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## ONE



o decent story ought to begin with a dead prostitute, and for that, apologies, for it is not something upon which respectable persons would desire to dwell. However, it was the very assumption that the gentle folk of Edinburgh would shy from such a thing that set Will Raven upon his fateful path during the winter of 1847. Raven would not have wished anyone to consider the discovery of poor Evie Lawson as the beginning of his own story, but what truly motivated him was the determination that neither would it be the end of hers.

He found her four flights up on the Canongate, in a cold and crooked wee garret. The place was reeking of drink and sweat, barely tempered by a merciful note of something more perfumed: a womanly musk to be sure, if cheap and redolent only of a woman who sold herself. With these scents in his nostrils, if he closed his eyes he could imagine she was still there, about to haul herself down to the street for maybe the third or fourth time in as many hours. But his eyes were open, and he didn't have to feel for the absence of a pulse to know otherwise.

Raven had seen enough death to understand that her passing from this life into the next had not been an easy one. The sheets on the bed were swirled up around her, testament to more writhing

than she ever feigned in her counterfeit passion, and he feared it lasted longer than any of her customers ever did. Her body, far from lying in repose, was in a state of contortion, as though the pain that had carried her off was still with her and there had been no release in death. Her brows remained contracted, her lips drawn apart. There were collections of froth at the corners of her mouth.

Raven laid a hand on her arm and quickly withdrew it. The cold was a shock, though it shouldn't have been. He was no stranger to handling a corpse, but seldom one whose touch he had known when warm. In this moment of contact, something ancient in him was moved by how she had gone from a person to a thing.

Many before him had seen her transformed in this room: from the sum of their desires to a wretched vessel for their unwanted seed, adored and then despised in the moment they spilled it.

Not him, though. Whenever they had lain together, the only transformation he contemplated was the desire to elevate her above this. He was not merely another customer. They were friends. Weren't they? That was why she shared with him her hopes that she might find a position as a maid in a respectable house, and why he had promised to make enquiries on her behalf, once he began to move in the right circles.

That was why she came to him for help.

She wouldn't tell him what the money was for, only that it was urgent. Raven guessed she owed somebody, but it was pointless trying to prevail upon her to reveal who. Evie was too practised a deceiver for that. She had seemed mightily relieved and tearfully grateful that he had got it, though. He didn't tell her from where, concealing a concern that he might have put himself in hock to the self-same money-lender, effectively transferring Evie's debt to him.

It was two guineas, as much as he might expect to live on for several weeks, and thus a sum he had no immediate means of

paying back. He hadn't cared, though. He wanted to help. Raven knew there were those who would scoff at the notion, but if Evie believed she could reinvent herself as a housemaid, then he had been prepared to believe it twice as hard on her behalf.

The money had not saved her, however, and now there would be no escape.

He looked around the room. The stumps of two candles were guttering in the necks of gin bottles, a third long ago melted down to nothing. In the tiny grate, the embers were barely glowing in a fire she would otherwise have sparingly replenished hours ago from the coals in a nearby scuttle. By the bed was a shallow basin of water, wet rags draped over its rim and a ewer alongside. It was what she used to clean herself afterwards. Close by it on the floor lay an upended gin bottle, a modest puddle testifying to there being little left inside when it tumbled.

There was no label on the bottle, its provenance unknown and therefore suspect. It would not be the first time some back-alley gut-rot distiller had inadvertently brewed up a lethal draught. Complicating this thesis was the sight of a bottle of brandy on the windowsill, still half full. It must have been a client who brought it.

Raven wondered if the same individual witnessed Evie's throes and left it behind in his hurry to escape the aftermath. If so, why didn't he call for help? Possibly because to some, being found with a sick hooor was no better than being found with a dead one, so why draw attention to yourself? That was Edinburgh for you: public decorum and private sin, city of a thousand secret selves.

Aye. Sometimes they didn't even need to spill their seed for the vessel to be transformed.

