

The Cross Keys

A Short Story by Phil Armstrong
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The Cross Keys

A delicate deception in a London pub.

It was a pleasant afternoon; the wind had died down and the city was bustling into life. The enthusiasm of tourists elevated the mood and Covent Garden was filled with street performers, vendors and the genuinely intrigued. London in the summer months was a special place; she'd always liked London. The streets were starting to narrow, and the cobbles posed an additional challenge, staying upright in her high heels. She'd pulled out all of the stops for this meeting; it would be special for her. She strode confidently along Endell Street, until the meeting place came into view. Her destination could have been easily missed because the pub's fascia was covered with flowers, vegetation, ferns, hanging baskets and an assortment of vegetation. Four, green marble Ionic columns diligently supported the distinctive marble arches.

Each column had a plinth, spray-painted in a luminous gold color. "What were those plinths called?" She heard herself mutter the question, as she tried to recall her guide's words, when she vacationed in Athens. She smiled, pleased with herself. English was not her first language and she remembered the guide explaining the attributes of the columns and their support systems. To many, this would have been boring; she found it

fascinating. There was a man on the tour; he was tall, slim and tanned. She remembered him grinning at her, trying to catch her attention. She was different from other women, very different. She knew if she asked the guy what an Ionic column was, she would get an answer that would not impress her. The guide spent ten minutes on this topic and all he could do was stare at her grinning like a hyena. "A Corinthian entablature," she whispered to herself.

Her eyes were drawn to the two-winged cherubs, clutching at two crossed keys. Below them, in large gold letters, was spelled the name of the pub, 'THE CROSS KEYS'. This was the place, she glanced at her watch; it was 2.29pm. She'd been instructed to meet him at 2.30pm sharp, "Don't be late, he hates people being late," was still ringing in her ears. She passed a shop storefront as she hurried towards the burgundy colored entrance. The sun reflected in the glass of the store, turning it into a mirror. She admired her reflection.

She was thirty-two years old and looked in her mid twenties. She was proportioned and in great physical condition. She ran, swam, practiced martial arts and did yoga, a regime followed to stay in prime physical condition. Today she wore a classy two-piece business suit. It consisted of a stylish jacket layered over a crisp white Gucci blouse, tucked into the waistband of a pencil skirt. Both skirt and jacket were navy blue with a hint of a subtle pinstripe. She had considered wearing her long blonde hair swept up in a ponytail, away from her face. She wanted to achieve the most professional look possible. She decided to let her hair fall naturally. Her black Jimmy Choo heels accented her professional office look. To complete the outfit, she accessorized with a wide black Prada belt, and of course, a black matching Prada clutch purse.

She smoothed the front of her skirt, tugging at the sides to ensure it sat on her hips right. She arranged her hair, brushing a few errant strands from her face. "You can do this, it's a job interview," she mouthed the words to her reflection. She turned to face the pub and entered cautiously through the burgundy door. The pub was smaller than she had imagined, consisting of one room. It was mirrored to give the appearance of being larger. The pub looked old with dark stained oak trimmings and a bar area to the left. Four hand pumps sat proudly on the bar and a vast array of bottles held liquids of various colors. It was dark inside, and her eyes strained to adjust. The seating seemed limited and close; she wondered how she would pull this off?

Professionally dressed, with long flowing blonde hair, piercing blue eyes, high cheekbones and a tanned healthy complexion, she wasn't going to blend in. She recognized her appointment from his picture. Craig Helm was of average height; he wore a wrinkled suit, a black shirt and inexpensive shoes. He wasn't what she had expected. He blended into his surroundings with comfort and ease. His hair was closely cropped and a dull brown color. He had a trace of morning stubble, but he didn't look unclean. He had an interesting blend of looking stylish, without really trying. He rose to greet her as she scanned the room.

"Jane? Over here, please join me," he extended his hand motioning towards an empty seat at their small table for two.

"Craig?" she inquired.

