Cambridge, England 1903

Professor Legrand’s tabby cat, a sweet-faced, friendly animal, especially beloved of the children in Eden Street, liked to sit between the railings on the knee-high wall and stand on her toes, rubbing a cheek against the black uprights, purring to be stroked.

That morning little George Goodman spotted Minmou from across the street and before his nursemaid could prevent it, he hurried over, paying no attention to the dairyman’s horse waiting outside number eleven. The two-year-old’s chubby hands were held aloft, ready to feel soft fur. ‘Pusstat!’ he called.

It was only Violet and the nursemaid who saw what happened next.

The horse, who wore blinkers, turned its head and must have caught a glimpse of a flapping shape rushing towards its hindquarters. It bucked violently, causing the dairy cart to rock, rattling crates of milk bottles, tossing one or two out to smash on the road. Its right rear hoof caught George, so that he was lifted, spinning, into the air. His hat flew off. His sailor collar flapped. Violet had the image in her mind for weeks afterwards; a plump body, arms wide, legs pedalling, seeming to hang aloft a moment, then beginning to fall towards the elegant row of cast iron arrowheads pointing upwards along the top of the railings.

There was a long silence as the child landed, jerking as his trajectory was interrupted by the sudden catch of a spike. Violet, throwing aside an armful of books, reached him first, and stepped between the boy and his shrieking nursemaid, instinctively wanting to spare her the sight. The sharpness of the upturned spikes, the undefended softness of George’s little body, the swift momentum of his fall - it seemed to Violet, as her mind struggled to take everything in, that the most terrible injuries were inevitable. And she was there first. What should she do?

The nursemaid staggered and fell wailing to her knees, leaving Violet to take the weight of the boy’s hanging body and lift it to release the pressure. George was at shoulder height and limp, his face a little blue. She called to the dairyman, now running towards her, to help. As she did so, George shuddered and came to life, uttering a short roar of outrage. His face reddened as Violet watched because his clothes were tight at the neck, where she now saw the sharp black point protruding close to his left ear.

‘Hold him up,’ Violet called, and climbed onto the wall to fumble at George’s neck. Finding three tiny buttons, she struggled them clear of their finely crocheted loops. It seemed to take far too long. The boy was now making a gurgling sound, flailing his arms and kicking his small buttoned boots. In the background the terrified cries of his nursemaid echoed around the street. Neighbours ran to their windows in alarm. At last the square blue collar came away from the jacket. The boy drew a long breath. His cheek was pressed against the sharp black arrowhead.

‘We must lift him up and away,’ Violet told the dairyman. ‘You take him under the arms. I shall push from underneath.’

She so feared the child's injuries that she quailed and felt like closing her eyes, but the dairyman did not notice and followed her instructions. Between them they raised the boy clear of the spikes and set him on the pavement. He lay there silent and rigid, his eyes tightly shut, his hands in fists, the golden curls that his sisters so admired a tangle on the muddy flagstones.

Violet pulled off her shawl and set the boy upon it. Turning him over, pulling his clothing aside, dreading the sight of ripped flesh, the spread of scarlet blood into the crisp pleated undershirt, she found only a long reddening line running down his spine. It had barely even broken the skin. The arrowhead had missed George entirely. Instead of being skewered – the injuries too catastrophic to imagine – he had been hung like a coat on a hook by his sailor collar. Later examination found that apart from this long graze his most serious injury was a curved bruise on one hip, presumed to be the first impact of the horse’s hoof.

Most of the railings in Eden Street had their arrowheads removed soon afterwards. Professor Legrand kept his; a single man and a mathematician, he declared the probability of a similar accident in Eden Street to be infinitessimally remote. Neighbours thought him a cold fish, even if he happened to be right.

Mrs Goodman, George’s mother, had seen her baby son hanging from the railings out of her drawing room window. Once recovered from the shock, she declared Violet a heroine and told her husband and all her friends about the girl’s admirable presence of mind. The sailor collar was framed and hung in the hall, its ragged hole forever reminding children to be more careful than Georgie as they crossed the street. The nursemaid left and went to work in Newmarket, in a street without railings.

Another consequence was that Violet, even while the little boy was being marvelled over and a small crowd had gathered to tut and re-tell the tale – he was already being tossed higher and further with each telling – Violet decided that she must know more. She never again wanted to feel the helplessness she had felt as she ran towards the little body hanging from the railings. What if the spike had not missed him?

When Georgie’s father, Dr Goodman, a short, intense Welshman, called that evening to express his gratitude, she confessed as much.

‘You must attend my First Aid classes!’ he boomed, his thick fist encircling the tiny sherry glass Aunt Louisa had offered. ‘Thursdays at the Emmanuel Hall.’

‘Are these ladies’ classes?’ Aunt Louisa wondered.

‘The skills of rescue and resuscitation are vital for everyone, Mrs Brocklehurst, I’m sure you’ll agree,’ Dr Goodman declared, swallowing his sherry in a single gulp.

It was difficult to disagree with the booming vigour of Dr Goodman.

‘I should like to come, if my aunt permits it,’ Violet told him.

Dr Goodman winked in conspiracy. ‘Then I shall persuade her,’ he said, as if her aunt were not there, standing next to him.

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The First Aid class was full of unfamiliar anxieties for Violet. What should she take? Would a notebook and pencil seem too presumptuous or would it be the barest minimum? What should she wear? Would there be strenuous activity? Her aunt watched her dither in the hall, fiddling with her hat, picking up and then putting down her notebook, and could stand it no more.

‘Are you ever going to leave, dear? It seems half an hour that you have stood there in the hall.’

