

THE
BUTTON MAN

ALSO BY MARK PRYOR

The Bookseller

The Crypt Thief

The Blood Promise

A Hugo Marston Novel

THE
BUTTON MAN
MARK PRYOR



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Inquiries should be addressed to
Seventh Street Books
59 John Glenn Drive
Amherst, New York 14228
VOICE: 716-691-0133
FAX: 716-691-0137
WWW.SEVENTHSTREETBOOKS.COM

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*To Nicola,
with all my heart and love because every day you make me laugh,
every day you remind me to be silly, and because . . .
you're English, you are!*

CHAPTER ONE

LONDON, ENGLAND, 2008

Hugo turned the corner onto Gable Street, the growl of London's evening traffic fading away behind him. The winter sun had set an hour ago and the damp evening settled itself comfortably over the city, bringing with it one of London's famous fogs, a slow creeper that followed Hugo from the Whitechapel station, stalking him every step of the way.

By the time he reached the entrance to the alleyway, at the south end of Gable Street, the fog had swallowed up the first of the terraced houses behind him. Hugo looked back at the remaining homes for signs of life; a few windows glowed yellow behind tightly-drawn curtains, but that was all.

He stood at the mouth of the alley, the reason he was here, and peered into its darkness. Under his feet the gray concrete of the sidewalk gave way to ancient cobblestones, worn smooth by the feet of man and beast, now shiny with the damp of the evening. Overhead the night sky was moonless, the stars already snuffed out by the gathering mist. As Hugo peered into the alley, the blackness seeped across the cobblestones toward him.

He raised his shoulders and shivered against a chill that was real, or mostly real. Above his head, a gentle breeze rattled the branches of an

old oak tree that reached over from the cemetery next door, sending a soft shower of rain pattering onto his hat.

He put out a hand and brushed his fingers against the rough brick wall. It was damp and his fingertips came away grimy. Two hundred years of London soot, he thought, and Gable Street had changed very little in that time.

He'd read about this place but had never been here. He'd first heard about it from a colleague in the FBI's behavioral-profiling unit, a man almost as obsessed with unsolved murders as Hugo. And now he was here for the same reason he always visited a crime scene: to make contact with the victim and with the killer. He'd come at dusk on purpose, a time when the senses were keenest. He was no believer in the supernatural, but there had always been something about the death of a day, the hour of the rising of night, that tugged at the part of Hugo that connected most easily with those he hunted.

Or used to hunt. He didn't do that anymore, have cases. He'd solved his last just two days before quitting the bureau for the State Department and now, as head of security for the US Embassy in London, he had duties and responsibilities, employees, and high-level meetings with the CIA. But no cases.

A hundred-year-old murder in the grimy backstreets of London wouldn't be his anyway. A good thing, considering it was all but unsolvable. There was no evidence left, of course, nothing to tag and bag, even to see, so the only connection he could make was through those unnamed senses that fed information to the nerves and the mistier corners of the brain. Pretty much all Hugo could do, with no evidence and no jurisdiction, was stand in the dark alley with the fog slinking around him and hope that he could recreate the fear, generate and experience the creeping sense of menace that lived in darkest London, in the places like this, where evil deeds were committed and where time seemed unable to wipe them away.

He started into the alley, the cobbles hard and smooth beneath the soles of his cowboy boots. The light from Gable Street faded and he stopped to let his eyes adjust to the gloom. A soft, wet smell reached his nostrils: damp earth and something rotting. Vegetable, not animal.

To his right, a twenty-foot brick wall secured the perimeter of a former coal yard, a place now used mostly as a scrap heap for old cars. To his left, another high wall kept vagrants and ne'er-do-wells out of White-chapel Cemetery. He moved forward, his left hand deep in his coat pocket, fingers wrapped around a flashlight, not switched on because he didn't want to spoil the mood. Three-quarters of the way down the alley he stopped, took off his hat, and looked down. Here, on the right side of the alley, is where she'd been found, tucked in the lee of the wall, stretched out with her fingers toward Gable Street, her feet pointing toward the iron gates of the foundry that dead-ended the alley.

Nothing more than a drunk and a prostitute, she'd died in December 1905 at the hands of an unknown killer who, the police had insisted, was not Jack the Ripper. Her head had been sliced open, one or two hard blows crushing her skull, and her throat cut down to the spine. Half-naked and not wearing shoes, the police surgeon found no evidence that she had been sexually assaulted. She'd bled to death on the cobbles, found by a fellow prostitute who'd gone into the alley with a customer and come out in shock. The dead woman was Meg Prescott, her body identified by a woman who sometimes shared her tiny ground-floor room on Dorset Street—a stone's throw away and described by the *Daily Mail* at the time as “the worst street in London.” There, the two women spent their days drinking to excess and entertaining men. Or, as the friend told police, they worked as “seamstresses,” a polite fiction the police observed back then, at least until things got really nasty. Oddly, when police searched her house the night she was killed, police found the door unlocked and blood on Meg Prescott's bed.