He looked once more upon the glassy hollowness in her eyes, the contorted mask that was a mockery of her face. He had to swallow back the lump in his throat. Raven had first set eyes upon her four years ago when he was but a schoolboy, boarding at George Heriot's. He recalled the whispers behind hands of the

older boys who knew the truth of what they were looking at when they spied her walking along the Cowgate. They were full of that curious mix of lustful fascination and fearful scorn, wary of what their own instincts were making them feel. They wanted her as they hated her, even then. Nothing changed.

At that age, the future seemed unattainable even as he was hurtling towards it. To Raven, she appeared an emissary of a world he was not yet permitted to inhabit. For that reason, he regarded her as someone above him, even after he discovered that the future was unavoidably here, and learned how easily certain things *were* attainable.

She seemed so much older, so much more worldly, until he came to understand that she had seen only a small, grim part of the world, and far more of that than any woman should. Woman? Girl. He later learned that she was younger than him by almost a year. She must have been fourteen when he saw her on the Cowgate. How she had grown in his mind between that moment and the first time he had her: a promise of true womanhood and all he dreamed it had to offer.

Her world had been small and squalid. She deserved to see a wider one, a better one. That was why he gave her the money. Now it was gone and so was she, and Raven was none the wiser as to what his debt had paid for.

For a moment he felt as though tears were about to come, but a vigilant instinct cautioned him that he must get out of this place before he was seen.

He left the room on quiet feet, closing the door softly. He felt like a thief and a coward as he crept down the stairs, abandoning her to preserve his own reputation. From elsewhere in the close he could hear the sounds of copulation, the exaggerated cries of a young woman feigning her ecstasy to hasten the end.

Raven wondered who would find Evie now. Her landlady most likely: the redoubtably sleekit Effie Peake. Though she preferred to pretend ignorance when it suited her, she missed little that

went on under her roof unless she had already succumbed to the gin for the night. Raven felt sure the hour was yet too early for that, hence the softness of his tread.

He left out the back way and through the middens, emerging from an alleyway onto the Canongate a good forty yards west of Evie's close. Beneath the black sky, the air felt cold but far from fresh. The smells of ordure were inescapable around here, so many lives piled one upon the other in the foetid labyrinth that was the Old Town, like Bruegel's *Tower of Babel* or Botticelli's *Map of Hell*.

Raven knew he should repair to his cold and joyless wee room in Bakehouse Close for one last night. He had a whole new beginning ahead of him the next day, and he ought to rest himself ahead of it. But he also knew sleep was unlikely to come after what he had just witnessed. It was not a night for solitude, or for sobriety.

The only antidote to being confronted with death was the hearty embrace of life, even if that embrace was smelly, sweaty and rough.

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## TWO



itken's tavern was a morass of bodies, a thunderous noise of male voices ever rising to be heard over each other, and all enveloped in a thick fog of pipe smoke. Raven did not partake of it himself but enjoyed its sweetness in his nose, all the more in an establishment such as this for what it covered up.

He stood at the gantry sipping ale, talking to nobody in particular, alone but not lonely. It was a warm place to lose oneself, the greater cacophony better than silence as a backdrop for his thoughts, but he also enjoyed the diversions afforded by homing in on individual conversations, as if each of them were tiny vignettes playing out for his entertainment. There was talk of the new Caledonian Railway Station being built at the end of Princes Street, fears expressed about the possibility of hordes of starving Irishmen finding their way along the track from Glasgow.

Any time he turned his head he saw faces he recognised, some from long before he was permitted inside an establishment such as this. The Old Town teemed with thousands of people, glimpsed upon the street and never seen again, and yet at the same time it could feel like a village. There were always familiar faces anywhere you looked – and always familiar eyes upon you.

