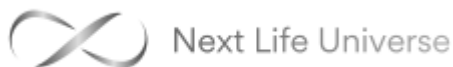


THE RIPPER  
THE FIRST NEXT LIFE PREQUEL



A NOVEL BY  
JAMES G. ROBERTSON



Next Life Publishing LLC, KS

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# Preface

Hey there, it's your author. So I wasn't sure if I wanted to add this page or not, but I figured it should probably be here just to explain a bit about this story. As you may have noticed on the book's title page, it says "The First Next Life Prequel". What this means for you, is pretty simple. It comes before the first book in the Next Life series (*Afterworld*). It fits somewhere between that and the next book *The Desperado's Tale*, which is also a prequel to *Afterworld*. For clarity's sake, and to avoid minor spoilers, this should probably be read before *The Desperado's Tale*. Still, both of those books can be read before or after *Afterworld*.

Now that that's covered let's talk about what inspired this book. The series is based on the mystery of what we humans call life, religion, and the unknown. So where does Jack the Ripper fall into all of this? As a person, we don't know much about him beyond his (or even possibly her) murders. So that realm of mystery gave me a unique opportunity to expand on their lives' unknown aspects. It allowed me to create a character that would provide a tangible explanation for why they did what they did.

I want to let you know I went against my editor in one regard, and that is the inner thoughts that some of the characters have in the dialogue (particularly with Magdalen). I could have changed it, but in doing so it would have required me to make essentially filler conversations. I wouldn't have liked writing it that way and I don't think you would have enjoyed it either as I would have had to change quite a bit around. I feel that as a person I tend to have deep thoughts and explore them in my mind when nothing else is going on, so while they found it strange, I felt that it was quite normal and didn't want to change the essence of that for you. Still, I hope you enjoy the story, especially Jack's character, as much as I enjoyed bringing him to life. Perhaps it will inspire you to create stories of your own. If I can do

nothing else in this life of mine, I hope I'm able to inspire someone to follow their ambitions no matter how far they might seem.

-J.G.R 5/20/21

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# Prologue



Jack the Ripper. Jack O' Lantern. Not many know the whole truth of these stories. Only those now dead and the few witches that still remain understand their souls' true tale. One Jack thought of as pure evil, who ripped through the London streets in the night, tearing away at the flesh of the whores in Whitechapel. Another Jack, whose presence burns with a fiery passion on our doorsteps and calms us during All Hallows' Eve's frights, scaring away the evil spirits while we sleep in our rooms with no light.

Both Jacks' stories have yet to be told in full. Their origins are vague and as hidden as the phantoms that still continue playing tricks on us in the fog of night. Yet, they are worshipped in one way or the next by their most loyal followers. Those that deem themselves Ripperologists, and those that partake in the festival known as Halloween, are both captivated by the stories that are known and of the many mysteries yet to be uncovered.

So, what is the connection between these particular Jacks? Is it the wickedness that surrounds them? Their names? Or perhaps it's just the truth in the misconception we've been led to believe throughout the years? What if I were to tell you that these Jacks were not all that different. In fact, while their followers may or may not be loyal to the both of them, these unusual Jacks were actually one in the same.

*A strange hypothesis*, one may think. Others might believe that it's downright preposterous. But perhaps they're right to feel that way.

## **JAMES G. ROBERTSON**

There will always be those unwilling to see the truth, regardless of the evidence. There's not much I can do for those who look facts in the face and continue to claim the opposite time and time again, but that's not you, is it, dear reader? You are someone who wants, no, needs to know the story of these Jacks and more. This story, which has remained hidden to most for so long, I will now share with you. Sit back, get comfortable, and let us begin the story of the burning ripper named Jack.



# Part One



## Death and Wildflowers



# Chapter I



## The 31st of August, 1888

In the dark streets of London's Whitechapel district in 1888, all sorts of foul humans lived. Some preyed on the weak; others took advantage of those in their sleep. Some drank themselves asunder, while others enjoyed the pleasures of one another. One may see these acts as heinous or deviant, but even greater depraved acts were committed.

Prostitutes were about like locusts in the streets throughout both the day and night; most, looking for their next target to make ends meet. You see, in the poor district of Whitechapel, nearly everyone was struggling—especially the single women to find work. However, none of them were expecting that while they looked for their next target, someone, or something, was also searching for those that caught their eye.

