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The Candle Man

Written by Alex Scarrow

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THE CANDLE MAN

ALEX SCARROW



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CHAPTER 1



11th September 1888, London

Mary hastened along the alleyway: a dirty rat-run, little more than two shoulders in width of uneven cobblestones between dark, damp brick walls. She could hear the man calling after her, an angry foreign-accented voice promising to gut her like a fish when he caught up with her.

She lifted her long skirts as she stepped across a backed-up drain thick with faeces and the prone hump of a drunkard, or just as easily a corpse.

The man's shrill voice bounced off the brick walls, lost amidst the warren of gas-lit backstreets.

'Bitch! I cut you nose off . . . you bitch!'

She glanced back down the alley she'd darted into to see a dark shadow cast by a lamp slowly rise up the wall opposite. It loomed and wobbled, and then finally she saw the man's lurching outline as he passed by, not giving the dark alley a second glance. She listened to his slurred voice slowly recede as he staggered on, each new promised threat of mutilation growing fainter, each scraping footstep more distant.

Finally sure she wasn't going to have to run again, she slumped against a wall, almost immediately feeling its clammy dampness through the thin material of her shawl.

Mary hunkered down to a tired squat, all of a sudden robbed of the adrenaline that had helped her escape . . . *this time*. And in the dark space she was sharing with a stream of shit, and with the light tapping of feet nearby of countless rats, she allowed tears to tumble down her cheeks.

Thruppence. This . . . for just a thrupenny bit?

She couldn't imagine for one moment what her parents would make of the pitiful wretch she was now. A girl with convent schooling, a girl who once upon a time wrote home weekly, a clever, bonny girl who enjoyed Austen, Dickens, even Mrs Beeton, and loved playing a few of Gilbert and Sullivan's easier parlour ballads on the school's upright piano. A young woman who had managed to talk herself into that job with such a wealthy, prestigious family . . . and now? In five short years she had fallen from being the bright, young girl from the Welsh valleys with dreams and goals, to being this twilight creature squatting in shit. This *thing* that offered to lift her skirts to any man for a quick fuck for no more than thruppence.

Often she couldn't bring herself to do it. On some occasions, with a man too drunk to manage it, she could get away with her modest fee by doing little more than tolerating several poorly aimed prods. Sometimes, clamping her thighs tightly around a probing member, she could fool a drunk man into thinking he'd made penetration and wipe the semen from her stockings later on. But occasionally, as on this occasion, her John was less drunk than she'd thought and quite well aware of some of the tricks tarts at the cheaper end of the market were prepared to pull to dodge their part of the contract.

This one had quickly realised in the darkness that she was presenting him with nothing more than the tops of her bare thighs and had angrily pulled a knife on her. Mary ran, taking the coin he'd paid, for services yet to be properly rendered, with her.

Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your little song go?

She replied with nothing more than a mewling whimper.

She knew that one of these nights she wasn't going to be able to escape. One of these nights she was going to end up like the prone form further back down the alleyway: another bundle of threadbare clothes lying in a drainage ditch. Ignored. Not missed by anyone. Forgotten.

All this for thruppence.

The price of a spoon of laudanum. A little alchemy. A little dose of cheer.

She wiped a string of snot from the end of her nose and the tears from her blotchy cheeks. She needed another couple of customers before the last business of the night was gone. Two more and she'd be able to buy some scran as well.

Mary pulled herself to her feet and began to pick her way carefully towards the far end of the alley where faint amber blooms of flickering gas light promised a little more business.

She was about to step out into the wider street, still a narrow back road, but at least wide enough to have its own grime-encrusted sign post – *Argyll Street* – when she heard a low moan.

Light pooled beneath two gas lamps and faded away across drizzle-wet cobblestones into darkness. On the periphery of faint light, she thought she could make out the huddled form of someone. A man, by the timbre of his keening voice, sitting on his haunches, rocking backwards and forwards with his head in his hands.

The clocks had chimed midnight nearly an hour ago and the public houses were all but emptied now. Dock workers and market traders had stumbled back home to their anxious wives, Dutch and Norwegian sailors back to their moored ships. The only potential customers she was likely to find left were *connoisseurs*; men who knew exactly what they wanted from a tart and were sober enough to make sure they got their money's worth. The type of customer she detested.

