

## PROLOGUE

“Victoria is on her way,” uttered the hushed voice of apprentice *Gaslight Gazette* journalist Mr Joseph Maxwell, his deep-set green eyes betraying both apprehension and excitement for his current situation. When neither of his two companions reacted, beyond a polite smile and slight nod, Joseph twisted around in his chair and watched the waitress carry two plates of sliced Victoria Sponge to a couple on the other side of the crowded tearoom. He was rather uncomfortable though as he’d kept his clasped hands, with their thumbs rubbing together, resting upon the table. A man of average stature, but of slender form, Mr Maxwell had broad shoulders, freckle-covered, sunken cheeks, high cheekbones, and highly distinctive red hair he kept neatly combed and parted slightly to the left. He was well-turned out in a black frock coat over a dark-grey waistcoat, high-collared white shirt, and black, silk cravat with its tiny bow tied over his Adam’s Apple. Mr Maxwell also had a hint of lavender and carbolic soap lingering about him.

The tearoom, meanwhile, was housed above a branch of the *Aerated Bread Company* with its only access being a set of stairs leading from the back corner of the ground floor shop. Located on the Euston Road, mere yards from the Euston Square terminus of the London and North-Western Railway, the *A.B.C. Tearoom*—as it had come to be known—was a favoured refreshment stop for both Londoner and northbound traveller alike.

After navigating the shop and climbing the steep stairs, one would encounter an open doorway through which a four-foot-high counter could be seen. Affixed to its front, a tin sign announced all customers must ‘Enquire here’ to be seated. Due to its popularity, there was usually a queue but the staff could be relied upon to empty tables discreetly and efficiently, thus seating one in no time at all. To the left of this counter was a rather tall, wooden-framed display cabinet containing a vast array of delectable goods, including freshly baked Victoria Sponges, aerated bread loaves, and scones. The cabinet’s glass panes served a dual purpose of allowing one to see what was on offer, but also keeping the goods free from contamination from the bad smells of the city and ‘germs.’ The remainder of the room’s furniture consisted of tables with rounded tops covered in long, white tablecloths and high-backed chairs with firm, dark-green cushions, every table and chair having been constructed from ebony. With regards to décor, exposed floorboards were preferred over carpets because of the footfall the tearoom experienced, whilst the walls were papered with a dark-green, curving plant design on a slightly lighter green background. Dark-green curtains hung on either side of each of the three sash windows which lined the longer wall directly opposite the door. These allowed the light from the low winter’s sun to pour into the room, adding to the already welcoming glow of the wall-mounted, gas lamp sconces. Their sashes were pushed halfway up the windows, providing the reassurance of fresh air pulling in from, and bad air expelling to, the street outside, thus negating any concerns a customer may have about the possible build-up of carbonic gas.

“Are they the couple we’re looking out for?” Joseph enquired, now returning his body to its previous position. “Miss Dexter, may I see your sketches again?”

Offering a second polite smile, coupled with a slight nod, Miss Georgina Dexter pulled her satchel onto her lap from the floor and removed two pencil sketches from it: the first of a male, the second of a female. She held the sketches out to him, over the table, whilst retaining her impeccable posture. At only five feet tall, Miss Dexter was considerably shorter than Mr Maxwell, yet her petite form was nevertheless perfectly proportioned. Like Joseph, she was fair skinned with red hair; hers was two shades darker than his though and somewhat longer—not that anyone could tell by looking at her as she always kept it tightly pinned and half-hidden beneath a bonnet. Naturally, today was no exception; her bonnet of choice being midnight blue in its majority and black in its edging to match the rather plain, non-bustle dress she wore. With the entirety of her chest and part of her neck covered by its material, Miss Dexter felt as comfortable as she could in the company of two bachelors—neither of whom courted her.

