

THE SURGEON'S HOUSE

By Jody Cooksley

The Small Museum
The Surgeon's House



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For Matt



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St Michael's Mortuary, Putney Burial Ground, 1883

It wasn't my first corpse. Something George appeared to forget. He disappeared with the magistrate to identify the body, asking me to wait outside as though I were delicate. Shielding me after everything we'd suffered. It was not his place to choose. Rose may have been our cook, but she was my friend and the closest I'd had to a mother figure in many years, perhaps ever. If I didn't see her, I'd never believe it was true. Poor Rose spent her life helping others, dishing out love and wisdom with her generous plates. Who could possibly wish her harm?

Banished to the corridor, I heard the urgent voices of men discussing things they believed a woman shouldn't hear. Why must I stay outside? I shifted uncomfortably on the waiting room bench; damp stone smudged with lichen and rust-stained in odd patches, as though bodies were examined there, too. Cold seeped through my cotton skirts and I stood, paced impatiently, my heels striking against the flagstones. Before they showed me her belongings, I'd prayed for a case of mistaken identity; another woman murdered on her way home. Such violence was common, after all. But they'd found her silver locket, the only item of jewellery she ever wore, chased on both sides with a pretty pattern of ivy leaves hanging from curled tendrils and engraved with her own initials – *RCP*

for Rose Caroline Parmiter. Distinctive. Unmistakably hers. And she would never have relinquished it without a fight. If the thief was disturbed, forced to flee the scene, then someone must have seen something. These were thoughts *I* should be sharing with the magistrate. George didn't know her half so well, and he was always so deferential to authority that he would never think to ask.

Small, high windows lined the corridor, barred with stripes of lead to stop the ghouls that risked their souls for the chance of a ring or a gold tooth – whatever the morticians hadn't already removed. Through dirty panes, half covered with branches of yew, I saw the light fading, evening drawing in. What could be taking them so long? Pacing closer to the door, I knelt awkwardly to peer through the hole. A heavy key blocked my view. They'd locked themselves in. What did they imagine would frighten me? I pressed my ear to the rough wood.

'My first time back,' said George. 'Doesn't get any prettier.'

As a boatman, George used to clear the river of all its strange flotsam, delivering to the mortuary regularly. I'd almost forgotten. No wonder he took charge so swiftly.

'There are similarities. The rock to the back of the head.' The voice waited for a moment. 'Could be a surgeon's orders again? Something fresh for demonstrations? You know they don't always wait for the formalities.'

A pause before George replied. 'Those bodies came from the water. We just . . . We didn't really examine them.'

A chill ran through me like a spectral sword. The doctor was always straight there to collect the cadavers for lecture demonstrations when his hired thugs had been busy along the river. Were they talking about him? I thought his ghost had left our lives a long time ago.

'It's a common weapon,' George added, his voice firm. He

didn't want to recall that man any more than I did.

The magistrate sighed loudly. 'And you can't think of anyone who would have wanted her out of the way?'

'Rose? Heavens no. Everyone loved Rose. I never heard her say an unkind word to anyone.'

'Outside of your household then? Did she have family on bad terms?' The magistrate coughed. 'A gentleman caller, perhaps?'

'No-one we knew of. Though she had plenty of friends in the Half Moon.'

'We'll question everyone who was there last night.'

'Whoever killed her must have watched her leave.'

'Unless he already knew her habits,' added the magistrate. 'He could have waited outside.'

Rose only drank once a week, on her night off. Always said she went to the tavern to 'forget the wickedness in the world', and who could blame her? It was a wonder she didn't drink daily.

'Her pocket's been slit. There was no money on her.'

'She'd probably spent it.'

Why would a thief target a woman like Rose? A plain domestic servant, long past her prime. Even if he hadn't intended to kill her, who would waste time for the chance of a shilling when there were better marks to be had? I conjured a mental image of her, dressed in the blue gown and red-patterned shawl she always wore on her night off. Bonnet ribbons loose – she never bothered to tie them properly – and large green umbrella over one arm. Key chain hanging from the loop she'd made in her skirt. That huge set of irons fit every room in Evergreen House and they never left her pocket. Had the police found them, too? I certainly hoped so. It wouldn't do for those to get into the wrong hands.

'May I show you something?' asked the magistrate. A rasping noise, like rough cotton being pulled back. 'The rock may have

brought her down, but it seems that her assailant wanted to make sure she didn't survive.'

'Saints preserve us!' George spoke in a low whispered voice. 'Whoever you're looking for is going to have some marks on him.'

Good for her. Rose was a large woman and fit for her age. Even after a few gins she would have put up a fight.

