

By the  
*Knife*

The Early Years

*S. F. Partridge*



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THE KNIFE  
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The year is 1737.

## *Chapter One*

**C**romwell Lane ran from Eastern Road to Dutchman's Wharf. It was a narrow, dark road that sloped downward and steadily became muddier and more refuse-strewn as it descended. On the corner of Lane and Wharf stood The General's Arms, a tavern popular with stevedores, longshoremen, bargemen, and the working population of this part of London and its docks.

By day, wagons and carts laboured up the hill, rattling on the cobbles and sloshing in the mud—loaded with the various cargos from the ships that were offloading at the wharf.

By night, the lane and the surrounding maze of alleyways gave way to a different population; thieves, urchins, beggars, and whores scraping a living. The General's Arms nighttime clientele consisted of drunken seamen, the mass of immigrant labour, and the occasional gentlemen from other parts of the city who were looking for adventure in the more dangerous parts of town.

In the dark of night, the bar formed a puddle of light at the corner of Lane and Wharf in which the customers would laugh and sing—the noise echoing from the surrounding dark, unlit buildings. Drunken men and women argued, fornicated, or fought against the pub walls and on tables.

In the small hours of an autumn morning, a young boy hid in the entrance to an alley. From where he stood, John Carter could see most of the river side of the bar. The rigging of the ships were visible high above the buildings against the stars and seemed to lean over the tavern.

Boxes and bales were piled along the wharf, which, deserted by all but a few drunks, stretched away into the darkness to his right. To his left, the lane wound its way up the hill. Broken buildings made a darker mass in the gloom while the smell of the river and the refuse was familiar to his nose. He shivered as mist from the river curled around his legs, sending a chill into his bones.

John was fourteen-years-old and had been selling his body since the age of nine, when one of his mother's customers raped him and paid for the privilege.

His mother, a whore who was long gone in gin, saw an opportunity and put him to work. John's father, whoever he was, gave his son blue-black hair, black eyes, and a handsome face. With the mud oozing between his bare toes, John waited for a regular client.

A party of six longshoremen started arguing outside the tavern, blocking John's view. He moved quickly across the lane and hid in the entrance to the tavern yard. From here, he could see through a side window into the bar. John cursed under his breath when he saw no sign of his client.

The boy knew better than to be seen by the landlord of the tavern—who hated urchins—and was known to show his displeasure with a wooden cudgel that he kept behind the bar.

As he tried to see into the tap room, he was suddenly seized from behind. A big man, who smelled of stale gin and sweat, dragged him into the tavern yard. John struggled to escape and the drunken man fell, taking both John and himself to the ground. John, who was underneath, struck his head

against the cobbles of the yard and, for a moment, blacked out. When his head cleared, the man had torn open his shirt and was tearing at his britches. John put both hands against the man's chest in an attempt to push him off. His right hand closed on the handle of a knife, and snatching it from its hiding place, John drove the blade into the man's chest.

For a moment, the drunk froze and, with a groan, rolled onto his back—his hands fluttering at the knife that protruded from his body.

John leapt to his feet and stood, gasping for breath. With his britches around his feet and his shirt hanging open, John looked towards the yard entrance; there was no one in sight.

Looking down at the drunken man, John snarled and dropped one knee onto his attacker's stomach. He pulled out the knife and drove it once again into the man's body. He slashed, stabbed, and cut until, with a deep sigh, the man sunk lower into the yard. Still John attacked him, spitting and cursing.

After some moments, he calmed down and knelt beside the body. John looked around once more; there was still no sign of discovery. With deft fingers, he searched through the man's pockets. He found nothing of value, not even a copper coin.

John stood up and tied his torn britches together; they had always been too big. His shirt, which he left open, was soaked in blood. His hands and chest were also bloody.

Taking a final look back at the yard entrance, John picked up the knife, and after twice kicking the body, sprinted deeper into the yard.

By climbing the rear wall, John reached the roof of the tannery that backed onto the tavern. He scrambled up to the ridge and slid down into the roof valley. John had been this way before. Once in the roof valley, he crawled back in the direction of the tavern. Upon reaching the end of the valley, he laid flat and peered down into the yard.