"Yes, thanks for joining me." His smile was forced, creating crow's feet around his eyes. She recognized the look, she had seen this before. Men took a while to get over her physical appearance. They seemed to get lost in her blue eyes and need a moment to compose themselves.

She took her place at the small round table, perching elegantly upon the worn wooden chair.

"This is quaint," she said, trying hard to pronounce the words accurately.

"It's a small local pub, but I thought it was handy, you know, close by."

Craig had made the first mistake. His pronunciation of "you know," had not been neutral, his accent had filtered through. "You're not from England, are you Craig? I detect an accent?"

"You have an acute ear Jane; I was born in Yugoslavia. My parents moved me here when I was a child and I was educated here. I do speak Yugoslavian, so my accent occasionally shines through. How rude of me, would you like a drink?"

"Yes thanks, soda water and lime please." Craig left his seat for the bar and she had a chance to study him. She looked around the table for a bag, briefcase or any belongings that he may have brought with him. The floor was empty; he'd traveled light. She held onto her purse tightly watching him pay for the drinks. He returned with her drink and a pint of murky brown beer. He placed the drinks down carefully making sure he rested them upon the new beer mats, made of stiff card. She adjusted her weight and leaned forward to pull the drink closer. He quenched his thirst with a large drink, she watched him demurely; she left her drink untouched.

Craig let a satisfied sigh escape from his mouth. "Sorry, but they do a great tasting pint here." Craig raised his eyes allowing them to settle on her fresh face. "It's a hot one today, please, quench your thirst, have a drink."

"I will," she said, holding his gaze, "when I'm ready."

Craig smiled. "Tell me why you want this job?"

"It's a larger company with a more challenging mandate, you have most of the market share and the recognized leader in this field, why wouldn't I want this job?" She smiled at her well-rehearsed answer.

"Good."

"Do you have my C.V.?" inquired Jane politely.

"I've seen it and know what I need to ask, thanks."

He wasn't an accomplished liar, he let his gaze slip to the left; a definite tell. "I hope he doesn't play poker," thought Jane.

Craig adjusted his weight, kicking the leg of the table hard. The table rocked and the beer surged out of the wobbling pint glass. Jane's glass had a wider base. Her drink wobbled but the liquid remained in the glass. "Oh, I'm sorry, these tables are too small. Can you reach behind you and grab a few of those paper napkins please"?

Jane diverted her attention momentarily to a small shelf, stacked with supplies. She grabbed a handful of napkins and turned to dab the beer spilt on the table. The dark brew was quickly absorbed by the paper napkins, which Jane piled neatly to one side of the table. "I do apologize, I'm not normally this clumsy. Thank you, I hope I didn't spill on you?"

Jane took a quick look but couldn't see any damp spots. "I'm all fine, no harm done."

"Well let's continue then. Tell me why you're thinking about leaving your current job."

The conversation continued for about thirty minutes. It was awkward and forced. Craig smiled at the wrong times and was often caught thinking, instead of listening. It was clear he hadn't interviewed much. The drinks were low, and the meeting had run its course. Craig was having difficulty thinking of more questions. He looked at her features closely and seemed to smile a lot. His laughter became more pronounced. The pub had emptied since she first came in, even the bar maid had lost interest in them.

Sensing the conversation had stalled, Jane decided to be bold. "So, do you think I have a shot at this job?"

Craig leaned inwards inviting Jane to reciprocate. "There's one small problem that I can see." Craig had been waiting for this; the shift in power was inevitable. This was his favorite part, it always was. "You see I haven't been totally honest with you." Jane furrowed her brow leaning back slightly. "You're not really here for an interview."

Jane's eyes narrowed, "I don't understand, the agency called me...."

"Well, it seems that you have been lured here under false pretenses." Craig leaned back and studied the confused look on this normally confident woman. She looked like a little girl, alone and lost in the woods. That's the realization point, the moment when she's not in control. He loved that look and the feeling that went with it. Some might call him sick, but they weren't around anymore.

