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Sawbones

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Chapter One

*Surgeon's Operating Theatre
St Bartholomew's Hospital
Smithfield
London
31 October 1792*

The room was packed. Students and interested observers all crammed onto the benches that were set out around the room, and behind them even more stood, squeezed into any available space. The air was thick with the smell of tobacco and damp wool – the rain outside was unforgiving.

On the table lay a boy – a few years younger than himself, Ezra thought – white with fear. His leg, a mangled twist of flesh all shades from dark blood red to livid scarlet speckled with bright white splintered bone was strapped hard into place. The leather fastenings dug into his skin above his knee, almost as tight as the tourniquet. Two porters were holding his arms, keeping his upper body still.

“The boy fell from a ladder?” Mr William McAdam, surgeon, tied on his leather apron.

The boy said nothing.

“Yes, sir,” Ezra McAdam said.

Ezra was sixteen, and had been apprenticed to Mr William since he could remember. He had the man’s surname, but that was simply because he had none of his own.

“He was sent up to fix the tiles – he’s a roofer, that’s his trade.” The boy on the table nodded, mute with fear.

Ezra passed Mr McAdam the skin knife and the flesh knife. He laid out the bone saw, freshly sharpened, and the artery hook; the wool for laying over the stump and the bandages for wrapping it after.

The boy’s lips moved soundlessly and a tear ran down the side of his cheek. Ezra could tell it was the Lord’s Prayer, over and over again.

“Gentlemen!” William McAdam addressed the room, one knife in each hand. “Your watches! I guarantee the fastest amputation ever performed anywhere in the world!”

The boy whimpered. The surgeon smiled down at him: a kindly, paternal smile.

Ezra felt every single soul in the room hold his breath. Inside his head, he began to count.

The knives flashed. The skin was peeled back, the flesh pared away. The boy was screaming and screaming.

“Saw.” Mr McAdam stuck out a hand.

Twenty seconds, Ezra counted, that was good. Mr McAdam’s skill was faultless.

Ezra passed his master the saw and took the knives, wiped them clean of blood and flesh. Then there was the sound of sawing, bone resisting metal. One minute.

The boy on the table was suddenly silent – his head lolled sideways, passed out with pain. Ezra hoped to

God he would regain consciousness eventually.

More sawing, the creak and brittle snap of a bone cut in two.

Two minutes.

The mangled, bloody leg fell with a soft thud into a basket on the floor.

The surgeon stood back, wiping blood on his apron as the crowd applauded. He consulted his watch. "Two minutes and five seconds, gentlemen!" The crowd was on its feet. "I think you'll find that unsurpassed! Ezra." He waved a hand towards the stump. "Tidy this up."

Ezra flapped the skin back over the stump and padded it with a generous amount of lamb's wool. While the tourniquet was still in place there wasn't an excess of blood. He bandaged tightly, swaddling the poor boy's leg as if it were a baby, firmly, tucking the ends in – all the while imagining a life with only one leg. At least it was a life. And Mr William McAdam was the best in the business: with luck there'd be no necrotizing flesh or gangrene.

Ezra cleaned and packed up the surgeon's instruments. Across the room Mr McAdam had done with glad-handing the crowd, directing the most eager to his anatomy lectures at his house on Great Windmill Street. "Every Tuesday and Thursday, the mysteries of the human body laid bare!"

Ezra smiled. His master was part showman, part genius. His Monday surgery at St Bartholomew's was famous, and his skills unequalled. Ezra felt the scar on the left side of his face, traced it from his temple to the edge of his jawbone. It was almost invisible now, a slender ridge of lighter coloured skin. Mr McAdam's stitches

must have been so neat – and of course Ezra had been a child, just five years old, when the tumour had been removed.