The body was hidden by the gloom, but he could see the gateway outlined against the light from the tavern.

This was a major problem and John began to go over his chances. He had been attacked, but there was no justice for the likes of him. He had to get away from London—that was clear—but he knew no other place. He would need money if he was going to leave. He had no friends. His mother was his only relative, and she meant nothing to him—in fact, he hated her. There was nothing to keep him in London.

Slowly, a plan began to form in his mind. He fingered the knife; it had a double-sided blade that was six inches long. The handle was bone with a brass guard and cap—expensive and beautiful.

A shout made him look up. A vague shape was stumbling about in the yard, shouting. Some drunk had fallen over the body. As John watched, more people started running into the yard; it was time to go. Jumping to his feet, John ran along the roof valley, dropped onto a lean-to roof at the rear, and from there, down to the alley that ran past the tannery.

Running as fast as he could, John turned left and right, quickly putting distance between himself and Dutchman's Wharf. He ran in the smaller, more broken-down alleyways, climbed fences, and passed through derelict buildings. When he felt safe in the maze of alleyways, he slowed to a walk and headed home. Stopping at a horse trough, John washed the blood from his shirt and body as best he could. He took special care to clean the knife.

Approaching the one-room hovel that he had lived in all of his life, John stopped. Hiding himself behind a heap of timber, he watched the building for some time. Seeing no movement, he crept up to the door. John listened for any sound that might indicate the presence of another—all was silent. Pushing the door open, he slid inside.

In the far corner was a heap of rags that served him as a bed. Pulling them aside, he quickly dug into the ground and uncovered a canvas parcel that contained his worldly goods—three, copper coins and a silver snuff box that he had stolen some days before. Pushing the bundle inside his shirt, he crossed to the door and left without a backward glance. Leaving his home meant nothing to him. His memories of that place were all filled with pain and despair.

Keeping clear of Cromwell Lane, John made his way up into the city. By now, the watch would have been called; they would call the guards from the tower, and the hunt would be on. As light began to edge into the sky, John broke into a run; he had to arrive at his destination before first light.

After running through the streets, John climbed a set of heavy, wooden gates and dropped down into a large, enclosed yard. Down one side of the yard was a set of six stables. The horses snorted a welcome as he walked past their stalls. Entering a hay store at one end of the yard, he burrowed between the hay and the rear wall.

After making a den in the centre of the stack, he settled down to sleep the day away. He ignored the rats that scurried in the hay and the ache in his stomach from not eating in twenty-four hours.

The landlord of The General's Arms was in a foul mood. After being dragged from his bar to find a dead body in his yard, some fool had called the watch before he could slide the corpse into the tide. He then saw his bar almost empty when the watch arrived.

A guardsman called his captain who, on arriving, insisted on using the tavern hand cart to send the body away.

Captain Darcy was a big man. Born in Dorset, he was a lifetime soldier who fought for his king against half the armies of Europe. A small set of whiskers decorated his upper lip and a scar from a sabre cut crossed his chin; the men under his



command considered him firm, but fair. Entering the room, he stomped across to the bar.

Looking the landlord up and down, Darcy saw that the man was big and fat with shifty eyes and a dirty pock-marked face. "Now, landlord," he said, "did you know this man? Was he in your bar?"

"He was," said the landlord, "but no, I don't know him."

"How many people were in this night? Can you list them?"

"Many people," the landlord replied, "and no, I can't list any of them."

Darcy looked around the half-empty bar; he had seen people sliding away as he approached.

*I wonder what scum I would find here on an average night, he thought.*

"A murder in your own yard and you say nothing?" asked Darcy.

"I was in the bar, not the yard," the landlord snarled.

Captain Darcy turned for the door. "I'll not let this go, man," he said. "I'll return later." The landlord spat on the floor as the army officer slammed the bar door behind him.

As day gave way to night, the horses were returned to their stables. John waited as they were rubbed down and fed; he was in no hurry. Eventually the draymen left to get their dinner. That reminded John that this was his second day without food, but then again, he was used to being hungry. Sliding from his hiding place, John spent some time talking to the horses; he had time to kill. Managing to take a handful of oats, he made cold porridge with water from the trough and choked it down. The horses didn't seem to mind.