She watched the dark shape, gently rocking to and fro, moaning softly, and whimpering almost like a child. She decided he was drunk. She stepped into Argyll Street towards him. She had to walk past him anyway, but a closer look couldn't hurt. Her shoes clacked lightly on the greasy cobbles as she approached him.

Closer now, she could see he was no dock worker or market trader. He wore smart boots that glinted with polish, a dark, well-cut suit, a waistcoat and a cape draped over his shoulders. The dim light picked out the white rim of his shirt cuffs, dotted with dark, almost black, spots.

Mary had seen blood by gas light before. It was as black as ink.

She stopped opposite him. 'You all right?'

The rocking stopped.

'Sir? You all right there?'

Slowly his head came up from his hands and she couldn't help but gasp as she saw the drying blood on his hands, down the right side of his face and matting his hair in a thick, gelatinous tangle.

His eyes seemed to focus on her for a moment, then to roll with a will of their own. 'I don't . . . I . . .' The rest of his words became a confused mumble.

Mary took a step across the narrow street towards him, confident that he looked to be in too bad a way to pose a threat.

'What happened?' she uttered softly. 'Were you jumped?'

She hunkered down in front of him, like a schoolmistress consoling a lost child. 'You been robbed? That it?'

The man's eyes swivelled back onto her. Not really focusing. Judging him from the side of his face that wasn't caked in drying blood, she guessed he was a man in his late thirties. Fashionably cut sideburns and a well-trimmed and cared-for moustache. A gentleman.

His eyelids flickered, his eyes rolled upwards until she could see only the whites and slowly, like a mature oak being felled, he slumped over onto his left side.

'Hoy . . . hoy, mister?' she prodded him. 'Mister?'

She leant over his head and could hear his breathing bubbling through mucous. Still breathing. Still alive. He'd passed out was all. She leant closer and in the flickering gas twilight thought she could see a deep gash in his matted hair.

A cosh, or a club, even a dull-edged hatchet, could have done that. She suspected she was right: some young hoodlums must have cornered and mugged him. Without realising it, she found her hands were thinking for themselves. Already probing his pockets. She hated herself for doing that. Hated that this was now her first instinct: to see what the muggers might have left behind that could be lifted off this unfortunate bugger, what could be taken and pawned.

'I'm sorry, sir,' she whispered as she probed the folds of his cape and jacket. 'See, I need the money. I need it.'

The man's voice groaned a thick syrup of lost words.

Her hand found dampness on the side of his torso. She pulled it out and saw it was sticky with dark, cloying blood.

He's been stabbed too.

She fancied the poor gentleman was going to bleed out on Argyll Street before the morning came and some early trader on his way to work found him. She resumed her hasty search of his clothing and, just as she was about to give up, her fingers chanced upon the edge of a leather strap. She followed it down to his hip where the strap met the soft worn leather of a satchel flap.

Her hand probed cautiously inside and immediately felt a variety of things: the cool metal of keys on a ring and the smooth leather of what felt like a bulbous, well-fed wallet.

'Bleedin' Jesus!' she muttered.

Mary was about to probe deeper, to pull out her find one item at a time and examine them, when she heard the distant clacking of hooves on stone. She decided she'd chanced her luck enough for one night and eased the leather strap off the man's shoulder and quickly tugged it over his head.

She got to her feet and, with one last glance back at his slumped form, she hurried on down Argyll Street, the small satchel already over her own shoulder as if that's how she *always* wore this masculine-looking bag of hers.

Her quick steps took her onto Great Marlborough Street, far better lit and overlooked on both sides by tall townhouses with lace-curtained windows that still, here and there, glowed the soft amber of midnight oil.

Several carriages clattered past, taking gentlemen home from their drinking clubs. A hundred yards up the street, where wispy skeins of early morning mist covered the stone cobbles and small islands of horse manure, a dozen noisy young lads ambled drunkenly in the middle of the carriageway, hurling abuse at each other and laughing like chattering monkeys.

Mary hesitated. A pang of guilt stopping her where she stood. Once more she glanced back down Argyll Street at the faint hump of the man's body and knew leaving him like that, she was surely leaving him to die.

'Oh bugger,' she whispered.

CHAPTER 2



12th September 1888, London

He was awake for quite a while before he realised it. Looking up at a high plaster ceiling, discoloured a faint vanilla and riddled with the porcelain-fine cracks of drying and peeling paintwork.