“Ey Polly, any luck tonight?”

“Not much, luv. I haven't really had much of any luck outside this bottle, you?”

Polly asked her, while taking a swig of what many would call rat piss. This was the local name for the liquor that was the cheapest one could get their hands on. The stuff the shop keepers would keep on the bottom shelf where the rats scurried.

“Well, I had this one bloke. He paid decently enough, but his cock knackered me right out. I shoulda charged him more for what he gave me,” she said while stretching her back.

“That good, aye? Sounds like something I could get behind!”

“You’ve always been a bit more flexible than me.” The other whore laughed. “I better head on inside, though. Gotta get some rest. This poor old back of mine won’t make it through tomorrow at this rate.”

“I hear ya. You don’t happen to have the time before you head off, do ya?”

“Well, let’s see. I did get a timepiece from a gentleman earlier this week,” she said as she rummaged through her burgundy overcoat.

A moment later, she pulled out a watch attached to a metal chain from within.

“Looks to be about 2:50 a.m. Still early enough, there might be a few customers around for you to cater to.”

“Alright, luv, I won’t keep ya any longer. Take care, and have a good night.”

Not too long after the woman waved her off, a few gentlemen passed her on the dark road. None of them seemed too interested in what she had to offer. She even heard a few of them snickering and commenting on her weight.

“Bugger off then will ya!” she yelled after them. “These damn blokes. I’ll never get anywhere at this rate.”

One man approached from around the corner, wearing a top hat and a dark civil suit. He paused for a moment giving her a nice smile, but then began to walk off. She caught him by the arm as he was about to pass.

“Hey there, darlin, can I interest you in a fun night?” she asked, tugging on his suit while gently squeezing on his arm.

The man smiled as he searched through his trousers. Polly continued pulling him closer until he stopped—frowning with a look of disappointment.

“Sorry dear, ’fraid I wasn’t dreaming. I lost all my shilling gambling tonight. Shame ’cause I could use a bit of distraction after that disappointment. Perhaps, another time?” he replied with a frown.

“That’s not a worry. Not a worry at all. What’s your name, darlin?” she asked, looking up at him blinking. Her large voluptuous bosom pressed firmly against his arm.

“It’s Robert, and you are?” the man almost stuttered while asking “Most around here call me Polly.”

The words and feeling of her warm soft skin and hot breath sparked something in the man’s loins that made him want to join her even more than before.

“There are other ways we can settle if you’d like to join me tonight,” she said, smiling at him.

The man swallowed, his dry mouth offering no comfort to his throat.

“I’d be very interested to know,” he told her, staring at the woman with glazed brown eyes.

She pulled him inside the nearby gate to her flat’s building.

“It’s really simple,” she continued. “You see all you have to do is...” She continued whispering in his ear until the man’s face perked up.

He smiled with a wide, giddy expression; like a kid who had experienced the taste of a chocolate truffle for the first time. He was about to whisper something back, but was quickly interrupted before he had the chance to begin.

“Mary Ann, oh Mary Ann,” a man’s voice echoed with maniacal laughter from the shadows.

“Who’s out there!” Robert demanded while snarling at the man in the shadows.

“Leave now and forget, my human friend. For it is I, Jack, who has stopped you from committing a cardinal sin.”

“Robert, Robert!” The woman tried to scream, but Robert pulled his arm out of her grasp and walked away as if in a trance. The words she tried to scream out weren’t even an audible whisper from her lips.

“Why don’t you come with me tonight, Mary Ann? All this time you owe has come due. Oh, what a treat it must have been for you—to do what you have done all these years, only thinking of yourself is how it appears. It’s all upsetting to the natural order, little Mary. You knew this, yet still, you did it. Oh, for what a travesty Mary that this carries with it!

“You hurt me, Mary Ann, I must admit. You hurt me, and you’ve hurt so many others in the figurative and literal senses of the word. Just why Mary Ann, oh, why? Why have you been doing it all this time?”

“Won’t you come here, Mary Ann? Won’t you come to see me? Why do you divert your eyes so? Does the thought of what’s coming frighten you for what you owe? Does the sight of my face send shivers down your spine? Will you not look upon me, oh Mary Ann of mine?” Jack looked upon her small, fragile frame as he stepped out of the shadows.