Jane smiled broadly, her eyes twinkled with mischief, "Craig, are you flirting with me? This isn't the way to get a date, I already have a boyfriend who's crazy about me."

That's when Craig burst into raucous laughter. "Oh my God no, I'm not hitting on you, I have other plans for you. So, you have a boyfriend who's crazy about you, are you sure about that?"

"Yes why?"

Craig was calm, enjoying the verbal sparring. He held the power; he held the answers. "Let me educate you a little. Somebody out there doesn't like you. Now we all have people who don't like us, but not all of us have people who hate us. You do." Craig watched to see if the words stung, but they didn't even register a response. "Someone approached my employer with a job; the job was to snuff you out. Do you understand?"

"Not really, I'd like to know who that was."

Craig leaned forward cupping his chin on the ledge made by his left hand. "I bet you would, it works like this. For a large amount of money, you can have a problem removed. My agency will facilitate this. All I know is the profile of the individual that is to be removed."

"Removed," Jane emphasized.

"Killed," said Craig lowering his voice. "I receive a dossier and half of the money."

"Let me guess, you get the other half when my picture shows up on the rags from Fleet Street."

"You're pretty smart."

"Yeah, I watch a lot of TV." Jane took the moment to look around the pub. It had cleared out except for the barmaid. She had positioned her back to the room and seemed engrossed in the daily crossword puzzle. Jane leaned inwards determined to continue with the dialogue. "So, you're a hit man; a trained killer?"

"Some people call me that, yes."

Jane noticed a remarkable change in his demeanor. The smile had disappeared but so had the nervous pretense. He looked confident now, more in control. It was difficult to believe that this unassuming man that sat before her, was capable of taking her life without remorse. He had the ability to look average, to simply blend in and be unmemorable.

"What's stopping me from running to the door and screaming at the top of my lungs to get some attention?"

Craig fidgeted in his seat in anticipation of a misguided run attempt. "Let me explain in your last five minutes on this planet. By now you should be feeling a little lightheaded?"

The tone used suggested a question. "Yeah, a little," confirmed Jane.

"That's the poison I slipped into your drink, as you retrieved the napkins. You finished off the whole drink and it's working its way through your system. It starts with a light head. If you tried to stand, your legs would not hold your weight, so running away is not an option."

"Certainly not in these heels," quipped Jane with a wry smile.

The muscles become paralyzed below the waist and the poison journeys towards the heart. You'll feel a warming sensation, can you feel it?"

"Yes, it's nice, almost pleasant in a strange way. How many people have you killed Craig? Craig isn't your real name is it?"

"More than you can imagine, and no, it's not."

"I read an article in the Independent last week, about a Russian spy based in Chelsea. He was found dead on the Tube, the Northern Line, I believe. The papers are saying it was a hit, but there are no witnesses and no conclusive CCTV footage. It's being described as the perfect hit. Was that your handy work?"

"Yes, it was." Craig rubbed his fingers together and glanced at the inattentive barmaid. "Someone wanted you dead Jane, I'm just doing my job. My agency set this up and I do the rest. You're a pretty girl, perhaps that's the problem." Jane's chin began to drop; she jerked her head backwards fighting against the pull. "That's the drugs, they'll eventually cause you to slump over this table, but I'll have slipped away by then."

"So, you don't know who set this meeting up, I mean, who's paying for this?"

Craig just shook his head silently.

"We have something in common you and I." Jane raised her brilliantly blue eyes to study Craig's face. There was no remorse, but she did sense satisfaction of a job well done.

"Okay, I'll play along for a few minutes, what do we have in common?"

Jane swayed, she could hardly keep her chin raised now, slumping in her chair. She held on to her purse, which disappeared under the table from its weight. "Well it seems that we both were lured here under false pretenses."

Craig seemed barely interested; he just wanted the next two minutes to pass quickly. Her ramblings would only speed up the poison, as it made her way to her heart. "How so?" he inquired, trying to keep her delirious rant going.