Turning his head slightly on a pillow that rustled noisily beneath him, he could see a row of tall windows draped with net curtains that shifted in a gentle breeze and glowed the soft grey light of approaching dawn. His head throbbed at the movement and he lifted a hand to soothe the pain, finding a thick swathe of bandaging around his forehead.

His eyes flitted around the other things he could see without shifting his head again: he saw a row of beds opposite him, most of them occupied, he presumed, from the chorus of wheezing and snoring that echoed off the high ceiling.

A hospital ward.

That's what this was. That's exactly what this looked like. He wondered which hospital he was in and prepared to recite the list of hospitals in the proximity of where he lived when . . . he realised he couldn't actually recall where that was. He frowned. He couldn't recall his actual address nor, for that matter, could he even recall the city he lived in.

A small stab of panic made him shift in his bed.

Not even which *country* was his home.

Ignoring the waves of throbbing pain, he lifted his head off the pillow and looked around the ward. He saw a sign painted on a board screwed to the ward door: *Remember! Clean hands means clean beds!*

So, he was somewhere English-speaking.

But where . . . where exactly am I?

He began to feel lightheaded and dizzy. His head collapsed back against the pillow and a single tear rolled out from beneath a clenched eyelid, down his cheek, into the bristles of his sideburns . . . as his foggy mind processed another deeply unsettling thought.

I don't even remember what my name is.

'You don't recognise me, do you?'

He stirred at the sound of the voice and opened his eyes to see a doctor standing beside his bed. A young man with a sandy-coloured beard and spectacles.

He shook his head. 'No . . . I'm afraid not. Have we met?'

'We spoke for a short while earlier this morning. I saw you at the start of my rounds.' The doctor pulled up a wooden chair beside the bed and sat down. 'My name is Doctor Hart.'

'I'm sorry . . . but I can't actually tell you my name . . .'

Dr Hart smiled. 'I know. This is what we ascertained when we spoke. Apparently you have no memory of your name, or where you come from. But by the sound of your accent, I have a suspicion you might have spent some time in America? Does that sound right to you?'

'I . . . I really don't know. I don't even know where my home is.'

'Well, we shan't worry too much about that right now. These things will, I'm sure, come back to you in due course. They often do in these kinds of cases.' Dr Hart pulled out a metal cigarette case. 'Care for a smoke?'

He laughed feebly. 'I . . . uh . . . I'm not sure if I am a smoker or not.'

'Well, there's only one way to find out, isn't there?' He passed him a cigarette and then flipped a lighter. They sat in silence for a while, Dr Hart watching his patient draw on his cigarette.

'Well? Does that bring to mind any memories?'

He made a face at the taste of tobacco on his tongue. 'I don't think I particularly care for it.'

Dr Hart smiled. 'So there we are. Now we know you *aren't* a smoker. There's a little progress for you, eh?'

'Doctor, could you tell me . . . how did I end up in here?'

Dr Hart shrugged. 'You were brought in a couple of days ago by the driver of a hansom cab. I believe the gentleman in question found you down some backstreet. You suffered several quite nasty injuries. Several shallow cuts from a knife around your midriff,

but the worst injury was the blow to your skull. The cranium was fractured and there was some haemorrhaging that needed to be bled off. I fully expected you to die, actually.' He smiled. 'But you seem to be made of sturdy stuff. I suspect you were probably robbed. That's most likely what happened. Robbed and left for dead by your assailant.'

'What hospital is this?' He looked around the quiet ward. 'I don't even know what city I'm in.'

Dr Hart studied him silently. 'Which city do you *think* you are in?'

He closed his eyes and willed his befuddled mind to produce a name. To produce *anything*. 'England?'

Dr Hart looked concerned. 'Now, you understand England is a country, not a city?'

Yes . . . goddammit, he knew that. 'I don't know why I said . . .' He shook his head, confused and frustrated with himself.

'Don't be so hard on yourself. Right now your mind is damaged and trying to mend itself. Things will be very confusing for a while. To answer my question, you're in London and this is Saint Bartholomew's hospital.'

He settled back against the pillow, feeling dizzy and nauseous from the cigarette smoke he'd just sucked in. 'Do I . . . did I have any possessions on me? Anything that might help me remember . . . ?'

'Nothing but the clothes you were wearing, I'm afraid. Whoever robbed you took everything you must have had on you.'

He felt sick. 'Do you have any idea how long this will last?'