“I... well, I—” She tried to speak, but the words left her lips as a silent stuttered breath.

“Oh, Mary Ann, you know you’ve been bad. The price you’ve asked for has come back to be had—for you, due to what the boss man asked you to do. You can blame no one else but yourself; that is true. You were told not to continue down this path of sacrilege, and yet it was done! But fear not my poor Mary Ann! I am here to put it to an end, so try not to run!”

The girl’s mouth in front of him opened wide. She tried to scream, but this time only a harsh breath exerted from her mouth.

“I’ll make it quick. But painless? I cannot promise to you! I’ll start with your throat, and no more devious words shall be spoken by you. Your soul may be lost, but you knew this already. Before I even beseeched you today, you knew the consequences, so get ready. For Mary Ann, the devil’s contract hurts both the seeker and the con-

scriptor that makes it to be true. So ready yourself, miss Mary, for your own time is now due.”

The figure from the shadows began to approach Mary Ann Nichols. The gated fence clicked over and over as Jack approached her. It was as if he had used a stick to taunt her, moving it through the groves before entering the gate. Once he reached her, his long, slick fingers ran across the nape to her bosom. Chills were sent down her spine causing her to shiver.

Mary Ann looked up at him with absolute tears and terror in her eyes that begged for mercy, sensing the patient hand of death now rapidly approaching. The violent, monstrous man looked down upon her with no pity. His round head and fiery eyes only cast a dark shadow upon the woman.

At last, she found the will to fight back. Struggling with all her might, she punched and kicked the presence in front of her. It was no use. She was repelled with limited force. Her flabby body grabbed like a child and tossed against the nearby fence—where she was pinned. He squeezed both of her hands with one, large, intrusive grasp while slapping her face with the other.

He cackled as blood gushed from her mouth, causing her to gag.

“SHH, SHH, SHH,” Jack sounded with a half shushing half laughing wheeze. He put one finger to her lips while letting out a heated smile that warmed her beaten face. Gently, with a lover's touch, he tapped and slid his finger down from one side of her mouth to the other four times, like a taunting metronome.

“We. Must. Be. Quiet. Can't alert the nearby watchman.”

He smiled one last time as tears and fluids escaped her swollen body—her final, distorted breath quickly exited with a quick flick of the wrist. Blood followed that last breath as it came rushing out from her neck. The wound was so deep that it went almost all the way through, just short of the spine.

The corpse of the woman dropped to the ground as a deep scarlet blood continued to spew out. It looked like some sort of twisted champagne bottle that continued to fizz over.

“You see, that wasn’t so bad. No more wicked words are heard coming from you when you’re nearly behead! Your soul will soon be destroyed, and what’s more, I’ll disembowel you all the way through, you meaty whore.”

By making a small incision in her stomach, he reached in deep, pulling out what he could. His smiling face created a soft luminance as he tore away at her flesh and innards. Mary Ann’s intestines and uterus were ripped from her body and tossed to the nearby building’s stone floor. Laughing at her lifeless corpse, he stood up and walked away. Mary Ann Nichols’s remains now layed there alone, silently, in a puddle of her own blood, guts, and teeth at the inner gate.

One of the miscreant whores of Whitechapel were now added to the Ripper’s death list in a blood-red ink. It wasn’t the first name, and it wouldn’t be the last. Jack’s devilish games were just beginning, and soon his games would force the devil himself to come to collect.

## 2

A few hours after the incident in Whitechapel, after the sun had crested the shores of England, a man at the Central News Agency by the name of John Pepo who had recently started working at *The Star*, was preparing a story he had been given by his superiors. Since he was new to the paper he was working closely with those at the Agency to learn the ins and outs of the world of journalism. The man he was being mentored by was named Thomas Bulling, which could be read from the nameplate on his desk in big bulging silver letters. As the sound of paper’s shuffling and typewriters being pecked at continued throughout the building, Thomas approached John, and began to look over what he had written about the fateful incident that occurred earlier that morning.