‘I am suddenly unsure, Aunt. I have never attended a class. Not in anything. How am I to behave?’

Aunt Violet looked the girl up and down and decided now was not the moment to mention the lace trim that had ripped along one sleeve, or the dab of mud on her skirt. ‘At Ladies Debating Society lectures, it is quite normal to take a notebook and pencil and to wear exactly the plain outfit you have chosen. Your manners are excellent, dear, you will know what to do.’

‘The others are all policemen, Dr Goodman says.’

‘Yes. That is unfortunate, but they will at least be well-behaved, one imagines, even if they are not, strictly speaking, gentlemen.’ Louisa opened the front door and stood expectantly beside it. ‘You know the way. And Violet, if it becomes...uncomfortable in any way, thank them politely and come home. You need not subject yourself to First Aid classes if they include unpleasantness of any sort.’

It was the word ‘unpleasantness’ that set Violet’s feet in motion. She hurried down Eden Street towards the Church Hall, clutching her notebook. It was not that she wanted to hurry towards unpleasantness, or hungered for it, but she passed the now blunted railings where Georgie had once hung and was reminded what had led to this.

Twelve young police officers, in full uniform, were already sitting in a row of chairs when she peered round the arched wooden door. They reminded her of pins in a child’s bowling alley. Dr Goodman pointed Violet to a chair at the end of the row. ‘Come in, Miss Carew. Gentlemen, I hope you will join me in welcoming our newest recruit. Now, this evening’s subject is How to Stop Bleeding. Charlie here,’ he indicated a boy of about ten sitting to one side, ‘is our victim, and we are going to practise the main methods of preventing severe loss of blood after an injury. We will begin with injuries to the limbs and then move on to dealing with wounds to the torso and head.’

It was a chilly hall. The chairs were not comfortable and the tea they brewed half way through the lesson was not particularly good either, but Violet remembered that lesson for the rest of her life. She learnt to raise bleeding limbs above the heart and apply pressure to wounds on the torso and head. She came away with a booklet and a pile of bandages to practise with before the next class.

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Eden Street in Cambridge in October 1903 was generally a peaceful enough place at half past seven on a Wednesday morning. Maids were about their work, early deliveries of food and coal were beginning, but on the whole you were more likely to hear the song of blackbirds or the boots of passing workmen on the cobblestones than a loud scream.

This particular scream came from number 14. A passer-by might have analysed it as a short, shocked cry, more a bellow than a wail, expressing outrage rather than fear. If the same passer-by had waited a short time (not passed-by, in other words, but lingered) he or she would have heard a slammed door followed by raised voices and within the half-hour, the same loiterer would have seen a large and angry woman carrying a bulging Gladstone bag flounce down the front steps and march determinedly off towards the city centre.

‘Mrs Teague gone?’ Aunt Louisa asked, over breakfast, ‘why would that be?’

Violet looked down at her plate. ‘It was a dissection. I thought I’d covered it. She screamed when she saw it in my study and said she could not stay in the house if that sort of thing was going on.’ She buttered a piece of toast and reached for the honey. Her aunt stirred her tea carefully.

‘What kind of dissection would it have been?’

‘A frog.’

‘You know I won’t have anything that smells unpleasant, don’t you, Violet? It isn’t fair to the servants or the neighbours.’

‘I use formaldehyde, Aunt, it really doesn’t smell unpleasant. Not once you’re accustomed to it.’

Her aunt, who had experienced the effects of the chemical as it drifted down from Violet’s rooms in the attic, took a sip of her tea, raising an eyebrow.

‘I suppose it’s essential, dear, for your studies, this cutting up of things?’

‘Edward’s professor says it is the only way.’

‘But aren’t there books?’

‘Of course, but one must learn the practical skills as well. It’s very delicate work. The blood vessels and the nerves are tiny. It takes great precision.’

‘I’m sure it does, Violet, but if it frightens the staff away we shall be in great difficulty.’

‘I regret that, but who could have predicted that Mrs Teague would be so sensitive? She looks as if she could wrestle a bullock, frankly, and my frog is nothing horrifying. In its own way, it is in fact very beautiful.’ Violet glanced up, caught her aunt’s eye, and quickly added, ‘I apologise. Perhaps I could help you find a new maid?’

‘It is not easy to find good servants, Violet, especially in a city like Cambridge, where they can so readily find work at the colleges. We must take care not to offend any more of them. Be sure to cover up your dead animals and lock your study door in future.’

‘I will, Aunt, and I regret causing Mrs Teague to leave so dramatically.’

Aunt Louisa sipped her tea. She was a neat woman, mostly dressed in black, but with a white lace cap on her silvering hair. Her hands, holding the decorated bone china teacup, were delicate, but often paint-stained. There was a piercing quality to her light blue eyes, which even now, whilst expressing concern, if not actual irritation, shone with a steady enjoyment of life. She was inclined to encourage her niece’s scientific interests, because Violet's energies were so evidently renewed by them. Louisa's great domestic fear was that she might lose Monsieur Picard, her French chef. Monsieur’s cooking was supreme. No guest ever left a dinner at Louisa Brocklehurst’s hungry or unimpressed. Maids came and went, but nothing must ever offend Monsieur, for his dinners attracted the great and the good to Mrs Brocklehurst’s table, and an excellent dinner encouraged them to commission the portraits that supported the household.

‘Not everyone can appreciate the beauty of a frog split open, dear,’ Louisa remarked, ‘I imagine the young gentlemen carry out such procedures in a laboratory, or some such, instead of at home.’

‘They do,’ Violet said with a sigh.