He noticed a man in a tattered and ancient hat glance his way

more than once. Raven didn't recognise him, but he seemed to recognise Raven, and there was little affection in his gaze. Someone he had gotten into a brawl with, no doubt, though the same draught that precipitated the fight had also blurred the memory. From the sour look on his face, Tattered-hat must have taken second prize.

In truth, mere drink might not have been the cause, on Raven's part at least. There was a dark want in him sometimes, one he was learning to be wary of, though not enough to be the master of it. He felt a stirring of it tonight inside that gloomy garret, and could not in honesty say whether he had come here to drown it or to feed it.

He met Tattered-hat's gaze once more, whereupon the man scurried towards the door. He moved more purposefully than most men might exit a tavern, casting a final glance Raven's way before disappearing into the night.

Raven returned to his ale and put him from his mind.

As he raised the tankard again, he felt a slap on his back, the hand remaining to grip his shoulder. Instinctively he pivoted on a heel, fist formed tight and his elbow drawn back to strike.

'Hold, Raven. That's no way to treat a colleague. At least not one who still has coins in his pocket to match his drouth.'

It was his friend Henry, whom he must have missed in the throng.

'My apologies,' he replied. 'One cannot be too careful in Aitken's these days, for standards have slipped and I'm told they're even letting surgeons in.'

'I didn't think to see a man of your prospects still patronising an Old Town hostelry. Aren't you moving on to fresh pastures? It won't make for the perfect start should you present yourself to your new employer having had a bellyful of ale the night before.'

Raven knew Henry wasn't serious, but it was nonetheless a timely reminder not to push things too far. One or two would be

adequate to help him sleep, but now that he had company, one or two was unlikely to be the whole of it.

‘And what of you?’ Raven batted back. ‘Have you not duties of your own in the morning?’

‘Indeed, but as I expected my old friend Will Raven to be indisposed, I sought the ministrations of another associate, Mr John Barleycorn, to soothe the woes cast by my duties today.’

Henry handed over some coins and their tankards were refreshed. Raven thanked him and watched Henry take a long pull at the beer.

‘A taxing shift, was it?’ Raven asked.

‘Bashed-in heads, broken bones and another death from peritonitis. Another young woman, poor thing. Nothing we could do for her. Professor Syme could not discern the cause, which drove him to a state of high dudgeon, and which of course was everyone else’s fault.’

‘There’ll be a post-mortem, then.’

‘Yes. A pity you are not free to attend. I’m sure you could offer greater insight than our current pathologist. Half the time he’s as pickled as the specimens in his laboratory.’

‘A young woman, you say?’ Raven asked, thinking of the one he just left. Evie would be afforded no such attention once she was found.

‘Yes, why?’

‘No reason.’

Henry took a long swallow and eyed Raven thoughtfully. He knew he was under exacting scrutiny. Henry was quite the diagnostician, and not merely of what ailed the body.

‘Are you well enough, Raven?’ he asked, his tone sincere.

‘I’ll be better once I’ve got this down me,’ he replied, making an effort to sound cheerier. Henry was not so easily fooled, though.

‘It’s just that . . . you have a look about you, of which I have long since learned to be wary. I don’t share your perverse appetite



for mayhem and nor do I wish to find myself treating your wounds when I ought to be resting.'

Raven knew he had no grounds for protest. All charges were true, including the glimmer of that dark want he feared was in him tonight. Fortunately, given Henry's company, on this occasion he felt sure the ale would quench it.

*You've the devil in you*, his mother used to tell him when he was a child. Sometimes it was meant in humour, but sometimes it was not.

'I am a man of prospects now, Henry,' he assured him, proffering payment and gesturing for two refills, 'and have no wish to jeopardise them.'

'A man of prospects indeed,' Henry replied. 'Though why the esteemed Professor of Midwifery should award such a coveted position to a reprobate such as yourself remains a mystery to me.'