*Police, Police! Oh my god, this is horrible. Someone, please!” a man yelled at 3:40 a.m. from the front of a flat complex in Whitechapel. The man’s name was Charles Cross. He was soon met by a man named Robert Paul and the police shortly followed. The body of Mary Ann Nichols, or Polly as she was known to most, was found mutilated within the gates of her flat’s building. Her abdomen was found to be eviscerated. Her organs, intestines, and other parts of her insides slung out across the concrete of her flat’s grounds, right before her foyer...*

“Jesus Christ, John. When Charles asked me to give you this story, I was skeptical, but really now, we can’t lead with that much brutality. I know you’re new to the professional journalism world and all, but for Christ’s sake, that’s a bit dark. They hired you to sell papers for public consumption, not horror stories. This is the Central News Agency. If you wrote something this sensational at *The Star* from a story we gave to you, William and Edward would have a fit. I’m not sure you’d get anything serious from us for a long time after, or if the paper would even keep you around if they were to come across this. You’re lucky I caught this before someone else had seen it.”

“Is it really all that bad? I read the *Sunderland Echo*’s recount of a mysterious murder a few weeks back, and it wasn’t much less gruesome,” John told Thomas with an odd look.

“You’re not with the bloody *Sunderland Echo* now, are you John? You’re working for the bloody *Star*. You have to have more tact than the people at the damn *Sunderland Echo*; that’s just how things go.”

“Well...”

“Well nothing!”

Thomas gave him a quick look and took a long drink of some black tea from a beaten tin cup that seemed to calm him down.



“Don’t worry about it,” he said after licking the droplets from his lips. “I’ll edit this up for you real quick and make it less perverse so that you can get *something* printed and out in the corner in time. I really don’t know why Charles is having me help with this. I’ve got enough on my plate already. *Goddamn interns*,” Thomas muttered that last part as he walked away.

*Are they all like this here? Such an interesting fellow.*

Although John was now technically working for *The Star*, the Central News Agency had been where he had done most of his work throughout the joint internship. He sat back at his desk and started looking through the other articles they had given him to work on, and then, turned to the stories he had been writing himself. Stories about a young man with lightning covering him and deep scars down his back; the desperado from beyond the endless desert searching for the god that damned him, and of course, the girl with the tattoos and feather who was the cause of it all.

It was her that had kept coming to John Pepo, an Irishman whose family emigrated from Ireland and into England a little more than a decade ago. Throughout the years she would come to his dreams in order to show him these glimpses and more. After doing a few small edits, John stood up and proceeded to walk over towards the manager’s office to try and get some answers to questions that had been bugging him.

The wooden floor of the multiple storey building echoed as he passed by a few smaller offices along the way. The people inside of them were working on their own stories for the day, or editing someone else’s. Still, nothing else compared to the one he had been given. The story of a woman ruthlessly slaughtered, a prostitute, nonetheless. It was almost guaranteed to be the talk of London as soon as it got to print and down to the corners. It would be likely that no one would be talking about much else. The other stories that were being added to today’s paper were just there to fill the pages. If they were

allowed, this would be one of those rare instances that they could sell a paper with a single story.

At the end of the long hall he reached the most prestigious office. It was odd for an agency to have such a fancy looking office, but they went all out here. The private investor who backed the Central News Agency, Nick, was well-off and took great care of those under him.

After a brief moment of inspecting the solid oak office door in front of him, John knocked.

“Come on in, don’t be shy,” the occupant, Charles Moore, hollered.

John entered and looked around. It wasn’t his first time being in Charles’s office, but he was nearly caught off guard each time by how nice it was. Expensive paintings, leather and velvet decor, and then, to top it all off, there was a Steinway Square grand piano that Charles was known to play from time to time.

*Such prestigious comforts*, John found himself thinking again. He was disgusted as he found himself inside the overly luxurious room.

“What can I do for you, John?”

“Charles, I was wondering if you had heard anything from Nick? I was brought on to learn the world of journalism at *The Star*, and the Central News Agency has done well to guide me, but I was also to help Nick with other operations.”

“Other operations? I don’t follow,” Charles responded sullenly with a scrunched brow.

*There’s no way this guy doesn’t know about what I’m speaking of*, John thought to himself. “You know, those to do with the shaping of things to come? Nick told me he’d be in touch in that regard, but I haven’t heard anything since I received my, well, recommendation to work here. I was quickly hired on, and I love every aspect of the job, but I was told I would also be helping with other operations—outside the concerns of the paper and agency.”

Charles looked at him with pursed lips while brushing his rough beard with his stubby fingers.