'The police think it likely to have been a smaller man, someone with weak upper body strength using the element of surprise with the blow from behind before he cut her throat.'

Oh, poor Rose! To survive all we'd been through, only to meet such a terrible end.

A scraping sound, like furniture moving, before the key rattled in the lock. I jumped back, began to pace again and whirled round to face them as soon as they opened the door. George looked shocked, as though he'd forgotten I was there.

'Rebecca, you needn't have waited.'

As if I would leave without knowing the truth. 'Is it her? Our Rose?'

'It is.' George put an arm around my shoulder. Exhausted from the day, I burst into tears, leaning against him as my knees gave way. It felt good to be held, to breathe his comforting scent of rosemary and earth. Perhaps, if we tried, something good may come of this nightmare. We had loved one another deeply once, and we would need each other now.

By the time we left the mortuary, it was early evening and purple clouds gathered, spreading like a bruise across the sky. We walked home in silence, unable to speak, watching costers starting their rounds. People bought twists of paper filled with nuts and sugared apple and then went about their business – finished work, arrived at clubs, joined families. They would return home and eat together,

enjoying the company of their loved ones while we walked around the hole in our happiness. Evergreen would not be the same without Rose and I dreaded the sight of the kitchens.

We took the back stairs, treading lightly as thieves, unwilling to risk questions. How would we find the words to tell the rest of the household? They'd be hungry soon, looking for Rose and finding a cold stove, an empty chair. Along with the ten unmarried mothers that lived with us were almost as many of their children. Rose was special to every one of them. It would be difficult enough to share the news without them asking questions first.

In the upstairs drawing room, George slumped in his chair fully dressed, boots on, his face drawn. I pulled the curtains across the window and removed my cloak before taking a low seat beside him.

'Was Rose . . . was it bad?' I took his hand in mine and, as he pressed it to his face, I felt the tracks of tears he would deny shedding. 'George,' I said softly. 'I heard them asking questions . . . about the old doctor.'

He raised his head to look at me, eyes dark with fear. 'Dr Everley is dead,' he said. 'They both are.'

My sister, Maddie, had been married to Lucius Everley – a match my parents forced in a bid to repair our name when I brought shame on our family. A doctor every bit as bad as his father, hanged for unimaginable crimes committed in the Everleys' clinics, and in their private home for fallen women. Poor Maddie was so cruelly treated by her husband and his evil sister, Grace, that she wanted nothing to do with their legacy, handing over the running of Evergreen to George and I when she escaped. We'd done our utmost to make it a peaceful place for women and girls failed by society and abused in the very house that was supposed to help them. But now Rose was dead, brutally murdered, and I

felt a creeping suspicion that the family was somehow involved.

‘It feels as though they’re back,’ I said.

‘How can they be? I watched him hang myself, and she’ll never be released. Nor should she after . . .’ George cradled his head in his hands. ‘It feels like yesterday.’

‘You must try not to think of it.’ He should never have spoken the name aloud. What curses might such carelessness invoke?

‘It’s not something you forget.’

George was always so strong for me, for Maddie. But it was he who’d dug the garden to get proof for the court, he who’d found the bones of those poor children. He did it for us, to make sure Lucius and Grace didn’t get away with it. And he’d stayed silent all this time. We should speak of it; *he* should speak of it. Memories lodged like splinters in his mind, and they would hurt him slowly. He needed to grieve, for the souls of those babies and the thoughts of the ones we would never have. It would free his mind of dark thoughts. Threlfall himself was fond of the talking therapy and he was always explaining it to anyone who’d listen.

‘Perhaps you could talk to Dr Threlfall?’ The man was vain and shallow, and his botched testimony in court had almost resulted in Maddie’s wrongful conviction. I didn’t like him any more than George did. But he was permitted by law to work from the clinic in our basement and, since his presence seemed to please the Charity Board, there was little we could do about it. He might as well be put to use in helping us.

‘I’d rather go completely mad than spend a minute in the company of that arrogant dandy.’

I knew better than to argue. I’d have to find a way of putting them together that seemed accidental.

‘Stay here and rest. It must have been hard for you today. I’ll tell the girls myself.’ I could do that much for George. And for

Rose. She was never anything but strong. No doubt she was badly treated by the Everleys too, but she'd remained the whole time they were proprietors of their house for delinquents, and she stayed when George and I took over, helping us return it to a sanctuary. 'We can talk about how we manage in the morning.'

George, pale as bone, didn't protest when I laid a blanket across his lap. 'Spare them the details,' he said, catching hold of my hand.

Could I? Such news travelled fast on the street and even now I might be too late. Better they hear it first-hand than through gossip from strangers. I closed the door gently behind me. Though my heart ached to help him, George would have to wait.