



# THE SMALL MUSEUM

JODY COOKSLEY

## Exhibit 1

*Grey stone female figurine. Hellenic.  
Catalogued 1873.*

Our wedding was cold and silent, unmarked by flowers or hymns. Pity no choir drowned the noise of my sister. Isabel had no right to cry. She'd done nothing to save me and now her weeping echoed round the chapel and tore at my nerves. I gripped Father's arm, feeling the darned patch in his suit, and watched the congregation through watery eyes. In the left pews sat as many family shreds as Mother could gather at short notice, overdressed in country finery. On Dr Everley's side was a group of suited men, and a woman in a beautiful emerald dress with mourning bands. She couldn't help those, but surely everyone knew green brought brides bad luck? A wide-brimmed hat hid her face from view; a fox stole clawed across her shoulders.

Mother beamed so brightly I felt ashamed. She had no need to pretend we were happy, everyone in the church knew my duty – a respectable marriage to heal our past. Isabel was quick enough to explain. *What chance of escape, for either of us, if you refuse?* So why was she crying? Not for me. Mother ignored her, turning to wave at the aunts like a duchess at a coronation, and Isabel snivelled into her handkerchief, throwing sideways looks at my shoes. Pale blue kid with two rows of buttons and heels that clicked when I

walked. They were all that felt beautiful. *Shoes for a lady*, Mother had sighed as the cobblers boxed them up and Isabel sulked for a day. She was welcome to walk in them now.

My veil was the 'something old'. A gift from Grandmother, delivered in a package of waxed paper stretched thin as her lips.

*An heirloom meant for three sisters*, was all she said but I knew she blamed Mother for Rebecca's disgrace. She blamed her for this too, saying things about Dr Everley that made me anxious. Hinting at darkness. Father's friendship with Dr Everley was shrouded in stage smoke, yet now I must promise to honour him, and all Mother said was that I should be glad he wasn't ugly. He was tall, sword-slim, with just a streak of grey hair at his temple.

Through Grandmother's fine lace I saw high cheekbones, eyes dark as tombs and deep lines around his mouth as though everything displeased him. Would marriage make him happy? He had certainly seemed keen, arranging things so quickly we'd barely had time to talk. I swallowed hard. As Mother said, I was to be wed, and I should make the best of it.

Paintings flanked the altar, crowding the wall. Gilded frames around the lives of saints. Symeon in his cave, Sebastian shot with arrows. The artist seemed especially to relish the sufferance of holy women. Devoted Agatha on fire; Felicity torn to pieces by wild animals; and Perpetua herself, so great a woman she could not be slain unless she herself willed it. When the service ended, Dr Everley took my hand and I recoiled at his icy touch. He didn't lift the veil to kiss me. All along the aisle, one arm in the crook of his, the other aching from the weight of my bouquet, I imagined Perpetua and willed myself not to be slain.

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At least there would be music at the reception. We came directly from the church, in two coaches which, to Mother's delight, both bore the Everley crest.

'Will there be dancing?' Isabel indicated the string quartet setting up in the corner.

I shook my head, embarrassed. Who could imagine Dr Everley dancing? He was a man of letters, too clever for amusements. Father said his research was gaining attention, perhaps notoriety, and I always pictured him in a library. 'Dr Everley's a serious man.'

'But he's a gentleman. You'll do alright here.' Isabel surveyed the room, devouring details for Mother when they returned home and left me. 'Those colours!'

'This isn't his house.' I would not give her the satisfaction of admitting it was beautiful. Watered silk dressed the walls in shimmering tangerine and the furniture was covered to match, low ottomans and broad-backed chairs in intimate groups. Small dark-wood tables waited to hold drinks and cigars. 'He may live in a perfect hovel for all we know. I'm sure Mother forgot to request the details in her haste to see me off.' I should have been trying to lift Isabel's spirits, but I had no patience for such foolish talk. What did orange walls matter? My life was ripped apart.

'Father's been to his house.'

'His clinic.' I couldn't imagine them as equals. Father had barely a fee-paying patient left. 'You know Brewsters aren't welcome in respectable places.' I turned away too late to avoid the hurt in her face.

'Don't you want to be happy? You'll want for nothing now.'