Mr McAdam was talking with one of the hospital porters, a small man with the pale, sunlight-starved skin of one who spends his working life under moonlight. Ezra knew the man, a Mr Allen. His second home was the Fortune of War inn at Pye Corner, where the men who bought and sold dead bodies gathered. They called themselves resurrectionists, but on the street they were known as grave robbers, body snatchers or worse. Ezra looked down at the boy on the table again, brushed his hair from his face and felt for a pulse. He was still alive; Mr Allen hadn't come for him. But when the poor lad came round – and he would, Ezra was sure he would – he would have to find another occupation. Tilers and roofers needed all their limbs.

Suddenly he realized Mr Lashley was watching him, right at his shoulder. Mr Lashley worked principally at St Bartholomew's; he was a surgeon too, though not anywhere as good as Mr McAdam, and bitter for the knowledge of it.

"Not bad, not bad," Mr Lashley said. Ezra stood away so he could see how cleanly and neatly the thing was done. Mr Lashley looked him up and down, taking in his black curly hair and dark brown eyes. "I had no idea your kind could be so well trained. If you find yourself in want of a position, you might let me know."

As the man walked away, Ezra cursed under his breath. He would no more work for Lashley than cut off his own arm. Mr Lashley was a surgeon to give them all a bad name, he thought.

"Ezra, Lad," Mr McAdam waved him over and spoke quietly. "I will be dining at my club tonight. Take my tools back to Great Windmill Street and wait up. Mr Allen will be delivering. Be sure you let him in without waking the whole household."

Puzzled, Ezra leant closer to his master and kept his voice low. "But we already have one thing, for the lecture tomorrow."

"This is an extra. Worthwhile, Allen assures me. And although I'd agree with you if you said the man was a sewer rat, I have to remember that we are hogtied and dashed without him. Please make both cadavers ready for an early start."

"Yes, Mr McAdam." Ezra tried not to show his disappointment. Anna had shown interest in a play at the theatre in Covent Garden and, even though he knew her parents would disapprove, he'd thought of asking her.

Mr McAdam smiled. "I am sure Miss Anna St John will wait."

Ezra flushed. Were his feelings so transparent?

It was still raining. Ezra weaved through the crowd outside the hospital, south towards Newgate and down Ludgate Hill towards the Strand. Past the shoppers and news boys, past the knife grinders and the gin sellers, the milkmaids and the shoemakers and the street singers and the card sharps. Even in the heavy autumn rain the city didn't stop.

As he passed the church of St Clement Danes, squatting at the east end of the Strand, Ezra pulled his jacket closer and shifted the heavy bag of medical tools. The

church bells rang for four, the shops were lighting their lamps. Perhaps there was still time to see Anna before he reached home – if only to convey his disappointment at not being able to see her this evening.

Ezra ran from shop awning to shop awning as far as the cloth warehouse on Lisle Street, where the St Johns lived and worked. It was busy; through the window Ezra could see Anna's older brother David serving a lady and her maid, rolling out yards of expensive Indian cotton. Ezra knew Anna's mother and brother did not approve of him – no, it was worse than that, David had called him the devil's imp and told Anna to avoid him. And who would blame them? An anatomist's boy was not a good prospect. And even if he became a surgeon, he would always be mulatto. Luckily Anna had her own mind – and as sharp and quick a mind as Ezra had ever encountered in a girl.

Ezra checked there were no blood spots or gobbets of flesh on his jacket or breeches, just in case. Then he slipped into Archer's Mews, which ran between the rears of the shops, and stopped at the back door to the St Johns' home. The door would not be locked but there was no sign of Anna or Betsey, their maid, who was infinitely better disposed towards him than the rest of the family.

Ezra looked up at the lights in the windows on the first floor. He could hear shouting, loud and in French, and although he didn't understand a word, he could tell something was up. He hoped their friendship was not the cause of the row this time. His heart cannoned in his chest.

He would leave a note for Anna with Betsey first thing in the morning and attempt to arrange a meeting.

By the time Ezra reached the McAdam house he was soaked through and almost covered in mud. His best woollen jacket with the dark embroidery, his linen shirt and his good Stepney leather shoes were all drenched. He shivered on the doorstep, looking up at the four-storey double-fronted house that was both his home and his workplace; had been for all the life he could remember.