"Does the name Sergei Beralov mean anything to you?"

"Sure, he's the dead dude in the Tube. His name was plastered across every newspaper."

"He was a double agent and you snuffed him out without the proper authorization."

Craig looked at the pretty woman slumping across the table from him. She didn't have long now. "You're a clever girl, but you can't tweak my inquisitive side enough to talk your way out of this."

Jane rested her limp arms in her lap; her hands were folded under the table. "What did you spike my drink with?"

Craig was getting impatient and annoyed. A bullet would have been quicker but these types of jobs, in public spaces, had to be delicately arranged and executed. "Poison, it was a paralyzing poison."

"What's it called?"

"If you must know it C-72, or Slim Jim as we call it in our business."

"I've heard of that," Jane slurred her words. She had managed to remain upright but barely. "Slim Jim is a spy drug used by the secret service. It's a synthetic drug, but it does have one flaw. Iron blocks the absorption significantly. Most people, especially women, are low on Iron, so the drug is lethal."

She had Craig's attention now. He leaned inwards; how do you know this?"

Jane lifted her heavy eyelids. "I said we were both lured here under false pretenses, what you don't know, is that you have a..." Jane's voice tailed off at the end of the sentence.

Intrigued, Craig leaned inwards turning his head and positioning his ear, so that he could hear Jane's barely audible voice. "Say it again."

"Sure." Jane lifted her hands slowly from beneath the table. She had fished out a small silver tube, about the size of a cigarette, from her purse. In one swift movement, she raised the tube to her mouth and blew hard. A dart flew from the tube and struck Craig's neck with some considerable force. The dart had a special tip, designed to pierce the skin and explode, once inside the body.

Craig raised his hand to his neck quickly, reacting to the shock of the pain. "You sly bitch!"

Jane straightened her posture, placing her designer purse onto the small wooden table. "You see the agency was annoyed with your reckless Tube hit. It brought unwanted publicity and caused a bit of a problem with the Russians. As an act of good faith my agency in Moscow, received a call from your agency here in London." Craig rocked as the blood streamed down his neck. His lungs filled with blood. Jane's voice was strikingly different. It was now laced with a thick Russian accent, she continued. Her posture was straight, her eyes clear and her head still; she showed no signs of the poison. "I'm fortunate that I have plenty of Iron, in fact, I took a booster shot this morning. Your agency lied to you Craig; you've become disposable."

"Let's make a deal." Craig could not complete the word "deal." His lungs filled and his heart stopped beating. His body stiffened and went into a rigor mortis like state. He would remain stiff, sitting upright for about an hour, before the muscles relaxed and he crumpled into a heap.

He had his back to the barmaid. Jane rose quietly; she retrieved the dart from his neck. It had left a small hole that was easy to miss. She slipped out of the dark pub unnoticed. She walked quickly to the end of the street, where a black Mercedes Benz waited. The hit's location was carefully selected. Street cameras did not monitor this part of London. She walked towards the black car. The passenger window opened slowly. She peeled off her jacket throwing it into the open car window. She stooped to take the high heels off. The belt followed; all were thrown into the waiting car. A pair of flat, yellow pumps were passed to her from the car. She received a large tee shirt, embossed with a colorful design. She quickly pulled on the tee shirt and slipped into the yellow shoes.

The final act was to pull off the long blonde wig. She threw it into the car and watched as the car disappeared into the busy streets of London. She glanced at her updated reflection in a glass window. Her short black bob cut was in stark contrast, to her long blonde locks.

She looked like a student or a Covent Garden artsy type. Her comrades would be proud. Men die of heart attacks all the time. The autopsy would show a cardiac arrest. "Now that's how you do a hit," she thought, allowing a small smile to cross her lips. "No fuss, no pomp and circumstance, just quiet efficiency."

Jane shuffled her way into the bustling crowds. She had a new look, a new gait, a new accent and three months to lie low in London. She loved museums; perhaps she would visit the British Museum tomorrow.

The End...