Reluctant as he was to admit it, it was a question that gave Raven pause too. He had worked hard to win the professor's approval, but there had been several equally diligent and committed candidates for the apprenticeship. He had no solid notion of why he had been given the nod ahead of the rest, and did not like to dwell upon the precariousness of such caprice.

'The professor hails from humble stock,' was as much as he could offer, an answer unlikely to satisfy Henry any more than it satisfied Raven. 'Perhaps he believes that such opportunities should not be the sole preserve of the high-born.'

'Or perhaps he lost a wager, and you are the forfeit.'

The drink flowed, and with it old tales. It helped. The image of Evie flickered in and out of his vision like the guttering candles in her room. But listening to Henry, Raven was reminded of the world Evie did not get to see, reminded of the opportunity waiting for him across the North Bridge. A little of his love for this place and for the Old Town in general had died tonight. It was time to leave it all behind, and if anyone was a believer in new beginnings,

it was Will Raven. He had reinvented himself once before and was about to do so again.

Several tankards later they stood outside Aitken's watching their breath turn to steam in the chill of the night air.

'It's been good to see you,' Henry said. 'But I'd best be getting my head down. Syme's operating tomorrow, and he's all the pricklier when he can smell last night's tobacco and beer on his assistants.'

'Aye, "prickly" is the word for Syme,' Raven replied. 'With emphasis on the first part. Meanwhile I'm back to Mrs Cherry's for one last night.'

'Bet you'll miss her and her lumpy porridge,' Henry called out as he turned onto South Bridge in the direction of the Infirmary. 'Not to mention her effervescent personality.'

'For sure, she and Syme would make a fine match,' Raven called back, crossing the road and heading east in the direction of his lodgings.

Raven knew there were elements of his time here that he might one day regard with nostalgic fondness or regret, but his accommodations were not among them. Ma Cherry was a cantankerous old crone who resembled her name only in that she was round and reddened, for there was certainly nothing sweet about her. She was as sour as earwax and as desiccated as a corpse in the desert, but she kept a lodging house that was among the cheapest in the town; just above the workhouse in terms of comfort and cleanliness.

A smir of cold rain blew about him as he headed down the High Street towards Netherbow. Clouds had gathered and the moonlight disappeared since he made his way to Aitken's. He noticed that some of the street lights remained unlit, making it almost impossible to avoid the piles of muck on the pavement. He inwardly cursed the lamplighter who had failed to do what Raven considered to be a straightforward job. If he himself was as incompetent, lives would be lost.

Lighting fell within the responsibility of the police office, as did keeping the gutters clear. Their main priority, however, was the investigation and recovery of stolen property. If they observed that as well as their other duties, Raven thought, then every thief in the Lothians could sleep easy.

As he approached Bakehouse Close he stepped on something soft and his left shoe began to fill with water; at least he hoped it was water. He hopped for a couple of yards, trying to shake off whatever was clinging to his sole. Then he became aware that a figure had emerged from a doorway and was loitering in front of him. He wondered what the fellow was waiting for, and why he would be lingering with the rain becoming heavier. Then Raven drew close enough to see his face, which in the gathering darkness was also close enough to smell the rancid decay from his carious teeth.

Raven did not know his name, but he had seen him before: one of Flint's men. Raven had christened him the Weasel, after his furtive manner and rodent-like features. The Weasel did not strike him as the type to chance confronting Raven alone, which meant he was bound to have an accomplice nearby. Probably that slow-witted fellow he was with the last time: Peg, Raven had named him, for the sole tooth standing amid his ruin of a mouth. Raven had probably passed him without realising a few moments ago. He would be hiding in another doorway ready to cut him off if he ran.

This encounter was not mere happenstance, he realised. He remembered the man who had been staring at him and then departed so purposefully from the tavern.

'Mr Raven, you're not trying to avoid me, are you?'

'As I can think of nothing that would commend your company, then my general intention *would* be to avoid you, but I was not aware I was being sought.'