Once the surrounding houses were silent, John climbed over the gate and set off into the city. He wandered through the empty streets that he knew so well, eventually arriving at a wide road between tall buildings, none of which were lit. He

chose a doorway, and leaning against a stone pillar, settled down to wait.



As the night wore on, some girls started walking the street; they smiled at John as they passed.

Some of them stopped on the corner, talking and laughing—one blew him a wolf whistle. Slowly, trade picked up and the girls began to disappear. John was starting to think that this was not his night when, finally, a carriage came slowly down the street. John stepped forward to the edge of the road. He smelt money when he looked at the expensive rig.

Drawn by two, dark horses, the lamps of polished brass on each side of the carriage glinted and reflected light sparkled on the varnished woodwork. A coachman in a heavy coat sat on the box, his face concealed by his upturned collar turned up to hide his face.

It passed, turned around, and came back, stopping opposite of where John stood. The door opened and John climbed in. The leather upholstery smelt of polish, and there was carpet under his feet.

The occupant of the carriage said nothing as they picked up speed. John got the impression that he was old; he saw the glint of buckles, and the man's shape seemed small.

After some time, the carriage pulled into a yard at the back of a large house and stopped.

The man climbed down and signalling John to follow, entered the back door of the house. The coachman stayed on his box.

John found himself in a large kitchen lit by two candles on a mantel over an empty grate. A large, wooden table ran the length of the room; the smell of food made John's stomach

turn. The silent man waved for John to follow him into the house, walking down a hallway and climbing a flight of stairs.

They entered a large bedroom exhibiting all wood panels and polished furniture; the large bed had white linen that shone in the light of the many candles scattered around the room. John stood staring at the paintings on every wall; he had never seen such luxury. Suddenly, the man took his arm and pulled him towards the bed.

Sometime later, the candles had burned down to half their length, and the old man lay sleeping with one leg and one arm over John's body. Slowly, John slid out from under the sleeping man, careful not to wake him.

Kneeling on the floor, he made sure the old man was fully asleep before silently pulling on his clothes. He moved across to the pile of clothes the man dropped to the floor and went through the pockets. He found a purse that felt heavy and saw a glint of gold that turned out to be a watch and a snuff box—all of which he put in his bundle.

John moved around the room, looking in drawers and cupboards. He had just opened a chest at the foot of the bed when the man leapt up with a scream.

"Thieving, little bastard," the old man cried.

John dodged to the other side of the bed and drew his knife. Seeing this, the man stopped, extending his hands as if to push John away.

"Wait," he said, "take the money and go."

A slow grin spread across John's face. His eyes looked like black tunnels into his brain in the depth of which lights seemed to flash. The grin turned into a snarl and he sprang forward slashing at the man's hands with his knife. Screaming, the old man tried to run for the door, but John was on him, cutting and slashing to the left and the right. The man fell to the floor and John, pinning him down, began to cut slowly, taking his time and enjoying the pleading and crying.

After a while, John stood and removed his clothes, which were once again soaked in blood. On a side table, there was a jug of water and a bowl where he washed his body and knife. He then dried himself with the bed linen. He took one of the man's many new shirts from the cupboard. It was a little big and long in the arm, but better than any John had ever owned. Finding some britches, he pulled them on even though they were a little short. He tried on shoes, but they were far too big.

Putting his treasures in a canvas bag that he found in the chest by the bed, he began a careful search of the house. He took only small, light valuables that he could easily carry, with the exception of a pair of carved pistols that he could not resist. John filled the bag.

Eventually he returned to the kitchen and in a pantry found a half-eaten meat pie, a large piece of cheese, and a loaf of bread. He brought it all to the table and ate the pie along with some cheese and a hunk of bread. After putting the rest of the food in his bag, he drank some water, and then, once more, walked through the house, making sure he didn't miss anything. Satisfied, he let himself out of the back door.

The carriage stood as before, minus the horses and coachman. John walked out of the yard and set off back to his hiding place.

By the time he arrived, it was almost light, and he had not been hidden very long when the draymen arrived for the horses.



