

The Girl with the Plum Gown

17th July, 1834

His eyes glazed momentarily as he glanced at the assorted finery laid upon the mahogany dressing table. Every item held a memory engraved in George's mind. She wore that necklace, the one with the dainty flower shaped pendant, every day since the first time they met. Sighing, he toyed with the idea of burning the vanity's contents. Leaning down, he traced his hand along the back of the vanity leg, latching his fingers onto a miniscule, tarnished key. His lips tilted upwards slightly and he slipped the key carefully into his boot. Footsteps slowly approached followed by the voices of two animated men. He sprung upwards, quickly reaching for the flower necklace and slipped it in his pocket. Sliding behind the armoire, he sucked in a breath.

The first man who appeared was rather squat - diminutive even - but what he lacked in height he made up for in muscle. The second figure, towering over him from behind, was marked with a distinctive scar spanning collar to temple. George, now crouching behind the armoire, froze as he noticed a flash of ebony hair in his peripheral vision. A girl, Celia, sat on the edge of the window, her skirts billowing in the wind. At the sight of George, her hand moved towards her calf where an elegant dagger lay strapped and easily accessible. He shook his head once and her eyes darted to the two burly henchmen in her bedroom. Sliding into the room she barked an order at both of them and they scurried back down the stairs. The girl pulled up the hood of her cloak but not fast enough to conceal the smirk forming on her lips.

“Not very gentlemanly, George, letting yourself into a girl's bedroom uninvited.”

His expression hardened and he turned away from her, sauntering out the window.

Turning his head slightly, he listened as she called, “I'll change the locks next time.”

March 10th, 1834

He swept Celia off her feet and pressed a kiss to her forehead. They entwined fingers and strolled the streets of London. Two older women in chartreuse waltzed past them and paused indignantly, unaccustomed to open displays of affection. Tutting, they bustled on, pontificating on the frailty of female virtue.

George leant down and whispered, "I bought us two train tickets."

She nodded.

"We'll have to go in the middle of the night. Midnight train, less eyes?"

She squeezed his hand, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. They weaved through the streets, treating themselves to some pickled herring along the way. Lost in chatter, they spent hours together hardly pausing in conversation. He smiled, imagining another hundred such days. *Only one more job and we'll leave this cursed place behind.*

March 13th, 1834

She twisted George's flower necklace around her neck and waited impatiently in the alleyway. Holding an envelope, a man appeared. He was attired in a tweed herringbone suit complete with top hat and pocket watch. *Jermyn Street tailors*, she noted. *Reputable clothes, not so reputable job.* She knew his type. Puffing on his pipe, inscrutable, he reached into his coat. Placing a letter in her hands, he examined her expression as she read. Four words were scribbled on the parchment: *it's him or you.*

"He's offering you 100 pounds. He wants me to remind you of your earlier conversation."

She could hear his voice, their last conversation, in her mind. He'd been a client of hers and George's for some time. Every time he needed a problem solved, a person *disappeared*, he'd sought the services of Celia and George. They'd built themselves quite the reputation, starting in Whitechapel, eventually building a client base across the city. His words - they only knew him as Able - had been shadowing her thoughts every day since. *"One hundred sounds a lot better than fifty, maybe it's time to leave your passenger behind."*

She unclasped the necklace. *Time to let George go.* Time to see what she could do on her own.

June 10th, 1834

George pulled the key out from under the dressing table, twisting it from finger to finger. She glanced up from her vanity, brushing rouge daintily across her upper lip.

“It unlocks the armoire.”

Whilst pressing charcoal onto her eyelashes, she rose and perched on the end of the bed next to him. Smiling up at him, she reached for the key and moved for the armoire. It clicked open and a cascade of petticoats tumbled out.

“*Voilà*. I should be going, I’ve received a new assignment.”

She strode away, stowing the key back in its hiding place, closing the door behind her. As she pulled a ribbon, her bustle dropped to the floor and revealed a loose black skirt. She straightened her charcoal corset and moved for the window, slipping out into the night.

Meanwhile he lay on her bed, his gaze darting towards the petticoats. *Why would anyone hide a key for gowns?* He slipped to the armoire and dug through the various mysteries of the female trousseau. He opened a drawer and swiftly shut it at the sight of undergarments. He turned, shaking his head, but saw a glimpse of metal. Pushing past a plum gown, he traced his finger over a keyhole. Slotting the tiny key in, the door opened to a dozen daggers, each engraved with the initials C.H.: Celia Hall. Above the daggers was a letter, labelled: *Rome*.

23:20 August 3rd, 1834

Her heel hit the pavement as she climbed out of the carriage and lifted her skirt with admirable grace. She was adorned in a taffeta gown, the shade of a plum, with a full conical skirt and impressive corsetry. Her ebony hair was twisted into a tight bun with tight ringlets framing her face. She casually dropped her purse and as she leant to reach for it she tightened the dagger strapped to her calf. Her lips, stained a deep crimson, drooped ever so slightly as she noticed a man heading into the ball and quickly recognising his curl pattern even from this distance. With the comfort of the dagger she straightened her posture and moved for the entrance.

George was talking to a girl in the most ridiculous shade of green and smiling politely as she talked about shades of paint- *shades of paint??* His eyes drifted away from the girl he was talking to and towards the girl in plum gliding across the dance floor. Her movements were fluid and calculated and he watched as the man accompanying her struggled to keep

up. Eager to escape his current conversation, George excused himself and weaved through the crowd towards Celia.

“May I cut in?”

The man hesitated for a moment but let go of her and made his way to the outskirts of the room.

George placed his hand on her waist, “I found you.”

Celia reached for her leg and he clasped his hand tightly around her wrist. Her eyes narrowed and she wrenched her hand from his grip.

“Calm down,” he whispered.

They spun across the room in silence. The song neared to the end and she wriggled from his arms and turned away from him. His hands wrapped around her waist once and he pulled her towards him.

“I’ll find you after this.”

She removed herself from his arms and smoothed her dress, glaring at him before she left.

2:04 August 4th, 1834

She walked through the streets, rain pattering against her skin. One hand lifted her skirts and the other held a slender dagger with a rose engraved along the side. George stood lurking in the distance, leaning against a lamppost. Examining a letter, he flicked through the pages and lifted his head upwards at the sound of her heels.

“You know, **as I opened the letter, a ticket fell out.**” He tilted his head to the ticket, labelled Rome, sitting in between his fingers.

Her grip tightened around the pommel of the dagger.

“First, I read the letter, which frankly was careless of you to leave behind, and then I read your deal. A job in Rome in return for a warrant on my head?”

The letter in his hand fell to the ground and he ran his fingers through his tousled hair. Her blade glinted in moonlight as she used the tip to clean her nails.

“Able’s looking for me Celia. I’ll be dead if any of his men find me. But I’m sure you know that, and I’m sure you are disobeying direct orders right now by not following through with that knife.”

She lifted the blade to his throat yet he didn’t falter.

“Don’t doubt my intentions. I just prefer a chase; it’s no fun when prey falls on my doorstep.”

She let the blade slip slightly and a trickle of blood spilled down his neck.

“There will be a next time.” She turned away with a smirk playing on her lips.