"Ezra McAdam, don't you dare drip filthy mud on the hall runner!" Mrs Boscaven, the housekeeper, glared at him as he dashed past, up the stairs to Mr McAdam's office and museum on the first floor.

It was dark. Ezra lit a candle and the room came to life in the yellow glow of the flame. He shivered, the damp was almost in his bones. He took the candle and made his way past the endless glass jars containing eyeballs and organs, dissections of goats and fetuses and human hearts; past the wax models of livers and lungs and brains, the flayed and boiled clean skeleton of the tallest man who ever lived, through a door at the far end of the museum into his own small bedroom. He changed into some dry clothes and a fresh apron. There was plenty to do, and at least it would take his mind off Anna St John.

The body for tomorrow's lecture was already laid out downstairs on the large table in the anatomy room, a large, glass-ceilinged hall that had been built onto the side of the house. It had two doors, one that led off the hallway and another that gave onto Ham Yard at the back, for the students.

Ezra took a candle from the hallway and unlocked the connecting door. The sound of the rain on the glass-

panelled roof was relentless and filled his ears. He put the candle down on the table next to the cadaver and raked the sawdust good and even, then hung the room liberally with bunches of dry rosemary and bay. Only then did he begin to unwrap the cadaver.

The body was swaddled in coarse sacking; the resurrectionists left all winding sheets and shrouds in the grave. Taking either would be theft, and the snatchers knew how to stay within the law as well as they could. A body, according to the law, was not property, and no one could be jailed for taking something that didn't belong to anyone.

Ezra slowly and carefully unwrapped the body. It was a strange life; he knew that was what others thought, that they judged him. People wanted cures but they didn't want to know how to come by them. But William McAdam was no ghoul. How did people imagine surgeons knew where to cut, how to cut and how far to cut? You couldn't have one without the other.

He could still remember the first dissection he had ever seen. He must have been seven or eight years old, and he had squeezed himself through the crowd of medical students to watch the master at work. He had steeled himself then, as he did, just a little, now. Ezra sighed and brushed the mud into a pile on the floor, out of the way.

For now, he left a corner of the sacking to cover the face. There was something about the face of a cadaver, Ezra thought. It was not like the lively, animated face of a living man; that look, that spark, was gone moments after death. There was nothing left of the person the body had once been. The humanity had gone. Ezra knew this was

true, not just a tale he told himself to make his and Mr McAdam's work acceptable. But still he covered the face – not because he truly thought the eyes might suddenly snap open and reproach him, but because he wanted to show a little respect to the life this cadaver had once had. This face, or, more to the point, the soul behind the face, had smiled, had laughed, had maybe blown someone a kiss. He let it rest a little longer while he looked at the torso, the arms, the legs. They would have plenty to tell him.

Ezra McAdam could read a corpse as well as an Oxford scholar could read Ancient Greek. He sometimes thought he must have seen more dead men than spoken to live ones. Mr McAdam said there was a lot to be learnt just by looking, and that's always how he began. Look first, notes second, he always said. Ezra had notes for every cadaver that had come through McAdam's anatomy school for the past three years. The master said it was good to know as much as possible about every single specimen.

Ezra lifted the candle closer.

The cadavers were not often Negroes. In the flickering yellow light he – and it was a he – looked almost well, his skin a deep, dull brown. He couldn't have been dead very long at all. Ezra lifted the left leg. It had gone through the rigor mortis and was now loose and limber, so the body was at least two days old. The discoloration and the settling of the blood in the back of the limbs told the same tale. There were no signs of disease, no necrotizing or ulceration – and anyway, it was utterly and completely obvious how this one had met his Maker.

Ezra took out his notebook. In all his years assisting

with anatomizing he could count on one hand the number of gunshot wounds he had seen. And they tended to be drunken soldiers discharging their weapons for sport – or perhaps shooting into a crowd at a riot, missing their target but harming some innocent flower seller or crossing sweeper instead. It was always the poor, the foreigners, the refugees who suffered the most, Ezra thought. At least in death, all were at last equal.