'Before your memory returns?' Dr Hart shrugged. 'It is not a cut and dried thing. Sometimes it can all come back within hours. Sometimes the memories never fully return. Your brain has suffered some damage. It is quite a remarkable thing, the brain, you understand? It can heal itself without the clumsy intrusion of someone like me. There is little that we can do for the moment. You are now in a stable condition, the knife wounds are clean and healing nicely without any internal injury done as far as I can see. As for the fracture to your skull, the bone will knit together in time. We just need to protect it a little with dressing.'

'Will I remain here? In this ward?'

'Until I am happy your injuries are satisfactorily recovered.'

'And where will I go, then?'

Dr Hart patted his arm gently. 'Well, there's the thing, chap. Whilst you're in here, mending, I'm certain we shall have someone

quite beside themselves with worry calling round various hospitals asking after you. Somebody will turn up for you, I'm sure.'

Someone?

He hadn't even begun to consider the notion yet that there might just be a wife, a mother, a brother, a father, out there looking for him. For a moment the thought of that lifted his spirits. That someone might at any moment come into this ward with a face twisted into a teary smile of relief at the sight of him. Someone who'd greet him with a hug, or smother him with wet and tender kisses. Someone who was going to use his name. He realised how disconcerting it was, how utterly disconnected he felt having no name, being nothing more than a disembodied 'I'.

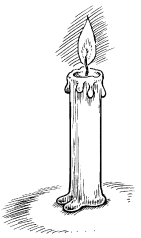
Someone who could at least tell him what his name was, someone to answer the million and one questions he had about who the hell he was.

'You really should rest,' said Dr Hart. 'You have been through quite a tangle.' He got up from his chair and pinched out the stub of his cigarette. 'And I must say, you really are jolly lucky to be alive, old chap. Maybe the Almighty isn't quite ready for you yet,' he said, patting him gently on the arm once more. 'I shall see you later at the end of my shift. Hopefully you'll remember me and this conversation.'

'Yes . . . yes, I shall try, doctor. Try very hard.'

'That's the spirit.'

CHAPTER 3



Two months ago
13th July 1888, Whitechapel, London

'So, who's the tart, Bill?'

Bill Tolly pulled the lollipop stick out of his mouth. 'Shush yer questions now. Yer know how it is: less yer know, less yer can squawk 'bout later, right?'

He led the pair of women along the street. Mid-morning, the market was busy, full and bustling with noisy vendors calling out their prices over cart tables laden with soil-clad vegetables and fish that still flicked and jiggled, calling to workers' wives carrying wicker baskets and angling to make a shilling stretch as far as it could go.

'I thought we was doing this *tonight*?' hissed Annie. 'Not the middle of the day!'

Bill shook his head. 'Just don't bother thinking, love. You'll do yerself a mischief.'

Annie chuckled at the insult. Nerves. She and her friend Polly were both giddy with nerves.

Bill checked the scrap of paper in his hands. 'It's down here, ladies,' he said impatiently, leading them away from the market, down a less busy street – Cathcart Street – which was no less quiet. One side was lined with a row of archways beneath a railway bridge, each archway occupied by a variety of different one-man businesses. All of them, it seemed, in competition with the others to make the most noise: a cabinet-maker breaking down and recycling old furniture, a saddler beating tacks through coarse leather, a butcher sawing through the carcasses of pigs.

On the other side of the road was a row of tidy-looking terraced

houses that each sported a tiny fenced front garden. The two women hesitated a moment, looked at each other anxiously.

'Bill, this is all posh,' said Annie. She turned to him accusingly. 'You said she was just some street girl.'

He looked around at them both standing still, unwilling to proceed another step further. He winced. One of the traders on the other side of the street was looking up casually from his work.

We don't want to be seen . . . don't want to be remembered. Not by anyone.

'I ain't pissin' around out here,' he snarled. 'Let's just get the job done.'

He reached for Annie's arm and dragged her along, making a show of a friendly smile and a mock laugh for the benefit of the mildly curious worker looking across the narrow road at them. Expecting their momentary sharp exchange to develop into an amusing shouting match, the workman quickly lost interest and returned to his task.

'She *is* just a street girl,' hissed Bill into Annie's ear. 'And a foreign one at that.'

'Well 'ow comes she's livin' in a bloomin' nice bloody manor house like one of these?'

