over the edge of the wardrobe door. There was no ghost, no phantom, yet only moments ago it had appeared so vividly real. How much the mind extemporised from the merest glimmer of suggestion.

As he came to, he found himself wishing it truly had been his father. The man had been a drunken brute but at least he would relent once his rage was spent. Raven was now in thrall to a worse tyrant.

Crying was good, he had been told. A silent child was far more troubling.

Raven had foresworn all quietening syrups; Godfrey's Cordial in particular was not permitted in the house, particularly given its

association with the shocking events of summer 1850, but the perpetual noise was wearing away at his resolve. He now understood the pervasiveness and popularity of such soporific draughts.

Raven sighed, resigning himself to yet another early start. He counselled himself that Dr Simpson would probably be up already, writing letters to the *Lancet* and preparing papers for presentation at the Edinburgh Medico-Chirurgical Society. Raven envied his energy: he seemed to have an endless supply. Raven also envied Simpson's ease with his children, the way he could play with them as though he was a care-free child too.

Little James seemed eternally displeased, erupting in outrage at the slightest frustration, as though permanently resentful at having been brought into existence. Raven had been assured that it would get better when the child could crawl, and then when he could walk, but in each case, James's greater mobility merely expanded the ambit of things he could be tearful about.

Simpson's children all seemed to be of milder natures than Raven's. He wondered, was this because Simpson's attentions served to imbue them with his own infectious calm? By contrast, the more time Raven spent around James, the more agitated the boy became. Or was it that Simpson's children had inherited the professor's gentle nature, while Raven's son inherited his rage?

When he had suggested this to Sarah, she was scornful. 'No one is born angry, Will,' she told him.

His wife was with the little one now, already awake for who knew how long, toiling to keep the child amused in their less than expansive home. He knew she was tired and strained but she remained indefatigably more patient than him despite being heavily pregnant with their second. Which was not to say her patience was limitless; just that these days she had far more of it for James than for Raven.

She had been particularly angry with him last night. It had been her stated intention that the three of them spend the day together as a family, but Raven had found a reason to be somewhere else. It was true that he had been asked to attend a birth, but he had been disingenuous regarding just how urgent it had been. And

more disingenuous still regarding how long the delivery had taken. Raven felt a hollowing shame about this now, but there was a limit to how much tearful disgruntlement he could subject himself to, and that was just from the bairn.

Yesterday had been a Sunday. That used to be his day of rest. These days when Monday came around, he was grateful to be going to work. Number 52 Queen Street used to feel like chaos: a menagerie of children and animals roaming unfettered as the day washed an unpredictable tide of souls through the front door for Raven to deal with. Now it felt like an oasis, a sanctuary.

As though to emphasise the point, his bedroom door swung open, crashing noisily against the wall as James burst into the room. His mother was upon him like a falcon, scooping him up and quietly urging 'We must let Daddy sleep' as she spun the boy's grasping arms away from where Raven lay.

She had spoken as though she was protecting Raven from interruption, mindful of his rest as the household provider, but he couldn't help thinking that in truth she was acting to protect the child from him.

He began pulling on his clothes, stubbing his toe on the wooden chest at the end of the bed, which did nothing to improve his mood. He briefly distracted himself with the thought of the breakfast that would be served at Queen Street, then calculated that this would not be for almost three more hours. Time enough for a dozen further tempestuous tantrums.

He was wondering how long he could stretch out his ablutions when he heard the jingle of the doorbell.

Raven stuck his head into the hall as a man was shown inside, clutching a note. He looked rather old to be a messenger boy. Then Raven took in the whip clutched in his other hand. A driver.

'It's from Dr Littlejohn,' the man said, handing him the note.

I require your urgent assistance at Surgeons' Hall on a matter that requires the utmost discretion. My apologies for the early intrusion. I will be greatly in your debt.

No, Raven thought, as James began howling once again: it will be I who is in yours.

There was a bitter wind whipping in off the Forth as the carriage climbed North Frederick Street, but the sky was clear and the morning's colours vivid. Raven instinctively welcomed the spring and its lengthening days, but as James was adapting to the changing season by waking with the first beam of sunshine, he thought that the winter had had its consolations.

Edinburgh was a city beginning its day. He was seldom on the street at this time, and it offered different sights to later hours. From the coach he watched bakers' boys carrying their trays of fresh loaves and warm rolls to hotels along Princes Street. Raven had known a time when he was not above lightening their loads undetected, and counselled himself that perhaps he didn't have so much to complain about these days. There had been a time when he dreamed of having what he had now. It wasn't that he lacked gratitude for his lot; but despite how much had changed, he still worried whether it would be enough, particularly now it wasn't just himself he had to provide for.