'I wanted nothing before.' Why should everyone's fate rest in *my* hands? Isabel and the boys could look forward to the summer at Lynton and I would have enjoyed it more than any of them. It was never me who resented the creeping shame after Rebecca left,

the lack of invitations, all the parties and picnics we missed. Lynton would have been enough for me. Walking the dogs in the coppice, taking my sketchbook, or setting my easel in the orchards. The scent of long grass and ripe apples. No-one to watch or admonish. No responsibilities. Before Dr Everley came, I was free as the swifts that returned in spring. As free as my brothers to sketch and draw all day. Afterwards I was made to wear dresses that caught on branches, hair dressed and fussed until my scalp ached. Mother closed my sketchbooks and balanced them on my head, training me to stand tall and walk without them falling. She dismissed my careful notes and drawings as ‘showing off’, and I bit my lip until it bled.

Isabel sighed. ‘You’ll have a house. A London address! And people to call. Your husband will be respected. You can stop worrying that you’ll die before you live.’

‘I’ve never worried about that.’ I frowned. Mother threw a sharp look from the buffet table and my heart sank as she bore down on us, a full plate in one hand, the other pulling at her too-tight gown.

‘For heaven’s sake, Madeleine, stop looking so miserable. You’re as far from a blushing bride as it’s possible to be! You don’t want Dr Everley changing his mind.’

‘It would be a little late if he did.’

‘You think he will like sarcasm? You’re lucky to be taken at all.’

I tried to smile before she moved off to seize Aunt Honour. No use parting on bad terms; I would miss them soon enough. I turned to Isabel. ‘You’ll come to stay, won’t you? As soon as you can.’ I could not imagine life without them.

‘You’ll need to ask permission for that now.’ Isabel looked across at Dr Everley, deep in conversation with an elaborately whiskered man. She sighed again. ‘Perhaps your new husband will want you all to himself.’

‘Lucius is not such a selfish man.’ The woman in the wide-veiled hat extended her hand and I pressed it, hit by an overpowering scent of roses and something sickly that I couldn’t place. My cheeks burnt to think what she’d overheard. Such striking looks, with amber eyes and deep-red hair set off by the green of her gown. The fox on her shoulders bared sharp white teeth.

‘Delighted to meet you, dear sister. Lucius has told me so little about you that I feared I would guess all wrong. But you’re perfect. So young. So pretty.’ Said with the confidence of one who knows her own appearance is unrivalled. ‘I’ll visit as soon as you’re settled. Do you like children? I *could* bring them, ghastly as they are. But we might better get to know each other if I leave them with Nurse.’ She paused, throwing her hair back over one shoulder. ‘But I mustn’t put you off. Lucius *adores* children.’

Dr Everley – I must try to call him Lucius – had told me very little. We had only walked together once, talking mostly of his work. I learnt about his expertise in bone-setting and the method by which his father cured a royal child of club foot. Yet I knew nothing of his family.

Isabel dropped an awkward curtsy and the woman turned, clasping her hands together in a dramatic gesture.

‘You must be dear Madeleine’s true sister; you look so very alike. I am Lucius’s sister, Grace. I hope you don’t mind me stealing her? I only had Lucius, and I have always longed for a sister of my own.’

‘We have brothers too. We know very well how they can be,’ I said, trying to cover my surprise. A new sister, just as beautiful as Rebecca.

‘Are they also doctors?’ She looked around as though trying to identify them, her lip curling slightly at the sight of Mother

clinking glasses. ‘I hope not, for your sake. So dreary always being called to watch Lucius’s scientific experiments. Frogs and fireworks.’ She raised her hand as if to brush their childhood away, but her eyes shone. They must be very close.

‘They’re still in school. Younger than us, but even younger brothers can be demanding. James would like to travel; he’s keen on India. I think he’ll make a fine businessman one day.’ I pointed at my brother who was trying to balance one more cake on an overloaded plate. I felt a surge of love and sympathy. Perhaps it would now be in my power to help him make his way in the world.

‘He’s remarkably young, but then you,’ she looked me up and down, ‘are remarkably young also. Don’t expect too much of my brother and perhaps you’ll be happy together.’ She continued to hold me in her steady gaze.

I nodded, unsure what she meant. What was too much to expect? I felt silly; a child dressed up as a bride. We waited warily until Isabel blurted out, ‘Your gown is so beautiful.’

Grace turned her attention. ‘I did worry that its colour might offend you. I know that country folk can sometimes be . . . *superstitious* in believing that green will bring bad luck to a wedding, but it’s new and I *so* wanted to wear it and I can see that you two, at least, are not the type.’