“Yeah,” replied Dr. Percy Weeks, his Canadian accent in stark contrast to the English ones of his two companions. Unlike them, he sat slouched with both hands resting upon the backs of Joseph and Georgina’s chairs, his head leant back slightly with a lit cigarette perched in the corner of his mouth. “So, stop fuckin’ gawkin’ at them,” he added, exhaling smoke in their direction. Miss Dexter gave a small cough whilst Mr Maxwell crumpled up his nose and moved his head back. Aside from his choice of vocabulary, obvious lack of manners, and distinct accent, Dr. Weeks’ other remarkable traits could be said to be his short, slick-backed hair, small, waxed moustache, and long, short-haired sideburns, all of which were jet black in colour. The quality of his attire meanwhile was in stark contrast to the quality of his behaviour, a custom-made, three-piece, dark-green suit, pressed, white shirt with starched collar, dark-green tie with gold pin, knee-length, black overcoat, and a black, felt trilby currently sitting upon the table. “Dunno why I’m here anyway.”

*I must agree with you, Doctor*, Miss Dexter thought to herself. The man reeked of liquor and, despite their need to be discreet, had refused to purchase a cup of tea, citing the fact he didn’t drink “such shit” and much preferred coffee. As if hearing her thoughts, Dr. Weeks retrieved a silver flask from his overcoat and knocked some whiskey back without a hint of shame. Her, yet, unspoken concern of his belonging to their Society—caused by behaviour of this very kind—wasn’t anything of real note, however, when one considered he was formally associated with the Metropolitan Police’s Scotland Yard. At a loss as to how such a man could be granted such responsibility, this fact had thus always left her feeling utterly bewildered. Yes, police officers were often exposed as drunks but Dr. Weeks was allegedly a man of *medicine*, one upon whom the Yard relied (or so she was told) to assist them with their investigations.

“Miss Trent said we needed a doctor for when Miss Johnson faints,” Joseph said, unconsciously drawing Miss Dexter back from her thoughts. She smiled politely, keeping her charcoal and pencil lead-smudged hands in her lap, as she watched him carefully inspect each of her sketches in turn. He’d seen them previously—they all had—but it wasn’t her place to remind him of this. “She seems to know what she’s doing,” Joseph added. He looked to Georgina. “Miss Trent, that is.”

“Put the damn things outta sight,” Weeks growled suddenly as he pulled the sketches clean out of Joseph’s hands and tossed them at Georgina. “*Jesus*,” he added, shaking his head in exasperation. Having initially been shocked by his companion’s actions, Joseph now felt his cheeks grow hot and his mouth turn dry as he realised his own error.

“Sorry,” he muttered, averting his gaze from the Canadian’s angry glare. Miss Dexter, on the other hand, looked to them both as she quietly cleared her throat.

“Miss Trent’s instructions, to me,” she began, sliding the sketches back into her satchel, “were to watch Miss Johnson and Mr Eddows, and to only act when the time is right.” Awkwardly glancing between her companions, she reached for her teacup, adding meekly, “I intend to do that.”

Wood scraped against wood, thus drawing the attention of Joseph, Georgina, and Dr. Weeks back to the young couple; he, with his three-piece, dark-grey suit of a reasonable cut and quality, white shirt with starched collar, and black tie, had the appearance of a middle-class gentleman. She, in her well-designed, cotton, midnight-blue, bustle dress with feather-adorned hat pinned over tightly curled, blonde hair had the appearance of one of a similar (if not the same) social class as her beau. Their difference in age, however, could’ve only been a couple of years with her being the younger of the two, though both were in their twenties. The sudden moving back of her chair, as she’d sharply stood, had caused the scraping noise. Now, she was doubled over with a lace-clad hand gripping her corseted stomach and her face creased in pain. A passing waitress immediately stopped upon seeing this and enquired, “Is everything all right, Miss?”

“No, of course it is *not* all right!” Miss Johnson snapped, her outburst garnering further attention from those sitting at nearby tables. “I feel positively *foul!*”

“Here, darling,” Mr Eddows spoke softly as he carefully pushed her half-eaten slice of Victoria Sponge towards her. “Have something to eat. It may help you feel better—”

“I *shan’t* have another bite!” she cried and, much to his dismay, shoved the plate back. Next, her wrath was turned upon the waitress, “*You* must have baked with rotten eggs.” Her hand shifted from the plate to grip the edge of the table.