The driver took him over the North Bridge and along to Nicolson Street, where the Roman columns of Surgeons' Hall loomed before them. Raven was a licentiate of the College of Surgeons, but he could not displace the sense that he was approaching enemy territory. The surgeons were increasingly inclined to see obstetricians as an upstart breed, an attitude typified by Professor Syme recently suggesting they be categorised alongside veterinarians, and the appointment of Dr Archibald Christie as the College's new head was unlikely to pour oil on troubled waters. He was new both to his position and to the city, but his reputation had preceded him. He was renowned for being as combative as he was ambitious, a man restlessly in search of new enemies to conquer. Consequently, he had been nicknamed 'Corpus' behind his back, less for the bodies he had dissected than for those he had climbed over to get where he was.



‘I dinnae envy you venturing inside,’ said the driver, bringing his horses to a halt.

Raven was briefly unsettled by this statement, thinking the man was referring to Dr Christie before realising he must mean something else.

‘Why would that be?’ he asked, curious as to what superstition or misapprehension the man might be about to share.

‘Heard they found a hacked-up corpse in there.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ Raven replied. ‘And quite necessary for the subject of anatomy to be adequately taught.’

‘Porter told me he saw guts and livers and all sorts, a severed leg still dripping blood.’

It must have been the porter’s first day, Raven thought. Wandered into the dissecting room without warning.

‘It’s common enough to have specimens on display,’ Raven reassured him.

‘On display, aye,’ the coachman said. ‘Not in somebody’s desk drawer.’

As Raven stepped down from the carriage, he saw his friend Henry striding to greet him, and a second man hurrying from the building at his back. Henry was recently returned from Selkirk, where the country diet had evidently been to his liking. He looked relieved to see Raven, his impatience and anxiety evidently deriving from the presence of the stern figure behind him. Corpus Christie was marching grim-faced across the flagstones, his brow knitted together in a mixture of consternation and disapproval, a man with questions to which he already knew he would not like the answers.

‘You’ve called for someone else?’ Christie asked, taking in Raven’s arrival much as he might the delivery of a wheelbarrow full of cow dung. ‘I asked for discretion.’

Henry sent Raven a look conveying both gratitude and apology for what he was being dragged into.

‘I appreciate that, sir,’ Henry replied, ‘but I explained that I would need some assistance in conducting my enquiries. That

meant engaging either Dr Raven or Mr McLevy. Which would you have preferred?

This spiked Dr Christie's ire. Nobody wanted the belligerent Irish detective at their door, even someone as preeminent as the head of the College of Surgeons. This also made Raven reassess why he had been summoned, having initially assumed his role would involve administering chloroform. Henry was assistant pathologist at the Infirmary, but he was also assistant to the police surgeon, Dr Struthers, which lent weight to his remarks regarding McLevy.

Dr Christie seemed to remember himself and belatedly offered a greeting. This was in keeping with what Raven had heard about the man. It was said he was garrulous around men of status but had little time for anyone who could not directly further his goals.

'Dr Archibald Christie,' he said gruffly, like he grudged the breath.

Christie was a tall and ascetically slender man with a dark mane of flowing hair, about which he was reputedly vain.

'Dr Will Raven.'

'Ah, yes. Assistant to Simpson.'

The great man's coat-tails had been of substantial benefit to Raven, but on this occasion he quickly ascertained the association would serve him ill. Christie had not referred to his mentor as Professor or even Doctor; merely 'Simpson'.

'Where is the patient?' Raven asked.

'I think it's a little late for that,' said Henry.

Christie tutted at this, visibly agitated.

Raven gave them both a quizzical look.

'Best that we simply show you,' said Henry.

Raven glanced up as they led him beneath the columns of the building's imposing facade. He wondered why such monuments always strove to evoke the Romans or the Greeks. Raven's schooling had served to instruct him that they were brutal and bloodthirsty times. He suspected the wealthy men who had commissioned them

did so in tribute to epochs when slavery had been altogether less controversial.

Raven's mother had given him the name Wilberforce, after the man who led the campaign to abolish slavery towards the end of the last century. He consequently saw it as his duty to be a driver of progress, and to look to the future rather than the past. Simpson had been an inspiration in that regard. Not only had the professor changed the course of medicine with his discovery of the effects of chloroform, but he was a strident sceptic of humbug and quackery. A duty to progress was a duty to scientific enquiry.

'It's Professor Cooper,' said Henry, leading Raven along a corridor.

'We don't know if it's Professor Cooper,' insisted Christie.

'I meant to say it's Professor Cooper we're concerned with.'

'What about him?' Raven asked, the words of the coach driver coming back to him and taking on a new and sinister resonance.

Christie opened a door on the left and led Raven into a well-appointed suite of offices. The room was warm, despite the fact that the furnace in the corner appeared to be unlit. The walls were wood-lined, three of them covered floor to ceiling with shelves of books and of preserved specimens. The sight of these alone might have been sufficient to startle whoever the driver had spoken to, but even allowing for exaggeration, they were hardly the stuff of nightmares.