Annie's voice was lost beneath a percussive symphony of hammers, mallets and saws. It didn't matter anyway; they were here now. Right outside number twenty-six.

He looked at the dark blue painted door, the paint peeling in places. It was one of the grubbier properties down this cul-de-sac. A rented property, neglected by some absentee landlord for some time by the look of it. But still, compared to the doss houses these two scabrous old tarts were used to, he mused, it probably did look like a proper manor.

He turned to them at the rickety gate, leading on to six feet of weed-strewn garden. 'Both of you clear on what's to be done?'

They both nodded sombrely.

'You can get rid of it proper?'

Annie nodded. 'Done this before.'

He took a deep breath and realised even he was a-flutter with nerves. Yeah, for sure, ol' Bill Tolly had killed before in cold blood. Three times before, if truth be told. Although he was happy for associates to believe it was a great deal more than that, reputation being what it was in this particular line of business. And for sure, there were no doubt others he may have killed or maimed during his

thirty-six years. Bill had been in too many drunken scraps to remember, and he'd be surprised if he wasn't responsible for one or two more grieving wives or mothers out there whose stupid sons or husbands had annoyed him over a pint and received the jagged end of his glass in return. But there were only three people he'd ever murdered in cold blood specifically for a fee.

Three jobs. Three hits. And all three 'jobs' had been men.

This time it was a woman and the scrawny little bastard of hers. A woman. Even if she was just some shitty foreign tart, that was still going to be awkward for him. Quite honestly, he wasn't sure how he was going to feel until after he'd done the deed.

Annie and Polly both claimed they'd done their part of this job many times before. 'Just like tapping a rabbit,' Annie had said last night. 'Swing it by the legs and smack its head on a table. All done in two shakes of a lamb's tail, love.'

Last night, the pair of them had been very matter-of-fact about the whole business. Just a bit *too* casual, a bit too cocky. Perhaps that had been the bottle of malty-flavoured genever they'd been sharing between them doing the talking. All the same, he knew they'd done the deed for several of the more notorious baby farmers out there.

'Wouldn't believe 'ow many *unwanteds* end up being flushed down the sewers, Bill. Me and Poll know what we doin', love. You can rely on us.'

That was then. Last night, when presumably they'd imagined he'd be taking them to some grimy, stinking, shite-hole lodging house down their neck of the woods. Some cheap little tart, barely more than a child herself, and her freshly-sprung bastard, still purple-skinned and coated in dried fluids, nestling in a laundry basket full of dirty clothes.

This nice house, with its own front yard, seemed to have thoroughly spooked them.

'Come on . . . job ain't gonna do itself,' he grunted.

He pushed the gate aside, walked up the front garden and pulled the chain on the front door. The noise from across the narrow street was too loud to hear if a bell had actually rung inside and he was about to try again with a firm knock on the door when it cracked open.

'Oui?'

He could see a slender face framed by wisps of dark hair that had spilled from a tidy bun. Large, bleary brown eyes blinked sleep away

whilst a pair of dark eyebrows arched in a wordless enquiry about his business. She tucked a tress of hair behind one ear. 'Yes?'

Bill smiled at her, careful to keep it polite and congenial: the weary but courteous greeting of a tradesman going about his rounds. She looked like she'd just woken up from a snatched sleep; her cheeks were blotched with fading pink, her eyelids heavy, one dusted with a little dry crust of mucous.

Still, a real beauty, though. A real beauty. Some rich bastard's tumble.

'Lan'lord sent us, miss. To come take a look at the pipings on yer out-'ouse.'

She frowned for a moment, struggling with his cockney accent. Her gaze quickly fell on the two women behind him. A man knocking on his own perhaps might have made her suspicious enough to query the unscheduled call.

'This *is* number twenny-six, ain't it, love?'

She nodded. 'Oui . . . yes, twenty-six.'

'Right, I gotta take a look atcha plumbings,' he said, waving a piece of paper around. 'Lan'lord, see?'

She hesitated a moment longer, glanced once again at Annie and Polly standing in the front yard. They both offered a courteous smile. 'D'accord. All right. You come in, please?'

She stepped back to let them pass into her narrow, dimly lit hallway, polite nods exchanged between them all as they wiped their feet on her doormat. And as she gently closed her front door, she was not to know that the rest of her life and her baby's life were, at best, going to be measured in mere seconds.

Bill saw Annie and Polly looking at him. He could almost read the accusation in their eyes.