“No, Miss, I can promise you we don’t—” Suddenly, Miss Johnson toppled backwards and both the waitress and Mr Eddows leapt to catch her. The former frantically looked about and cried, “Is there a doctor in the house?!”

“That’s my cue,” Dr. Weeks said, taking another swig of whiskey. All three stood but Weeks got to the couple first. Those sitting at the tables closest to them were already straining their necks and giving their direct neighbour a running commentary. Miss Johnson’s faint had also drawn horrified gasps from elsewhere in the tearoom, but even those customers couldn’t pull their eyes away. The moment he reached her, Dr. Weeks tapped Miss Johnson’s cheeks without so much as an introduction.

“Stop that,” Mr Eddows ordered firmly, as he rose and reached across Miss Johnson to shield her. “What do you think you’re doing? Who are you?”

“I’m the doctor,” Weeks stated. Half-turning, he dropped his cigarette into the table’s vase of flowers before continuing, “and I’m tryin’ to help yer friend, so get outta the way.” He unceremoniously grabbed Mr Eddows’ arm and, despite encountering a far greater degree of physical reluctance than he would’ve expected, yanked it away. He recommenced his tapping of Miss Johnson’s cheeks.

“Americans,” Mr Eddows muttered under his breath.

“Canadian, actually,” Weeks corrected and pressed the back of his hand against his patient’s forehead.

Mr Eddows’ voice was somewhat dry as he enquired, “Is there a difference?”

“Canadians are more refined,” the surgeon stated and met Mr Eddows’ gaze dead on.

“Not this Canadian,” Joseph remarked, quietly, into Georgina’s ear as they finally joined the group. The eighteen-year-old artist blushed deeply, causing her to bow her head, as she pulled the smelling salts from her satchel and offered the bottle to Weeks. Taking it, he pulled its cork out with his teeth, and wafted its contents under Miss Johnson’s nose whilst turning his head to spit the cork onto the table. Within seconds of inhaling the salts’ pungent aroma, Miss Johnson came out of her faint with a sharp gasp. Despite this seemingly happy event though, Mr Eddows eyed Georgina and Joseph with great suspicion.

“Who’re you?”

“Just friends of Dr. Weeks. We were taking tea with him when we heard your call for help,” Joseph explained, though purposefully failed to introduce them. He’d been told what these people were capable of, after all. Mr Eddows gave a slight nod by way of response but continued to eye them nonetheless.

“Let’s get yer outta ‘ere,” Weeks said, gently taking Miss Johnson by the arm and helping her to her feet.

The waitress, though concerned by the situation, looked to Mr Eddows and said, “I’ll just fetch your bill, sir.”

“You *honestly* expect us to pay for this poison?” he enquired sharply. The waitress’ mouth opened as if to reply but Mr Eddows stopped her by exclaiming, “Don’t be ridiculous, woman! The cake made her ill! Look at her!” He gestured to Miss Johnson who seemed to be shaking slightly despite her face not having lost any of its pinkness. “I utterly refuse,” he added.

“Let me fetch the manager, sir,” the waitress replied, pointing gingerly toward the counter.

“You already have my answer,” Mr Eddows retorted. “Come.” He looked to Dr. Weeks and Miss Johnson as he picked up his coat and hat. “We’re leaving.”

“But... but... sir, you can’t,” the waitress stuttered with her hands outstretched as Mr Eddows walked from the tearoom. He was followed by Dr. Weeks who supported Miss Johnson as she held onto his arm. The waitress moved, as if to chase after them, but halted as Georgina stepped into her path and gently took her by the hands.

The artist said softly, “Don’t worry. Your manager knows of this.” It was a cryptic statement to be certain, one clearly confusing the young waitress, yet Georgina had spoken nothing but the truth. After offering a smile of reassurance, she parted company from the waitress to take her place in the pursuit of the others. Mr Maxwell followed closely behind, but both took deep breaths as they crossed the tearoom’s threshold and descended the stairs.