“I’m sorry, John, I really don’t have a clue about what you mean. Tell you what, I’ll get a message to him for you, and you guys can figure that part out together. You’ve already finished your article today, and it looks like Tom got it approved by *The Star* for print as well,” Charles said while pointing out the office window at Thomas who held up a copy of the completed paper—still panting from running up and down the stairs.

“Why don’t you take the rest of the day to do some further investigations at the crime scene? You should look deeper into it and see if you can come up with anything to add. I’ll contact *The Star* and see if they’d like to do a follow-up piece on this tomorrow, as it’s bound to be a hot item by the way the woman was cut up like that.”

“But I—”

“No buts, I’ll get that message sent over to *The Star*, and to the boss man for you. You just go ahead and take the day. Go on now,” Charles said with a stern glare and forceful tone in his voice.

*Very strange*, John thought, but in the end, he nodded and headed out.

He grabbed his dark hat and his orange, sunset-colored scarf from his small desk before heading down the stairs towards the exit. There was a reverberating thud with each step, until he made it to the first floor lobby, where he passed by Ruth, who was the secretary at the front entrance. She waved him farewell on his way to the front door of the building, and he at last passed by Chip, who was the young security guard.

“Sir,” Chip said, tipping his hat as he held the door open.

After walking through the front door, John was hit by a brisk north wind in the open street, along with the sound of people and carriages moving about. At the end of the street, a boy was loudly

touting the freshly released news and trying to sell *The Star's* paper on the corner.

“Hot off the press from *The Star*! The Central News Agency’s detailed report of the gruesome murder of the Whitechapel harlot! Get them while they last!”

*I hope Thomas didn't destroy the integrity of what happened too much. I don't want to hear about it from **him** later on.*

Horse driven carriages passed by John, and the nearby crowd swarmed the kid on the corner of the brick road like vultures to pick off what remained of Mary Ann Nichols in the form of her detailed obituary in the paper. John pushed through, and made his way across the street. He traveled straight for a few streets, and then a couple to the left and then straight before making one final turn to the right. After reaching the street’s end while holding his hat tightly to keep it safe from the wind, he entered a small business named The Spirits’ Pub.

As John entered, a smooth elegant sound greeted him from the back of the pub where the third-hand piano the owner Sallz had brought in was located. The man who was playing and was responsible for such a fine melody looked as though he may be homeless from his dirty ragged clothes. No one seemed to be making a fuss about his attire, as they all looked to be enjoying the professional grade he brought to the craft. For the time of day, it seemed to be quite lively in this little back alley joint.

“Is MK here?” John asked, approaching the barkeep.

The man at the front gave him a quick look up and down and then, after a moment, nodded him over to the lower section of the pub. Sallz was there waiting on two older gentlemen who were a little off-balance from the many empty drinks stacked around their table. Not too far away, MK stood cleaning up the abandoned bar.

“MK, a word?” John asked, approaching the younger woman with piercing blue eyes. Her long strawberry blonde hair swayed as

she swept a cloth over the bar. She stopped to adjust the shoulder of her dress, which covered most of her body aside from her exposed ankles. Two sloshed old geezers were staring at her like dogs in heat—whispering their dirty thoughts back to one another.

“Just a moment John, I’ll be right with you,” she said, grabbing the remaining dishes and heading to the kitchen with them.

John smiled and took a seat at one of the smaller tables nearby. He rotated the condiments and shuffled through the menu as he awaited. Fancy drinks like *Ghost’s Whisper* and *Witches’ Brew* were among those he thought sounded interesting.

“How’s it going, John? How’s everything with the job?” she asked after returning and sitting across from him.

“Everything’s as well as it can be, I suppose. How’s the day job treating you, MK?”

“It’s fine, thanks to everyone here. It’s really thanks to Sallz that we’ve been able to keep this place up and running as well as we have.”

John started tapping three of his fingers on the dented pine table in a rhythmic fashion. He found a strange comfort in the uneven surface beneath them.

“And how about your *other* job? Have you been able to come up with anything new for us since you’ve been there?”

“No, but John,” MK paused for a moment before continuing. “I don’t know how long I can keep doing the other job for. You know if he finds out...” she said. Her hand quivered and she tried to steady it by gripping the table.