Mrs. Corns waddled across the yard and entered the kitchen door. She had worked as the cook and housekeeper for Magistrate Hamilton for eight years; her husband, Mr. Corns, also worked for the magistrate as coachman and handyman.

She stood and made irritated noises at the state of her kitchen table. "An empty pie dish left out and crumbs spread about," she mumbled. "The master brought an urchin home with him again." By the time she cleaned up and prepared a tray, the maid had arrived.

"You're late, girl," Mrs. Corns said. "Be quick, and take up the master's breakfast."

The girl hung up her coat, and picking up the tray, set off up the stairs.

The cook had started to set the kitchen range when there was a scream and the sound of breaking china. "What have you done now, girl?" she called, heading for the stairs.



Captain Darcy stood and looked round the room. He had seen many a battlefield against the French and Spanish and plenty of bodies cut to pieces, but this was somehow worse. The rich bedroom, a place of peace and quiet, harshly juxtaposed the blood-soaked body.

The body was that of an old man, naked and vulnerable. The viciousness of the attack demonstrated that it had to be the work of a madman.

He stooped and examined two heaps of clothing, one just bloody rags, the other well-made and expensive. Turning, Darcy walked out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

"No one is to enter. I'll send for the body," he instructed the guardsman who stood on the landing.

Entering the kitchen, he approached the table around which sat the household staff. The maid, who found the body, was still weeping. The fat cook, who was very red in the face, sat at the head of the table. Corns, the coachman, sat staring at the floor with a sullen look on his face.

"Did you hear anything?" Darcy asked.

It was the cook who answered. "No sir," she said. "We live above the stable; the girl lives out. The master didn't want anybody living in."

Darcy looked at the coachman. "This boy you say you brought back . . ."

The cook interrupted. "The master was such a good man," she wailed, "always bringing ragamuffins home to give them a meal."

Darcy ignored her. "What did he look like?"

"It was dark," Corns replied.

"It was a clear night; you must have seen something. Was he tall, short, fat, thin?"

Corns looked up, and now standing, held his hand up to the height of his ear. "This tall," he said. "They're all thin."

"What about his hair, long, short, light, dark?"

"Dark, very dark," Corns touched his shoulder, "this long."

"When you pick up these," he looked at the cook, "ragamuffins, do you always find them in the same place?"

"Down near the docks," Corns said without looking at him.

"Very well," Darcy walked towards the kitchen door, "I'll send for the body. Once he is gone, make a list of anything missing."

"Hell's teeth," he thought, "a magistrate with a brother in parliament and a boy prostitute."

Outside he took the reins of his horse from the guardsman who was holding them. "Watch the kitchen door," he said, "no one is to leave or enter, except our men," and under his breath, "a few more questions for that damned landlord, I think."

The landlord of The General's Arms cursed under his breath. "Here comes that damned army officer again, and this time with half the cursed army."

Darcy strode into the bar. "I have men outside the door," he announced. "Nobody leaves until I get some answers."

He turned to the bar at large. "Who was in this bar the night before last?" he demanded. Nobody spoke. "Come on, I know some of you were." Still, he got no response. After waiting for a moment, he tried a new tactic. "I'm looking for a street boy this tall." He held out his hand to show height. "He has black hair down to his shoulders and new clothes."

The landlord laughed. "A street boy with new clothes," he said, "now that would be a sight."

Darcy turned on him with a snarl. "I'll close this pig sty and keep it closed if I get no information."

The smile slid from the landlord's face and, after a moment's thought, he said, "Ask Lilly Carter." He pointed to a table in one corner of the bar where three women sat.

Darcy walked across to them. "Which of you is Lilly Carter?" he demanded.

One of the women put her hand to her mouth, a look of fear in her eyes. Her face had the red eyes and bloated look of a drunkard.

"Do you know of the boy I described, or do you have a son on the street?"

"I've not seen him," she blurted.

"Where do you live? Take me there." Darcy took hold of the woman's shoulder and dragged her to her feet. "What's his name?" he hissed.

"John," she cried.

Outside the tavern, Darcy called to his men. "Spread out, search the alleyways, and question anyone you meet. Look for a tall boy with black hair to his shoulders. His name is John Carter. A gold piece for the man who brings him to me."