Something was wrong here, something both Christie and Henry were reluctant to describe. Instead they wished Raven to see for himself, and the closer he got to doing so, the less Raven relished the prospect.

Remembering the driver's words, he glanced at the desk, a sturdy and expansive bureau covered in volumes and papers. Its drawers were closed. Henry and Christie had already walked past it anyway. They made for a wall press, a shallow cupboard adjacent to the windows, its door conspicuously open.

As he approached it, he could see more shelves, bearing vials,

boxes and yet more books. Raven remained unable to discern what had occasioned either urgency or concern. Then he saw that on the floor of the cupboard was a dark grey blanket, its contours vaguely describing a shape underneath.

Henry delicately tugged it away to reveal a human foot. A left foot. It wasn't still dripping blood and it could not be described as a leg, but the carriage driver was right about one thing. It did look freshly severed.

Raven felt a hollowing inside himself. Mere yards away, human specimens were dissected every day: sights, smells and sensations with which he had developed a quotidian familiarity. But something hidden in a cupboard and covered beneath a blanket spoke not of scientific exploration but of darker deeds.

Raven took it in for a moment then turned to Henry and Christie, the latter looking simultaneously agitated and affronted; whether by the presence of the foot or of Raven he was not sure.

'I'm a little confused as to my role here,' Raven confessed.

'As am I,' said Christie, addressing Henry. 'Other than his not being James McLevy, what do we gain from Dr Raven being here?'

'He has a proven record of making discreet enquiries. The matter of the French midwife a few years ago, and of the notorious Mrs King.'

'I would hardly call the latter discreet,' Christie observed distastefully. 'It was the talk of the city.'

'The city knew only a fraction of the truth,' Raven said, for there were aspects of that affair that would shake the town to its volcanic core were he ever to reveal them.

'We don't know where Professor Cooper is,' Christie volunteered. 'He was last seen on Friday.'

'And was he walking with a bit of a limp?'

'This is no matter for levity, Dr Raven,' Christie grumbled.

'I merely mean to ask whether you believe this to be part of Dr Cooper.'

'This was discovered by one of our porters late last night,' Christie said. 'He informed me, and I sought Dr Cooper at his

house. He was not at home. I returned here a few hours ago and summoned Dr Littlejohn.'

'Is Dr Cooper a tall man?'

'Of average height.'

'It's just that this looks a small foot to me. I assume this is not a specimen from the dissecting room?'

'There is only one cadaver being anatomised at the moment, and it has the full complement of feet,' Christie replied. 'We do not know who this belongs to or where it came from. There might be a perfectly mundane explanation for it, which is what I am hoping Dr Littlejohn might be able to arrive at.'

Raven looked again at the foot, which struck him as having been concealed hurriedly rather than carefully hidden. He noted too the lack of evidence suggesting violence had happened here, far less the messy business of hacking through a limb.

'I can think of an explanation that excludes Dr Cooper having murdered anyone or having been murdered himself,' Raven said. 'Unfortunately, it is not one that would continue to exclude Mr McLevy.'

Christie looked at him with an uncomfortable combination of expectation and apprehension.

'Perhaps someone has been acquiring dissection specimens, shall we say, independently,' Raven suggested.

Since the Anatomy Act of twenty years before, any unclaimed bodies could be used for dissection, so there was usually a sufficient supply. Nonetheless, some doctors were still not above procuring specimens by underhand means, particularly if they were unusual in some way.

Christie's expression indicated that an explanation involving murder might now seem preferable. The man had only recently taken up his post and anything suggestive of body-snatching would provide a calamitous start to his tenure.

'Is it possible to make some discreet enquiries at the Infirmary?' Raven suggested.

'I will certainly ask,' Henry replied. 'But if a body had turned

up anywhere in this town missing a foot, it would already have attracted the attention of Struthers, and therefore McLevy. We should be grateful that does not appear to be the case.'

Christie did not look grateful. 'Until such time as we are able to account for this, it is imperative that the matter remains confidential. I do not wish to invite speculation or public alarm.'

He then turned so that his simmering glare took in Raven too.

'I realise that I am new to this city, so let me state very plainly that I am not a man who deals well with disappointment. I expect this matter to be resolved without the unnecessary involvement of anyone who is not already present in this room. Is that understood?'

'Yes, of course, Dr Christie,' Henry replied.

Raven remained silent. His thoughts turned to the driver who had brought him here. It might have been a porter he had spoken to, but his would not be the only wagging tongue. The fishwives of Newhaven were as nothing compared to the doctors of this city when it came to trading gossip and rumour.

Little in Edinburgh stayed secret for long. Apart from those things that stayed secret for ever.