Isabel opened her mouth, and I threw her a warning glance.

‘Perhaps a cup of tea?’ Grace perched on the edge of a small love seat and smoothed her dress, watching Isabel rush to obey. She was clearly used to people doing as she asked.

‘Sweet thing,’ she said. ‘And you have another sister, I believe? But she . . . can’t be here?’

I nodded, turning my head so my face would not betray me, though I could feel the way she watched.

‘Perhaps that is why the rest of your family came? I understood Lucius asked for a quiet ceremony.’

‘Mother is fond of a gathering.’

‘So I see. And how do you like our little part of London?’ She leant in, expectant. The fox’s eyes glinted orange.

What I’d seen from the carriage couldn’t have been more different to the market towns and villages of Cheshire. So many tall buildings, so many strangers. ‘The streets are very wide,’ I said, instantly wishing I’d thought of something clever.

‘You’ve never visited before?’

She must think me naïve. Isabel’s return interrupted the need for an answer. If my hand shook slightly as I accepted the teacup, if her fingers gripped the saucer a little too fiercely, then both of us worked hard not to show it.

By the time our party left, the sky was darkening to black. Rain drizzled down. Gas lamps blurred in the mist, so the street seemed viewed through tears. Yet London was alive as day, thick with walking couples and costers in bright coats, gentlemen calling from their carriage to be let down at the very door we were leaving through to go home. Lucius grabbed my arm and steered me away, almost pushing me inside the carriage.

‘I’m sorry they took so long.’ I leant against the window, tired from attention and long farewells, and rubbed my sleeve where his fingers had pressed too firmly.

‘You’d think they’d want to get home. It’s a long enough drive.’

‘James said if Thursday’s weather was good there’d be a picnic by the pack bridge.’

‘Indeed,’ Lucius replied.

His disinterest in my family was plain. Why would he care? But the thought of them all together dried my throat and I found



nothing else to say. Mother had probably organised the picnic to campaign her social return. James planned to try painting the bridge, he promised to send me the picture, though he was a boy and would forget. They would all carry on just as well without me. I could write and remind him, ask him to post my paints. I wish I'd thought to pack them, though I wasn't sure there'd be enough grey to paint London. Perhaps it would seem less miserable in daylight.

We travelled in silence until the carriage rolled to a halt at the centre of a long, curved street. Houses all pushed together with no room to breathe. Arlington Crescent had grey-brick buildings, patterned with sandstone, and lidded with slate tiles that gathered like frowns over the eaves. Lucius took my arm to help me down and led me to a flight of worn stone steps, railed with iron. Number five had huge windows and white shutters, a shiny black front door. *Elegant*, Mother would declare. It looked unfriendly and I longed for the thatched roof and sprawling lawns of Lynton. Two more rows of windows glared under the low hanging roof. How many servants could a single man need? How many would I have to manage? There was only Ellen at home.

'Good evening, sir.' The sudden deep voice was startling. 'Good evening, madam.' Standing in the darkness was an old man, his back slightly crooked, the tails of his black coat hanging to his knees. A strange smell emanated through the open doorway. Sweet and rotten, like forgotten flowers long dead in their urn.

'Evening, Barker. Take the bags, would you? And have Mrs Barker show my wife to her rooms, make sure she's comfortable.' He turned to me with his sister's air of assurance. 'It's been a long day and I'm sure you'll wish to retire. I rise early for work, but the Barkers will see that you have what you need.' Holding out his

hand, he reached towards me and then seemed to think better of it. 'I'll take my brandy in the study.'

I wanted to keep him there, to apologise for the guests, the noise of the wedding. He was a quiet man, and I would have liked him to realise that I understood him. But he didn't wait, and Mrs Barker was already sailing down the passage, her black dress scratching against the walls.

Half the night I waited for steps in the corridor. They all told me – Mother, my cousins, even Grandmother – that he would come whatever happened, that men would always come. They described things I only half believed. Cradled in the stiff four-poster bed I waited, at first with the curtains tightly drawn and then, when I couldn't stand wondering if he'd come in unseen, with them hanging half open again. I sat upright as a statue, a stone figure, stiff with waiting, until I drifted in and out of fitful sleep, dreaming of some unknown thing that followed close behind me, only to disappear as I turned.