You said she was just a tart! Just a cheap tart!

'You say you are come to . . . ?' Her slender face creased as she struggled with her English. 'What is this you come for?'

Bill's smile was stuck rigidly on his face.

She ain't no cheap slapper. The woman didn't have the wrecked look of a prostitute: the pallid skin riddled with sores and dry flaky patches, powdered and rouged to look tolerable; the florid blossom of burst blood vessels; the red eyes of too much drink and worry. That's what he'd assumed. That, or she'd been some flirtatious housemaid who'd tempted her employer once too often.

But this foreign woman, she almost looked like a *proper* lady. One

of them ones you could see taking the air in Hyde Park on a Sunday morning, all bonnets and bustles.

'W-wha' you waitin' for, B-Bill?' snapped Annie quickly. 'Do it!'

'All right, all right!' he grunted.

The woman's bemused frown deepened to concern as she looked from him to the other two. 'Que est-ce que . . . ?'

His hand tightened around the long wooden handle in his jacket pocket.

'Bloody well DO IT, Bill!'

'All right! ALL RIGHT!' he snapped angrily. His hand was out of his pocket and the tip of the twelve-inch blade embedded into her petite waist before he realised he'd done it. The woman looked down at the army bayonet, her sleepy eyes wide awake now. She started to scream. His other hand clamped over her mouth.

'SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!'

He tugged the long serrated blade out of her guts, pushed her up against the hallway wall so hard the back of her head smacked against the plaster. He turned the bayonet blade sideways, then rammed it into her bare throat. He punched the blade so heavily into her neck that the tip crunched its way through vertebrae and ground into the plaster behind her.

Her muffled scream suddenly became a wet gurgle, blood pulsing between his fingers as the heels of her feet thrashed and drummed against the skirting board below.

'Shhhh,' he whispered. 'There's a good girl. Nice an' easy now.'

Polly stifled her own muted cry and Annie swore under her breath.

'What you two fuckin' starin' at?!' snapped Bill. 'Go an' do yer business!'

The two women, frozen to gawping statues by shock, finally stirred. They hurried past him, Polly crossing herself, while he continued to hold his hand over the French woman's mouth as she squirmed, struggled and kicked against the wall, blood pouring down the front of her blouse and pooling on the wooden floor.

Bill watched her eyes – such pretty eyes too – slowly lose their focus and begin to roll uncontrollably as she went into shock. All whites now as her dilated pupils seemed to fixate on something up on the ceiling.

Last night, after he'd finished discussing the job with the girls, he'd tried to imagine what it would be like *shanking* a woman. Of course, he'd slapped around a few in his time, tarts trying to short-

change him, tarts who really should know better. But he'd never *stabbed* a woman.

It wasn't as difficult as he thought it might be. Not now he'd started. Just a little more squirming from her and it was all going to be over.

It was unusual though, to say the least: some gentleman actually putting a price on a *tart's* head. Mind you, this one . . . she was clearly no ordinary tart. She had some class, some poise. He wondered if she was something more than a maid. Perhaps a governess? He knew some of the posh buggers in London – the really posh types – paid for educated ladies from places like France to come and teach their children a bit of culture.

She finally sagged, her body's dead weight suspended by the blade of his bayonet still wedged into the soft plaster wall. Bill looked at the small triangle of pale skin at the hollow of her throat: the only skin below her beautiful oval jaw not covered by a dark tributary of blood. He wondered what it would be like to fuck a woman of class, albeit a dead one. He grinned. An added little perk to the generous money that gent was paying him to do this. He could feel the bulge in his trousers pressing against her narrow-framed body. He was fumbling at his buttons before he knew it, wanting to enter her before the warmth of her body had begun to wane.

Annie and Polly found the baby's cot up a flight of stairs in a small front room. It was a sparse room with bare floorboards, but the woman downstairs seemed to have gone some way towards making it more homely. Several threadbare teddy bears and stuffed farmyard animals sat side by side beneath the small window.

'Oh, lord, 'elp us,' gasped Polly. 'Look at it!'

Annie was. It wasn't freshly born as Bill had promised them. It looked to her eyes like a baby several months old. She steadied her resolve with a mantra, one she silently repeated over and over whenever she had to do a job like this.

