

Prologue

THE glass lid closed quietly on the wooden base and the key turned with a soft click and scrape.

The curator clipped the ring of keys onto his chatelaine. ‘And that’s the last.’

‘Thank the Lord.’

‘Indeed.’

The men spoke with satisfaction. Their work was done, the task completed, all made safe. It was evening, and tomorrow would be bright and fresh. A good feeling.

‘Nightcap before you go?’

The younger of the curator’s companions murmured his apologies – his wife, the carriage ride, the time – while the older clapped his hands together and accepted cheerfully.

But the woman lingered, staring down into the display cabinet, unable quite to separate herself from this last link with all she had lost. ‘Whose fingers will next touch them? Who will reverse what we have done?’

The three men paused. ‘No-one at all, for at least a century, my dear Emily. Perhaps longer.’

‘But some day somebody will. What will it be like? What will he see?’

Where did my darling go? What will my little Gabriel be?

Her back still turned, the woman placed her palms against her thickening waist, reaching out with her senses to the baby she was convinced would be a boy.

‘Our descendants, you mean?’

Our descendants, and hers. Will she produce a son, like my Gabriel, or a daughter? How could he leave me – leave us – for her?

‘Of course! If only we could have... Don’t you wish you could be there with them? Go through when they go through? Don’t you wonder what it will be like?’

I want to see it and feel it and taste it. I want to part the vines and smell the breeze and understand what made Uriel.

The curator laid his hand on her arm. 'Emily, not one of us will be here in a hundred years' time. All we can do is pass on the instructions. Come along now and we'll find you a cab. Or you can travel with Foster here.'

Emily Seward walked with the three men, buttoned into their great-mantles, steady and reliable and so unlike her quicksilver lover. She glanced back at the cabinet.

Then the door opened; the curator turned down the gaslight and the cabinet was lost in darkness.

Boots scraped on stone steps and collars were turned up against the night air. Partings were said at the gate and footsteps receded.

Around the door, ivy crept, delicately probing for crevices, leaves unfolding, tendrils spreading, clothing the redbrick in softly whispering green.

Chapter One

THE pencil lightly held between index finger and thumb, resting on the curled middle finger; the hand relaxed, the wrist stable, only the arm in motion as the pencil point slides over the paper and the graphite trail is laid...

A single curving line, slow and sure, winding across the white field of the page and looping back upon itself twice, ending in a delicate curl... And where before there was only paper and graphite there is now the tendril of a vine, two-dimensional but unmistakable, a true representation of a living plant saved on the page for anyone to see. What magic there is in drawing. How immensely satisfying to identify the correct place for each element and then to put it there.

Rebecca lifted her hand from the sketchbook and looked at the vine she had drawn. Not perfect, but not bad. Perhaps each element had not been put in exactly the correct place, but the places were pretty good. With her artist's eye she judged the proportions of what she had made, measuring angles and spaces and relationships, and then checked against the casket in the cabinet in front of her and the vine that had been carved in the ivory over one thousand years before.

Close. She had emphasised the tendrils over the leaves because they attracted her the most – the spirals and the curls. They almost appeared to move, to tremble in some unseen breeze.

Actually, there was a light breeze in the gallery now – or rather a draught, of course. It was fresher than the museum draughts usually were, though, with a scent of something herbal. Someone must be wearing perfume.

She glanced along the gallery but it was quiet, as the Victoria and Albert Museum often was midweek – just a couple working their slow way along the cabinets, and somebody sketching at the display in the centre. He must have come after she had got started; it was surprising that she hadn't noticed him arrive, even if she had been immersed in drawing.

He was seated with his back to Rebecca, and all she could see

of him was his hair hanging forward and that he was wearing a denim shirt and jeans. Then he moved his hand to hook the hair behind his ear and the curtain was lifted revealing the extreme edge of his brow and cheek and jaw, with its impression of age (twenties) and structure (sharp-boned) and colour (lightly tanned).

Rebecca sat forward a little. Now she could see his eyelashes and from them could gauge how his attention was split between the object he was drawing and the drawing he made. She observed him observing, looking steadily at the artefact in the cabinet for eight seconds? ten? and then down at the paper while he drew what he had memorised. The proper way, Rebecca noted approvingly, the artist's way, not flicking back and forth anxiously but looking, learning, and then reproducing with confidence.

Certainly confidence because he was drawing in ink. That was intimidating. Rebecca's finished work was often in ink, but produced with time and patience in her studio; her museum drawing was in pencil. With ink there was no possibility of removing an error of proportion or perspective, every decision there on the page for good. And he appeared to be using a sketchbook in a square format. That was intimidating too. Square sketchbooks are hard to find, and – Rebecca thought, glancing down at her commonplace rectangular book – suddenly strangely desirable.

The couple had reached the end of the gallery. There was almost complete quiet – just the occasional squeak of their shoes on the polished floor and the soft rasp as the artist's – the other artist's – hand moved across the paper. He lifted his head again to study his subject and some of the hair escaped from his ear and closed his face once more from view.

Rebecca thought, He is so intent on drawing that he has no notion of my being here, just as a minute ago I wasn't aware of him. And he certainly has no idea that I'm watching him.

For a long moment, as if of stretched time, she enjoyed the sensation of being hidden from him, observing him unimpeded by good manners. Then, as she saw him move his attention once more from subject to sketch, she remembered that she should be doing the same and turned her gaze back to the ivory casket.

She had only been able to see his back, anyway.