Hugo knelt and put his right hand on the cold stones, finally bringing out the flashlight with the other. He switched it on, the light blanching out the cobbles, showing him nothing. Poor Meg, her death unavenged, her murder forgotten. Not even a part of the many Ripper tours that momentarily chilled the spirits of ghoulish visitors to London. He looked back the way he'd come, the way the killer had fled that winter night.

“I'd have caught you,” he said quietly. “Jack or not.”

He stood up and cast the light around him. A trickle of water

from the afternoon's drizzle ran along the gutter and into a drain, but there was nothing else to see. As he looked down at Meg Prescott's final resting place, another chill settled around his shoulders and he shrugged it off before heading out back toward Gable Street, his footfalls echoing gently in the narrow confines of the alley.

He turned right, walking alongside the low brick wall topped with iron railing that separated the street from the graveyard. Thirty yards along he reached the entranceway, a tall, double gate that someone had forgotten to close. He paused and put a hand on the cold iron but, as he started to pull it shut, he paused. He wasn't ready to dispel the macabre cloak he'd pulled on, nor to leave the spirit of Meg Prescott entirely. He checked his watch. Not yet six. Plenty of time until his rendezvous at the Coachman pub a mile away. He pushed the gate open and stepped inside. Ahead of him, the path curved away to the left, cutting diagonally through the churchless cemetery whose gravestones tipped and tilted every way but upright, decades, centuries even, of shifting earth and soggy days, vandals that no graveyard custodian could keep out.

The cemetery was large for central London, the size and shape of a football field, but the closeness of the rising fog and the heavy chill shrank it down, making it more intimate and personal. Hugo paused for a moment. He rested one hand on a moss-covered headstone and noticed the lack of traffic, the absence of construction noise; standing here, London was silent. After a moment, he pressed on and followed the gravel path deeper through the uneven rows of markers, stopping occasionally to try and read the older ones, tracing his fingers over the soft, worn stones and the hard, disfiguring lichen. He was able to decipher first or last names, rarely both, and sometimes dates. No catchy epitaphs or sorrowful last words. Just a fading catalog of the dead, filed away in a quiet, tree-lined corner of London, perhaps waiting to be recycled when this patch of land became too valuable and when the descendants of those who lay here had given up all pretense of aftercare. Or, maybe, had left the ranks of the living themselves.

"A good night for ghosts," Hugo said aloud, smiling at an unexpected knot in his stomach. Despite his skepticism for ephemeral bodies, he had

to concede that the wraiths of fog that drifted around him, obscuring the lights of the city and trapping the dark, made for a spectral scene of the first order. He stepped up the pace, returning to the path and making for the far side of the graveyard, where he assumed another gate would release him back into London's rush-hour traffic, and a little closer to the pub.

He crested a slight rise and saw the gates in front of him, twenty yards away and the twins of those that had let him in. He breathed a sigh of relief and tried to guess which major street would be closest, but stopped short when he saw a movement to his right.

He peered into the dark but saw nothing except the last rows of markers and, beyond them, a line of oak trees as old and twisted as the stones. The fog shifted as a slight breeze rattled the upper branches of the oaks, and he saw movement again, conspicuous not because of how much it moved, but because of the way it moved. A long, narrow object dangling in the middle branches, a gentle sway, back and forth.

Hugo dug his hands deeper into his coat pockets, feeling the reassuring weight of his flashlight. He moved forward, his jaw clenched. The wind rose again, and a few last leaves floated past his face as the branches above clattered more loudly. He lost sight of the object for a second, but as he drew nearer he heard the faint creak of a rope above him. He looked up, his gaze trapped by a silhouette that slowly rotated in front of him, a figure that swayed in the breeze. Like a kaleidoscope image, the black limbs of the oak sank into the background and the clear outline of a human form took shape, a human being hanging from a rope that looped around its neck.

He quick-drew his flashlight and the beam arrowed up, a weak light in the thick, pressing, cemetery dark. As he watched, the body rotated toward him and Hugo steeled himself to see the dead man's face, to see the sunken pits of his eyes and the sagging look that Death painted on all His victims. But as it turned toward him, the body remained faceless, the beam of Hugo's flashlight ending in a blank and empty pool where the face should have been. Hugo looked harder, not understanding what he was seeing until a momentary shift in the wind gave him a clearer view of the light-colored cloth covering the dead man's head.