'Anyone who owes Mr Flint will always be sought. But you can guarantee my absence just as soon as you make good on your debt.'

‘Make good on it? I have barely owed it a fortnight. So how about you sub me an advance on that absence and get out of my way.’

Raven brushed past him and resumed walking. The Weasel did not seek to apprehend him, and nor did he immediately follow. He would be waiting for his accomplice to catch up. He and Peg were used to breaking the bones of already broken men, and some craven instinct perhaps detected that Raven had a greater stomach for the fight. The ale might have doused what burned in him before, but the sight of this sphincter-blossom was reigniting it.

Raven walked slowly, aware of the footsteps behind him. He was searching in the gloom for a weapon. Anything could be turned to such a purpose: you simply needed to know how best to use it. His foot happened upon something wooden and he bent to lift it. It was a splintered length, but solid enough.

Raven turned around and rose in one movement, the stick drawn back in his right hand, then something exploded inside his head. There was light everywhere and a whiplash movement, as though his inert body was being hauled like a dead weight by the momentum of his head. He hit the wet cobbles with a rattle of bones, too fast to make any attempt to cushion his fall.

He opened his dazed eyes and looked up. The blow had rendered him insensible, he reasoned, for he was having visions. There was a monster above him. A giant.

Raven was dragged from the street into the dark of an alley by a creature that had to be seven feet tall. His head alone was twice the size of any man’s, his forehead impossibly overgrown like an outcrop of rocks at a cliff-edge. Raven was paralysed by pain and shock, unable to react as he saw this Gargantua rear up before him and bring down a heel. The sound of his own cry echoed off the walls as pain erupted inside him. He flailed in response, curling his limbs tight about him, then felt another post-holer of a blow drive down through the huge trunk of his assailant’s leg.

Gargantua crouched to sit astride him, pinning his arms to the floor with the sheer weight of his thighs. Everything about this brute seemed stretched and disproportionate, as though certain parts of him had just kept growing and left the rest behind. When he opened his mouth, there were even gaps between his teeth indicating that his gums had kept spreading out around them.

The pain was indescribable, worsened by the knowledge that Gargantua's fists were free to rain down more damage. No amount of alcohol would have been sufficient to dull his senses through this, else the operating theatres would be going through more whisky than Aitken's.

His mind was a storm, coherent thought nigh impossible amidst such agony and confusion, but one thing seemed clear: there was no prospect of putting up any kind of fight. If this monster wished to kill him, then he was going to die here in this alley.

Gargantua's face was a compellingly grotesque vision, more fierce and distorted than any gargoyle clinging to the walls of a church, but it was his thick, sausage-like fingers that drew Raven's gaze in the gloom. With his own hands helplessly restrained, he was entirely at the mercy of whatever these outsize pommels might wreak.

Raven felt relief when they were directed to rifling through his pockets, but this was short-lived as he remembered that there was little to be found there. Gargantua held what few coins Raven had left in the palm of his hand, which was when the Weasel emerged from the shadows, pocketing the money and crouching down alongside the monster.

'Aye, not so free with your mouth now, are you, Mr Raven?'

The Weasel produced a knife from his pocket and held it up in what little light was to be found in the alley, making sure Raven could see it. It was about four inches long, the blade thin, a bloodstained rag wrapped around the wooden handle for a surer grip.

Raven silently prayed for a quick end to his ordeal. Perhaps a stab upwards under his ribs. His pericardium would fill with blood, his heart would stop beating and it would all be over.

‘So now that I have your attention, let us properly address the issue of your debt to Mr Flint.’

Raven could barely find the breath to speak, with the weight of the monster crushing him and the pain still gripping his trunk. The Weasel seemed to notice and ordered the hulk to raise himself just enough for Raven to be able to issue a whisper.

‘See, it seems you were keeping your light under a bushel. Since lending you the sum, we have learned that you are the son of a well-to-do lawyer in St Andrews. So having re-evaluated your status, Mr Flint has brought forward the expected date of redemption.’