Not even properly human yet. That's how Annie rationalised it. Not like her little daughter who died of meningitis a few years back. Two years old, a cheeky smile that melted her heart and a mouth always full of jibber-jabber half-words. A real little person. Not like this fleshy, slug-like creature.

They ain't human 'til they can walk an' talk.

'Oh god, Annie! It's not freshly born!'

'Just an *unwanted*, Polly, s'all it is, love.'

'We . . . we . . . can't—'

'Ain't even a *proper* baby 'til someone says they want it, right?'

'It's a little boy.' Polly stared in silence down at him, legs and arms kicking fitfully as he lay on his back fast asleep. This wasn't what she was used to. The brats her and Annie had disposed of looked no different to piglets: squirming folds of discoloured flesh that promised to suck a young woman dry like a parasite, promised to turn a young working girl's life to shame and ruin.

Every one of those bastards they'd gotten rid of had been unwanted; every one of them like a monster in the corner of a room, the mother cowering away from it in another. But this one – she looked at the row of soft toys – this baby was *loved*.

'It ain't right,' uttered Polly.

Annie turned on her. 'The mother's dead now, stupid! What you gonna do? Look after it yourself?'

Polly shook her head silently.

'Bill's payin' us good for this one.' She glanced down at the baby in the cot, stirring in his sleep. 'It's just a fuckin' *crib-rat*,' said Annie. She reached down into the cot. 'An' what do we do with bloody rats, girl?'

Polly shook her head as Annie tossed the blanket aside and grabbed the baby's bare feet. She turned to look away as her friend lifted him out of the cot by his feet, the baby now wide awake and squirming in her tight grasp. 'We bash their little 'eads in, is what we do!'

A mewling wail spun through the air and ended with a soft thud against the wooden floor. Polly clasped her hands over her face and whimpered at the sound of impact. She heard a second, softer smack against the floorboards.

Outside, the muted clatter and bang of the businesses opposite filtered through the grimy window, filling the silence of the room. Polly heard the rustle of Annie's clothing, her letting out a breath of long-held air. More than just a sigh.

'It's done.'

Polly opened her eyes and immediately shot them away from the pale little body on the floor.

'*You* can bag it,' said Annie dryly, 'since it was me 'ad to do the thing.'

Polly could only nod as she opened the canvas grocery bag she'd brought along for the job and knelt down beside the small corpse.

She touched a bare foot, still warm, pebble-stone toes still flexing and curling post-mortem.

How many times had she and Annie done this before? Too many times to count. *Baby farming,* that's what the papers called their business, wasn't it? All your troubles and worries gone, for a one-off payment. An assurance to the tearful and frightened young lady that their baby would be found a home, loving parents eager to adopt an' all that. That's what they were told. What they heard her and Annie say. Lip service. Polly suspected half the young women they'd saved from shame or a life of drudgery knew their assurances were an empty promise.

The papers liked to portray women like her and Annie as wicked witches, monsters who no doubt cooked and ate the freshly born babies they spirited away into the backstreets of the East End. But as Annie quite rightly said, although what they did was for money, it was a service to the community. A good thing. The streets were choked enough with abandoned or orphaned children. Many starving to death. A slow and horrible way for a life to end. What they offered, to her mind, was a service not so far removed from the many backstreet abortionists she knew operated from grubby front rooms they deigned to call 'surgeries'. All that differed was the matter of timing: a week, a day, an hour even, was all that separated her and Annie from those sorts.

In or just out of the womb, that's the only difference. They're still unwanted.

She lifted its foot, no longer than her index finger, and cradled its small lifeless body in her other hand. Its head, misshapen now, lolled on a shattered neck as she lifted it into the grocery bag.

But this one, this little life, had been around for some time, maybe even several months. Long enough to have a name, perhaps. She glanced at the tin rattle in the cot. Long enough to have a few possessions of his own, even.

Not 'he'. 'It.' She chided herself. *It. It.*

'Come on,' snapped Annie. 'We're done here.' She grabbed Polly's arm and pulled her to her feet. They made their way out of the small bare room, the grocery bag swinging by its handles as they clumped noisily down the stairs to the hallway.

'Bill? You there?'

'I'm in 'ere,' came his voice, muffled from behind a door off the hallway. Annie stepped towards the door and began to push it open.

'Hoy! Don't come in! I'm busy in 'ere!'

'What you doin'?'

'Finishin' up. You done *your* business?'

'Yeah.'

'Then off yer go with it. I'll see yer tonight with yer share.'