“You don’t have to worry about that MK, none of these drunks in here know anything about that. Just keep your head down and do the minimum to keep up appearances. I don’t know much, but what I do know is that you’re fairly new here. As for those you need to look out for, they dare not show their faces here, as it’d cause a great scene.

“If they were to plan anything that bold, they’d have done it by now. You just keep a low profile and continue what you’ve been do-

ing. I'll take care of the rest. The plan all of you have concocted with Fate has brought me inside. Now I'm just waiting for the meeting I was promised to get in closer. Once that happens it's only a matter of time before our friend sets things straight, as they were intended to be, for all of us."

"You don't understand John, you don't understand one bit. He's not really a man, no, h-he's really no man at all. He's more akin to a complete monster. He goes against everything sacred and takes advantage of the weak and only worries about his collections and... and—" she paused again as John grabbed her shaking hand.

"It's okay. You're okay," John said, looking into her eyes.

"You're... right... I'll be fine. I'm sorry, it's just, it's just been very stressful lately. With everything, well, you know. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"That's right. Anyway, I was just coming to check on you to make sure things are still going well. Keep doing what you're doing, and everything will be fine. If things go well, I should be able to completely end all this before the end of the year. This is my task to handle and why I was brought here. You just rest and focus on yourself and what Sallz asks. I'll handle the rest. Anyway, I've got to head out. You be good now."

"Where are you going?" she asked, now a bit more composed.

"I've got a job to do. I have to go investigate things more thoroughly in Whitechapel."

"Be careful, John," MK said as he approached the door.

John smiled at her, tipping his beaten hat, and MK smiled back, now a little more relieved. Sallz waved him off, and the door to the pub closed behind him.

### 3

Thirty minutes after leaving The Spirits' Pub, John made his way into the decrepit district of Whitechapel. Usually, the streets would be packed with whores, even at this time of day. On this particu-

lar morning, however, there wasn't much whoring going on at all. Though the act was frowned upon, and technically illegal, it wasn't being enforced as much as in previous years. Though right after a murder like this, the area was heavily covered by police.

By the time John arrived, Polly's crime scene had mostly been cleaned up. As far as he could tell, besides the occasional officer patrolling the area to keep a watchful eye, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. He thought that even if it was improbable, perhaps the police suspected the killer might return to inspect the reactions of the nearby populace. While unlikely, it was the only explanation he had as to why they might be sticking around.

John carefully inspected the area, trying to complete his own assignment. Before long he heard the sound of a whistle and was approached by those same few officers asking him what he was doing snooping around. After showing them his journalist credentials, they eventually left him alone, but he was unable to get an informative statement from them.

*I'll never find anything useful out here at this rate. There isn't really anyone out here that can tell me anything meaningful that I don't already know,* John thought.

After looking around the crime scene and nearby area, he decided to go deeper into Whitechapel's roughest part. The district as a whole was a poor, run-down, whore-ridden stain on the otherwise mostly prestigious city of London, but there were parts of Whitechapel that even the locals would avoid.

John passed the local market trying to sell their meager-looking grapes, lamb chops, and chicken burgers that were beginning to rot, and eventually made it into the darkest sector. After kicking a few glass bottles and other rubbish along the way, he soon found himself walking by street vendors selling fancy looking watches; most were easily decipherable as knock offs, and he knew that even if he bought the few that weren't, he'd likely receive a visit from the police about

it being stolen. That, or one of the hawkers' scouts would follow him until he was alone. This way they would have no trouble stealing it back in order to sell it again. That was just the way it worked in Whitechapel.

A few muddy roads later, and John was in the depressing epicenter of filth. The clouds and tall buildings here blocked out all sunlight, and only whores and beggars could be heard mumbling about.

An older woman in her sixties met John from the side of an alley. She held a hand-rolled cigarette and it looked like it took quite the patchwork to get it to stay together. Her voice haggard, and lungs full of nicotine and tar almost growled as she spoke to him.

"It's a little early—you lookin' for some company?"

"Fraid, I'll have to decline," John replied, as the woman leaned upon the raggedy concrete wall. "If you can answer my questions, however, I can see about giving you some sort of compensation to make up for the time. You see, I'm a journalist for *The Star*, and I'm searching for answers to what happened to Mary Nichols; perhaps you knew her by the name Polly?"

The old crow groaned as she lit her next smoke that would only serve to add even more tar to her already caked lungs.