This young man was healthy, or at least he had been at death. Taller than average – a soldier, then, gun happy and drunk?

Ezra lifted the cloth he had rested over the man's face.

"You will do us all a favour, sir, whoever you were," he said aloud. "We will know more, thanks to you."

The cadaver, of course, said nothing.

The face was clean shaven, with a good bone structure. Ezra lifted the eyelids; the eyes were clear and not bloodshot. He smelt the mouth – not a taint of gin or spirits – and his teeth were good and strong. His hands were a gentleman's hands, manicured, clean. Not a soldier, then, and not one of the St Giles' blackbirds, men who had been slaves and soldiers once, fighting for the British against the free colonials, but who now scraped a living on the streets. Ezra made a face, deep in thought. Perhaps this one had been the loser in a duel. But a Negro in a duel? With pistols? Surely it would have been common knowledge, sung by every news sheet singer from here to Stepney and back.

The wound was just below the man's left ribs. Ezra knew Mr McAdam would be upset if the lungs had been damaged. He lifted the candle and brought it closer to

the wound. It was like a dark red flower, black and foul in the centre, the skin forming red, petal-like fronds around it.

He hoped to God this wasn't a gentleman, some sort of wealthy merchant. If he had been a man of quality, that could mean a world of trouble for Mr McAdam. No one was too bothered about the empty coffin of an ordinary Londoner – and in too many cases wives sold their husbands; fathers, their children – but a gentleman, and a Negro one at that ... someone might be looking for him.

Ezra looked back at the face. There were no scars or marks such as he'd seen on visiting African royalty in Whitehall once. The hair on this one was cropped close, almost a shave, and there was a slit in both ears, as if Mr Allen or one of his kind had been in a hurry and pulled the earrings out. A sailor, then? But no sailor had hands like this, so little used to rough work.

The man's arms were well muscled, so he could not have been a merchant or an ambassador who sat in a chair all day. On the inside of his left forearm there was a mark. A bruise? Ezra lifted the candle closer – no, a tattoo. It had a definite shape, a letter perhaps. If so, it was one Ezra couldn't decipher. Possibly Arabic, he thought. Maybe a sea captain, an independent trader?

Ezra fetched a bucket of water to wash the body down carefully, the way, he told himself, he would like to be washed if he and the cadaver happened to swap places.

There were no more clues, save a lighter band on several fingers where there must have been rings. He turned the body over, and he could see the wound went all the way through to the back. The candle fizzed and guttered,

and the room went dark. Ezra sighed. There was a stub on the shelf by the door, so he lit that and propped the cadaver on its side. Now he could see that the bullet wound on the back must be the entry wound. Of course! The flesh pushed in, the skin forced downward...

Ezra laid the body on its back again. The wound on the front was where the shot had left the body; when he looked closer he could make out tiny fragments of white bone among the pulverized flesh. This could not be a duel. This man had been shot running away. One shot from close distance – there were no other wounds. Whoever shot this man had either been close or had a good aim. Ezra thought how much more information he could have gleaned if he'd been able to see the man's clothes.

The body's mouth had fallen open as he rolled it over, and he was about to close it when he realized something. Or rather, a lack of something. In death the tongue sometimes swelled, he often had to tuck it in. But this time there was no tongue. He looked again. This man, when he had been a man and not a cadaver, had had his tongue cut out, and the wound had healed completely. It had been cut out many years ago.

Here was a puzzle, Ezra thought. How could a man run a ship, give orders, buy and sell, without a tongue? It was possible; Ezra had seen folk with no speech talk with their hands. The tattoo pointed to the cadaver being a foreigner, but even that was not certain. Whoever he had been, Ezra reckoned, a man like this would be missed. He would have to tell Mr McAdam. The decision would be the master's.

Suddenly there was a three-beat knock on the yard