The casket sat on its plinth, eleven hundred years old. Eleven centuries of opening and closing and being picked up and set down and now resting in this sealed glass tomb. Vines crept about its ivory lid and sides, with grapes bunched and tendrils extending, reaching out to find and grip, a network of stems and roots growing denser and deeper, drawing in and thrusting away, both together, ancient and modern, antique as the millennium-old ivory and modern as the Virginia creeper in the garden at Manorfield Road, twisting and rustling and deeply, disturbingly green...

It was not the first time Rebecca had been interrupted in her drawing by the museum closing. Once you get into drawing, really properly into it, you lose track of time. The five minutes announcement pierced her concentration and she leaned back, stretching her shoulders, and then felt about for her pencil case. On the floor, under her stool. She slipped her pencil in, and her eye fell on the sketchbook open on her lap.

‘Whoa!’

The exclamation broke from her quite involuntarily, and in the quiet gallery sounded shockingly loud. The artist glanced up.

‘You okay?’

Confused and embarrassed, Rebecca stared at him.

‘No. Yes. Sorry. I’m fine.’

He looked doubtful. ‘Sure?’

‘Yes, yes, sure. Sorry.’

What an idiot. She felt herself flush and hoped it didn’t show. She saw him drop his eyes to her page before turning away.

Rebecca looked again at her drawing.

The casket had disappeared. Or rather almost disappeared, for the outline of its chunky shape was just discernable at the top of the page through the tangle of foliage that had sprawled, coiling and trailing, outwards over the double spread, ignoring and over-running the spiral binding. Shockingly, the vine had gone mad, rejecting the subordinate role of decoration and seizing the limelight. As a representation of a ninth century casket it left a lot

to be desired; as a study of rampant botanical growth it was rather wonderful.

But Rebecca had no memory of having drawn it.

AT home, after the obligatory five minutes with Aunty Edie, Rebecca opened the sketchbook and looked at her work again, trying to be objective. So what if she had been daydreaming? She had drawn this whether or not she remembered each line. How good was it, that was the question.

The balance wasn't always right – here and there the flow of the stems was interrupted and the page was a little top heavy – but the drawing was strong and dynamic, and she couldn't help but feel pleased. Too much concentration, or too little? Either way, imagination had got into the mix somehow. The vine held treasures.

There were grapes and flowers and leaf buds, and there were also small birds and insects, and spiders' webs stretched from stem to stem. There was a bird's nest lined with moss and with eggs inside. And then, bizarrely, there was an area where the stems sprouted thorns and became a dog rose, with open flowers and fat rosehips, and then, further on, scalloped oak leaves and acorns. There were five cockle shells held in the stems on the right hand page, and a fair stab at a mouse's skull, like the one which, strangely, lay on Aunty Edie's mantelpiece, and what looked like the pinion feather of a largish bird – a magpie or a pigeon or a seagull.

As the drawing developed across the page a handful of seemingly random objects began to appear – objects that had no business in any vine: a compass with spidery legend; the ornate hands – but no face – of a clock; a lit candle, its flame blown sideways by an invisible breeze; a scroll of paper with ragged, deckled edges; a spool of thread; and at the foot of the right hand page, surely almost the last thing she had drawn before being jerked from her trance, a key, with simple wards but a complex, decorated handle held tight in the coils of the vine.

Weird. Imagination in over-drive. Unsettling didn't come near.

Don't think about it. Aberrations happen. Forget it.

When she told herself not to think about something, Rebecca usually succeeded. Somewhere in her past, perhaps after her mother's accident, she had learned the power of distraction and now, determined to ignore the peculiar uncontrolled drawing, Rebecca closed the book and went to see what could be turned into supper.

Her flat – flatlet, really, or a flatling perhaps – had what was surely the tiniest kitchenette in London. Anything smaller would be just a cupboard.

There was a half-sized sink with a half-sized draining board, and a single cupboard with a counter over, on which could stand a sandwich maker, a toaster, or an electric casserole. They had to take turns, whichever was in use. There was a 'fridge, and the rest of the food – bread, rice, pasta – lived in a crate on top. There was absolutely no extra space at all, and Rebecca frequently opened a can or chopped vegetables at her desk.

Still, it was home and it was wonderful, because it was in the capital and everything, or everything she needed, was close by. Since cutting her ties with home and running away to art college, Rebecca had been living rent-free in this bedsit at the top of Aunty – Great-aunt really – Edie's Edwardian house, and she knew she was immensely fortunate.

Especially since dropping out.

Rebecca settled for a toasted sandwich, and plugged in the sandwich maker to start warming up while she sliced bread and cheese and tomatoes. Thank goodness summer was on its way and salad would be refreshing again instead of just cold.

Dropping out had been inevitable, she told herself with the unassailable conviction of the pig-headed. All the high-concept stuff, all the installation art, wasn't what she had wanted at all. She knew she had talent. She had been selling work for two years by the time she left school – designs for greetings cards, playbills for amateur dramatic societies; even a series of stitched silk wall hangings after being seduced by the sheen and jewel colours of silk fabrics, which she had exhibited in a gallery in nearby Southwold.

The college hadn't offered technical lessons in draughts-

manship, focusing instead on experimentation, and after two terms Rebecca was having no more. She had surrendered her student loan and put together a portfolio of illustrations suitable for children's books to tout round the publishers, and in the meantime had been admitted to a small craft co-operative in Wandsworth where she could exhibit her stitched hangings.

It was precarious and Rebecca knew she could not have survived without Aunty Edie, so the brief chats she endured every time she left the house or returned were, she supposed, a reasonable payment. Tiresome, but fair.

Washing up later, gazing out of the window over the rows of terraced houses, Rebecca wondered yet again what would happen if she didn't find work, proper work. She couldn't sponge off Aunty Edie forever and returning home to the farm was not enticing.

Something has to come. Soon.