"I didn't know her personally, but seeing how we participated in the same business, I may be able to help you," the woman said, snorting. Shortly after, she hacked up a lump of phlegm that dropped onto the dusty road below. "What you want to know about her, deary?"

"Well, you see, I'm trying to get a better perspective of what she was like. So perhaps if you could tell me a little more about her, possibly you know of a circle of friends that I could ask? Maybe they could shed some light on the situation for me? If so, that would be very helpful."

"Shed some light? What more ya need to know? Seems like she got herself killed by some crazy person. Not sure what friend would be able to tell you more about that."



“That’s not... well, never mind. Do you have any names or not?”

“Well, ain’t you a pushy lad? We ain’t really supposed ta tell names of our own like that, an like I say before I don’, well, didn’, really know her that well now, ain’t it? I know she used to hang round a particular tavern more than most. Mmmmmm, really fine place. Too fine for her if you ask me. If you want, I can give you the name of that for some coin. Aye, what you say?”

“I’d say what’s your price?”

The woman paused, taking a long drag on her patched cigarette that still held together as she smoked it, and then, coughed breathlessly before responding.

“Well, considering the risk to me for the telling of this, I think I can do it for a quid. Yeee, ye, that be fair. Can you handle that?”

John stared at the woman. He knew there would be no bargaining with her. It was either take it or leave it. He knew this information could be nothing, but it was the best potential lead he had found. Unless he wanted to wait a few days for everything to clear up around here, he likely wouldn’t find even a hint of better information.

“I suppose it can’t be helped. A little expensive, but you’ve got yourself a deal. May I inquire as to why you feel there is a risk associated with divulging this information?”

“I got me theories, but the people she was hanging around don’t play. Could have been them tryin’ to send a message with her. Not sayin’ it was, but you never know when it comes to these kinda things.”

John looked at the woman before flicking the quid over to her to cover the cost.

“Go to the Silver Edge tavern, deary. It’s just outside of Whitechapel to the west. Oh, but in a far nicer area than this. You might find the clues you’re lookin’ for there.”

“Silver Edge, you say? I thank thee, and will be on my way.”

John nodded to the woman and headed west from where he was, according to the directions she had given him.

*Silver Edge, wasn't that the name of the tavern Sallz mentioned the other night that she found to be suspicious?*

After passing by the same lovely market, and barely dodging a bird that seemed to have had it out for him, he found himself back at the crime scene. With even fewer people there now, someone caught his eye, and it seemed he had caught hers as well. A fine woman who looked to be in her early thirties approached him. Leather boots, pearl necklace; all fine features and accessories someone from this district couldn't afford, and most would be hesitant to even wear here.

"Excuse me, I'm doing an investigation of this crime. If you don't mind my saying, you seem quite a bit out of place here. Not many people are daring enough to wear that kind of attire around here, especially a pearl necklace. Is there perhaps something you could tell me that would help enlighten the public about the events that took place here? Perhaps you have a theory of your own that you would like to share and have published in tomorrow's paper?" John asked the woman, who looked at him indignantly.

"Your message was received. Stop asking questions not related to the paper before given the go-ahead. Know your place in this equation. When you were brought on, it was through the boss's own kindness, don't forget that. The boss is currently indisposed and unable to meet with you to discuss your operations role until next Friday. You are to meet with him and others on the eighth of September at the Silver Edge tavern. Until that happens, you are to keep quiet and continue your normal work as usual at the paper. Are we clear?"

*I guess both Sallz and that old hag were onto something in regards to the Silver Edge tavern. Seems I'll have to wait until next week to check things out, or it would look suspicious,* John thought while offer-

ing a pleasant smile to the woman. "I understand, is there anything else I should know?"

"No, that is all you *need* to know until next Saturday. We won't be in touch. Here's your invitation. Make sure not to lose it, or you will not be given entry. Do try to dress appropriately for the late dinner and festivities. Someone will be by to get you at 3 a.m. sharp, be ready."

The woman retrieved an envelope from her jacket and handed it to John before walking away.

After opening it, he found a black index card inside, and nothing else. John looked at it strangely, as the index card itself was completely blank on both sides. With a faint glimmer in his eyes, he smiled and looked towards the woman as she departed.

*I have a feeling the fun is just beginning.*