'Right. And dontcha be late with it. I mean it, Bill!' Annie said.

There was no answer through the closed door, just the shuffling, bump and slide of movement. 'Bill? I said don't—'

'I 'eard! Now fuck off! I'll see you two later!'

Annie turned to Polly and nodded toward the front door. 'Let's go.'

Bill heard the front door close and watched them through the net curtains, stepping out through the garden gate and walking back down Cathcart Street with their grocery bag swinging casually between them as if contained nothing more than several pounds of potatoes. He turned back to the work at hand.

The head was completely off now and covered like a badly wrapped gift in a length of tarpaulin. The body was stripped naked, the clothes ripped and bloodstained and in a pile on the floor. He was going to have to bag them up and burn them later. The headless body he was going to roll up in the bloody rug on the floor and tonight, after dark, drop it into the Thames. The head? Well, he was friendly with a brickmaker who let him use his kiln from time to time for a few coins, no questions asked.

Bill nodded. A very easy two hundred pounds earned, that was.

Very easy indeed.

He was rather pleased with himself, with the fore-planning, deciding to do the job in the middle of the day when all that noise from across the street was likely to cover a solitary scream. As opposed to the still of night, when a voice could carry.

Well done, Bill.

Two hundred pounds. A skilled craftsman might take half a year to earn that kind of money. And he'd earned it in the space of a few minutes. The girls were asking for ten pounds each, but he knew they'd done baby farming for far less. Tonight he was going to give them half that, and if they got all leery about it, maybe fifteen between them with the certain warning that if they asked for more, they'd be asking for a slapping.

He hunkered down beside the naked form of the headless body and studied her pale, unmarked skin.

She was such a beauty, though.

Certainly no common tart. Slender but none of the sharp edges of the malnourished, none of the bruises, scratches and scrapes that came as normal with the whoring profession. Perhaps a maid, then – a household maid who'd managed to catch her employer's eye? A scullery maid from one of them big tall houses in Holland Park?

Bill knew not to ask questions. A professional didn't ask questions. The gentleman who'd met with him had given him everything he needed to know: an address, a description of her and, in carefully nuanced language, what he wanted done with her and the child. But no one needed to be a genius to work out some west end toff had found his way into a very awkward situation. This unlucky girl presumably had been put up here for a while. She no doubt had assumed her fate had been sorted, the matter resolved; that her gentleman lover was going to provide for her like this indefinitely. A regular monthly allowance and a roof over her head. Never again having to work. But, the gentleman in question had opted for a far cheaper solution for this nameless foreign girl, presumably with no family in the country. To simply make her disappear. Another *no one* lost in the sprawling dim and dark beehive of humanity. London lost 'no ones' all the time. They pulled them out of the Thames nearly every day.

The gentleman hadn't even bothered to ask what Bill would charge for his services. If he had, Bill would have, poker-faced, insisted on fifty pounds and not a penny less. Although, truth be told, he would have let it come down to thirty and still have been reluctant to walk away from such easy money.

But two hundred pounds the gent had offered! Even a nib with education and decent clerk's position would struggle to earn that over six months toil.

He stuffed the last of her blood-soaked clothes into the bag. Not expensive clothes by the look of them, but certainly not the stained and second-hand frills and lace most working women wore to threads every day.

He could imagine the girl in her new home with a crisp folded finny in her purse to spend on a brand new wardrobe, then taking herself on a hasty shopping trip along Oxford Street. Perhaps thrilled with the experience of possessing so large a denomination. Five pounds. A fiver! Being called 'ma'am' by some store girl her own age, who yesterday wouldn't even have deigned to acknowledge her if she'd entered in her maid's uniform.

As he lifted the last of her things into the bag, something heavy

slipped from the folds of material and thunked onto the soft rug between his knees. He reached down and picked it up, turning it over and over with his bloody fingers. He thumbed a clasp on one side that opened the item and saw within an image that took him several moments to register.

An image that was going to allow him to ask for ten times the gentleman's fee!

A photograph. This woman, a baby and a man. A very important man with a face he vaguely recognised. Bill felt the first prickle of concern on his scalp. The gentleman who'd approached him for this job was doing it on behalf of *this* man – an important man? – in the photograph.

There's more to this than just one randy gent cleaning up his own mess.

To his mind it meant one of two things: opportunity – or danger.

Or perhaps a bit of both.