Parked directly outside the shop was a two-wheeler, highly varnished, hansom cab. It had both the inside and outside plates and stencilled certificate on its back, to show it had passed its examination by the inspectors at Clerkenwell. Furthermore, whomever owned it, in this case the Bow Street Society, had paid the two shillings for the licence to drive it around London. Further expense the Society had had to lay out, not obvious by merely looking at the vehicle itself, was the fifteen shillings carriage duty to Somerset House and five shillings to the Metropolitan Police for a licence and badge to drive. In this case, the driver’s licence was currently at the Society’s office, for the purposes of insurance, whilst he took the cab around London. Though the cab was inspected annually, a cabman’s ability to drive was only assessed once. At the end of each year, the cabman took his current licence, complete with the length of time he’d served with his employer written on the back by the employer himself, to New Scotland Yard who would issue him with a clean licence for a further twelve months.

Pulling the cab was a single, brown horse, brown being the more fashionable colour and the one more preferred by cab customers. The wheels, meanwhile, were approximately four feet wide and consisted of a wooden ring with an iron sheet embedded on its outside, a centre attachment to the cab's axle and seventeen wooden spokes going from the centre to the outside. Between these wheels, and resting upon the axle, was the main body of the cab; a wooden bench within a two-sided box with a ceiling also doubled as a canopy over the heads of the passengers. The front edge of this canopy was carved into a curved arch whilst, attached to the edges of the left and right walls by hinges, were heavy, wooden doors with pointed middle sections to thus accommodate passengers' knees once they were seated inside. These, coupled with the wooden canopy overhead, provided some shelter from the elements and from any mud and spray the horse's hooves may kick up. Glassless windows in the sides of the cab enabled passengers to see where they passed, as well as providing the much-valued free flow of fresh air. Finally, candlelit lamps hanging from the top corners of the front of the cab enabled passengers to see when climbing into the cab at night.

"You wanna cab?" the driver's rough, East End voice enquired as he looked down upon Mr Eddows and Miss Johnson. He sat upon a narrow seat, attached to the outside of the cab's back wall, elevated enough so he could see over both the cab and horse. This seat also had iron railings on three sides to prevent him from toppling out when the cab was in motion. When the couple looked up, brown, beady eyes met their gazes, set deeply in the middle-aged driver's weathered, bushy, side-burned face. His broad shoulders slightly hunched over calloused hands, holding the ends of the horse's reins. These reins ran along the top of the cab, through the hollow tips of a V-shaped attachment mounted upon the canopy's front edge (to keep the reins in line) and down to the horse's harness. Aside from his face, the driver's hands were the only other parts of his body visible beneath a heavy, black cape. Even his scuffed, and slightly torn, black-leather boots were concealed, though they rested against the back of the cab.

Having pulled down the brim of his brown hat, to block the low, winter's sun, he now pushed it back up with a fat thumb as Weeks replied, "Yeah, we do."

"Hop in, then," the driver replied, pulling his hat down again and clearing his throat. "Plenty of room inside." Though a cab like this could only ever seat two persons comfortably, on this occasion, three would be a squeeze and four an absolute push. Five, therefore, was utterly out of the question. Thus, whilst Dr. Weeks perched his feet upon a considerably narrow step at the back of the cab—one hand gripping the side rail of the driver's seat, the other gripping the roof's edge—Miss Johnson climbed inside and sat down. Her young beau followed, Miss Dexter, and finally, Mr Maxwell, who had to hold his breath to place himself within the narrow space beside Miss Dexter.