As dusk fell, the guards officer mounted his horse; his men had found nothing. They had torn the Carter woman's hovel apart and searched all of the surrounding lanes and alleys.

She was waiting at the tower; he would question her further.

Darcy called to his sergeant, "I want men posted all around this area. You will search again at first light. The boy will be here; he has no other place to go." Then, he set off up the lane.



As before, John waited well into the night before leaving his hiding place. Low tide would not be until the early hours. He made a meal of bread and cheese, and then said goodbye to the horses.

Slipping through the streets, he avoided Cromwell Lane, arriving downriver of Dutchman's Wharf.

Climbing down to the riverbed, John walked the low water mark upriver, arriving back at the wharf. The four ships docked there were all high and dry, the river bottom being gravel with a thin coating of mud. He slowly and silently worked his way to the bow of the second ship in the line—a Dutch fluyt that had finished offloading flax the day before.

Reaching up, John could almost grasp the bowsprit rigging. He stepped back a few paces and then, taking a run, jumped and grabbed hold of the bobstay. From there he climbed up and using the bowsprit shrouds, came level with the rail.

John lay outside the rail with his eyes just above the capping. From here, he could see the length of the wharf to the tavern on the corner. As he watched, a guardsman moved into the entrance of an alley. As the man stretched his back and turned his face away, John slipped over the rail and onto the deck. He quickly moved to the shore-side rail. In order to see him at that time, the guardsman would have had to stand on the wharf's edge and look straight down.

John moved quickly and hid under the poop-deck ladder,



just outside the cabin door. He settled down to wait once again.

As the night wore on, the noise from the tavern subsided. Soon afterwards, John heard the crew of the fluyt walking down the wharf.

They swung into the rigging and dropped to the deck. All but one went down the forward hatch. The last, the captain walked to the cabin. As the man approached, John opened the front of his shirt and, with his most winning smile, stepped out to meet him.

"Hello, Captain," he said.

The man stopped short. "John, where were you? I waited two nights; come inside. What happened? Everybody is looking for you."

John slid through the cabin door. "I was in the city, Captain," the boy told him. He moved closer to the big Dutchman. "I missed you."

It took a long time for the captain to go to sleep, and even then, John was afraid to move for some time. At last, however, he was able to slide out of the cot. With great care to be silent, he pulled on his clothes. Then kneeling on the cabin sole, he carefully moved the sea chests that were stowed beneath the cot. He moved them away from the ship's side, making just enough space for him to hide. Once concealed, he allowed himself to sleep.

Captain Darcy stood in the middle of Dutchman's Wharf and stroked his horse. It was mid-day, and he had been organizing the search since first light. The night watch saw nothing.

The tide was high and a barge was coming alongside the wharf. He wondered, in a half-interested way, what ship left to make room for it.

Looking east, he saw a Dutch fluyt slowly moving downriver.

A fine carriage, drawn by two, matching greys, rattled its way down Cromwell Lane towards the captain. He moved to let it pass, but it stopped beside him. An expensively-dressed dandy leaned out of a window. "Captain Darcy?" he inquired.

"At your service, sir," said Darcy.

"A word, if you please."

A coachman dropped down to hold his horse, and the captain climbed into the carriage.

"Captain Darcy, I am Michael Howard from Lord Hamilton's chambers," the man began, "I am instructed to inform you that a grave mistake has been made. The idea that some street boy was involved in the death of Lord Hamilton's brother is totally unacceptable. I have spoken with your colonel, and you are instructed to halt this investigation at once. The death was the result of a simple robbery, and you will conduct your inquiries accordingly. I'm sure you have no business in this part of London. I wish you good day, sir."

Darcy climbed down and was handed the reins to his horse. He watched the coach disappear up the lane, and then turned to his sergeant. "Get the men back to barracks," he said. "We are finished here."



The *Delft* worked her way clear of the sands and set her course for Rotterdam. Captain Van Hesston handed the ship over to his mate and walked to his cabin. The passage downriver had been good; the wind was firm from the northwest. They carried the tide for the first five hours.

Once the tide turned, however, progress was slow and Van Hesston had been on deck for almost twelve hours. He ducked his head to pass through the cabin door and saw the boy sitting on his cot.