Raven felt a new weight upon him, though Gargantua had eased himself off. It was the burden of a lie returned to its teller, in accordance with the law of unforeseen consequences.

‘My father is long dead,’ he wheezed out. ‘Do you think if I could have borrowed from him, I would be seeking out cut-throat usurers?’

‘That’s as may be, but the son of a lawyer must have other connections, in time of need.’

‘I don’t. But as I told Flint when he lent me, I have prospects. When I begin to earn, I will be able to pay, with interest.’

The Weasel leaned closer, the stink from his mouth worse than anything in the gutter.

‘Oh, there will be interest. But for an educated man, you don’t seem to understand this very well. Mr Flint doesn’t wait for prospects. When you owe him money, you find a way to get it.’

The Weasel pressed the knife against Raven’s left cheek.

‘And just so you know, us usurers don’t only cut throats.’

He drew the blade across, slow and deep, all the time looking Raven in the eye.

‘A wee something to remind you of your new priorities,’ he said.

The Weasel slapped Gargantua on the shoulder by way of telling him they were done. He climbed to his feet, freeing Raven to put a hand to his face. Blood was welling through his fingers as they tenderly probed the wound.

The Weasel then pivoted on a heel and kicked Raven in the stomach where he lay.

‘You find the money,’ he said. ‘Or next time it’s an eye.’

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## THREE



aven lay in the dark for a while and concentrated solely on breathing. With his assailants gone, he felt relief flood through him, an uncontainable elation that he was not dead. Unfortunately this manifested itself in an unexpected urge to laugh, which proved far more containable under protest from his ribs. Were they broken, he wondered. How much damage had been done? Were any of his organs contused? He could imagine blood dribbling between the layers of the pleura, putting pressure on his bruised lung, constricting its expansion even now that the brute had removed himself.

He put the image from his mind. All that mattered was that he was still breathing, for now, and while that remained true, his prospects were good.

He put his hand to his cheek again. It was wet with blood and mushy, like a bruised peach. The wound was deep and wide. There was no option to return to Mrs Cherry's without this being seen to.

Raven dragged himself to Infirmary Street, where he decided it would be best to avoid the porter's lodge and the stern questions his appearance would surely prompt. Instead he made his way along the wall to the section most favoured by the house



surgeons for climbing over. Henry and his peers used this means of ingress when they did not wish to draw attention to late-night excursions, as such behaviour might see them called in front of the hospital board. It took several attempts in his enfeebled state, but Raven eventually hauled himself over the wall before climbing in through a low window that was always left unlatched for this specific purpose.

He shambled along the corridor, leaning against the wall when his breathing became too laboured and painful. He crept past the surgical ward without incident, hearing loud snoring emanating from just behind the door. The noise was likely coming from the night nurses, who frequently imbibed the wines and spirits supplied for the benefit of the patients in order to ensure for themselves a good night's sleep.

Raven made it to Henry's door and knocked repeatedly on it, every second it remained unanswered adding to the fear that his friend was in a post-tavern stupor. Eventually, the door swung inward and Henry's bleary and tousled visage appeared around it. His initial response was one of horror at what creature had visited him in the night, then came recognition.

'Gods, Raven. What the bloody hell has happened to you?'

'Someone took exception to the fact that I had nothing worth stealing.'

'We'd better get you downstairs. That's going to need stitching.'

'I diagnosed that much myself,' Raven said. 'Do you know a competent surgeon?'

Henry fixed him with a look. 'Don't test me.'

Raven lay back on the bed and attempted to relax, but this was not easy given that Henry was approaching his lacerated face with a large suture needle. He was trying to recount just how many times Henry's tankard had been refilled, calculating the implications for how neatly he would be capable of stitching. Drunk or sober, no quality of needlework was going to spare him

a scar, which would be the first thing anyone noticed about him in the future. This was likely to have ramifications for his career, but he could not afford to think about that right then. Most immediately his priority was to remain still, but the pains racking him and the prospect of Henry's needle were militating against that.