In seating himself though, he accidentally touched her knee. "Oh!" he cried. "Please, forgive me." He felt his cheeks burn again and one look at Miss Dexter revealed hers did the same. Pressing his body against the side as much as possible, his hip wedged against Miss Dexter's. "Fortunately, the journey isn't a long one," he stated before clearing his throat. Pulling his door down, as Mr Eddows had, Mr Maxwell faced the problem of where to put his hands. Deciding the top edge of the door to be the most appropriate place, he clasped his hands together and rested them there. The sharp lurch forward, as the horse trotted, caused him to fall back slightly, however. One hand gripped the cab's window whilst the other unconsciously set down in an instinctual need to steady one's self. Upon feeling the material of Miss Dexter's dress beneath it, his eyes widened. Yet Miss Dexter's own hand came to rest upon it, and even gave it the gentlest of squeezes, as she smiled reassuringly at him. "Oh," Joseph glanced downwards, surprised. "Erm... thank you, Miss Dexter."

“How are you feeling, darling?” Mr Eddows enquired, his head tilted slightly as Miss Johnson pressed her fingers to her temple. She had as much seat space as Mr Maxwell, but her head was leant out the window slightly. At least she got the benefit of some fresh air.

“Foul, still,” she complained. “I shall be relieved when we reach the hospital.”

“We’re taking them to the hospital?” Joseph enquired, looking to Miss Dexter in confusion.

“Yes, Mr Maxwell,” she replied, trying to warn him with her eyes about saying anything further.

“Where else would you be taking us?” Mr Eddows enquired, leaning forward slightly and looking to Maxwell with those suspicious eyes again.

“Endell Street,” Joseph said, matter-of-factly, only realising his error a half second after the words had left his lips.

“Endell Street?” Mr Eddows enquired, angrily.

“Yes... you see... erm...” Joseph stammered.

“What the bloody hell’s going on?!” Eddows demanded. Striking the back wall of the cab, he shouted, “You said you were a doctor!”

Weeks, having heard it all, cursed sharply and replied, “I am! Maxwell, keep yer damned mouth shut!”

“But I—” Joseph began, deep regret in his face and eyes.

“Let us out!” Eddows demanded, reaching over the doors to unbolt them. The driver cracked the whip though and the horse galloped on ahead, the cab lurching violently this way and that as it weaved through the chaotic sea of London traffic; omnibuses, cabs, carriages, and vans all sped past in a blur of colours and smells. Faces of pedestrians rushed by the windows as they ran around the cab without warning. One stepped out in front of the horse, only to leap back again as they realised how dangerously close they were.

“Get off the bloody road!” their driver yelled above them. Both Miss Johnson and Miss Dexter had covered their mouths at the sight. Now, their hearts pounded with terror—Miss Dexter out of fear for the pedestrian, Miss Johnson out of fear for her own safety.

“Are you coppers or sumin’?!” Eddows shouted, his once refined accent now having degenerated into an East End one. “We’ve done nowt!” he added. Reaching over Miss Dexter, he grabbed the lapel of Joseph’s coat and yanked him toward him as far as the still closed doors would allow. “Either you let us out, or I’ll have to do sumin’ stupid,” Eddows warned, his other hand now holding a revolver as it emerged from under the door.

“Don’t be thick, Toby,” Miss Johnson shouted, her fear increasing upon seeing the gun. She gripped his arm with both hands and tried pulling it towards her.

“Oi, ge’ off me, bitch!” Eddows growled, looking over his shoulder at her. The whole cab leapt up into the air slightly as it struck something in the road and, as it came down with a bump, Eddows’ hand slammed upon the top edge of the door. He immediately lost his grip and the gun clattered down the door and, in a freak turn of events, struck the horse’s hoof and fired. The horse gave a blood-curdling shriek as the bullet lodged itself in its thigh. Its leg collapsed, causing the animal to topple sideways whilst still galloping with its other legs. The cab, with no way of stopping, crashed immediately into the body of the stricken animal; its left wheel was lifted clean off the ground—still spinning—as the horse stopped the right in its tracks. Everyone within lifted their arms to shield themselves as the cab flipped and rolled into oncoming traffic. More horses shrieked as the other drivers fought to swerve out of the way.

Some even yelled “Look out!” whilst pedestrians on the pavement ran frantically out of the way of the approaching cab, screaming. The cab struck the curb but, as it had already rolled some distance, only tilted a little before falling back onto the road.