'I realise that it's difficult, but I must ask you to refrain from writhing, and when I commence, from flinching. Part of the wound is close to your eye and if I get the stitching wrong it will droop.'

'Then I will have to be rechristened Isaiah,' he replied.

'Why?' Henry asked; then it came to him. 'Mother of God, Raven.'

Henry's expression was funnier than the joke, but any relief it gave Raven came at a sharp cost to his ribs.

Raven lay still and attempted to transport himself from the here and now, so that he was less conscious of the procedure. Unfortunately, his first destination, quite involuntarily, was Evie's room, the sight of her twisted body appearing in his mind just as Henry's needle first penetrated his cheek. He felt it push through the skin and into the soft layer below, could not but picture the curve of it bridging the sides of the wound before re-emerging, which was when he felt the tug of the cat-gut through his already ravaged face. It hurt far more than the Weasel's knife, that being over in a couple of seconds.

He put up a hand as Henry was about to commence the second stitch.

'Have you any ether?' he asked.

Henry looked at him disapprovingly. 'No. You'll just need to tolerate it. It's not as though you're having a leg off.'

'That's easy for you to say. Have you ever had your face stitched?'

'No, and that good fortune might be related to the fact that nor do I have an inclination to bark at the moon and pick fights with Old Town ne'er-do-wells.'

'I did not pick any— ow!'

‘Stop talking,’ Henry warned, having recommenced. ‘I can’t do this if your cheek is not still.’

Raven fixed him with an ungrateful glare.

‘The ether doesn’t always seem to work anyway,’ Henry told him, tugging the cat-gut tight on the second loop. ‘Syme has just about given up on it, and with someone dying of the stuff recently, I think that will nail down the lid.’

‘Someone died of it?’

‘Yes. Down in England somewhere. Coroner said it was a direct result of the ether but Simpson continues to champion it.’ Henry paused in what he was doing. ‘You can ask the man about it yourself when you start your apprenticeship with him in the morning.’

Henry continued with his needlework, his head bent low over Raven’s face. He was close enough that Raven could smell the beer on his breath. Nonetheless, his hand was steady, and Raven got used to a rhythm of penetration and tug. No stitch was any less painful than its predecessor, but nor were any of them more painful than the ache in his ribs.

Henry stepped back to examine his handiwork. ‘Not bad,’ he declared. ‘Maybe I should conduct all my surgery after a bellyful at Aitken’s.’

Henry soaked a piece of lint in cold water and applied it to the wound. The coolness of the material was surprisingly soothing, the only pleasant sensation Raven had felt since his last swallow of ale.

‘I can’t send you back into the arms of Mrs Cherry looking like that,’ Henry said. ‘I’ll give you a dose of laudanum and put you in my bed. I’ll sleep on the floor for what’s left of the night.’

‘I’m indebted, Henry, truly. But please don’t allude to Mrs Cherry’s arms again. In my current state, the image is liable to make me spew.’

Henry fixed him with one of his scrutinising stares, but there was mischief in his tone.

‘You know she provides extra services for a small additional

fee, don't you?' he said. 'I gather many of her young lodgers have sought comfort in those arms. She's a widow and needs the money. There's no shame in it. I mean, between the scar and the droopy eye, you may have to begin revising your standards.'

Henry led Raven to his bed, where he lay down delicately. He hurt in more places simultaneously than he had ever hurt in individually. His face was full of cat-gut and, joking aside, he really might have to alter his expectations with regard to his marriage prospects. But it could all have been so much worse. He was still alive, and tomorrow was a new beginning.

'Right,' said Henry, 'let's get you that laudanum. And if you are going to be sick, please remember that I'm on the floor beside you and aim for my feet rather than my head.'