

# The Caster's Secret

A story of humility, authenticity, equality and true love  
by way of upsetting the status quo.



There was once a famous plaster caster who made flawless reproductions of sculptures out of plaster. All the finest houses in that part of the country would always contract him as his reputation for quality and timeliness was unquestioned. He always had work and made a fine living by it.

The Caster was a widower, having lost his wife to sickness, and was solely responsible for his only child, a daughter. Her name was Gabriella. For a time he enlisted the help of a Nanny to care for Gabriella while he worked the long hours in his workshop. But as she got older she wanted nothing more than to stay in the workshop and watch her father work. As she was quiet and attentive, her father allowed it – and in time, he grew accustomed to having her there. He was generally a quiet man, but having his daughter present became a comfort to him and he took to chatting with her about the news of the city and their neighborhood, about what they would prepare for dinner, and indeed, about the craft of plaster casting. And though his daughter enjoyed listening to her father talk about anything, it was the craft of plaster casting that held her special attention. She watched her father work, studying every step and every move he made. She saw how he smeared the fat over the sculpture to create a parting. Then he mixed the plaster, adding a little at a time to a trough of water until it looked like a dry lake bed. Then he would wait. He would wait for the slacking until the plaster is entirely wet. He'd mix it until creamy and then throw it onto the sculpture. Again and again, he would throw the plaster until it was thick. Then it dried and he would part the plaster mold. She knew that this mold was called the Mother, as it could then be used to make several reproductions of the sculpture over and over again. But he didn't call it that. He knew it made her sad to be reminded of his wife and her mother – so he called the mold the Lover instead. He said it should be the Lover because the mold was the perfect compliment to the sculpture – it was the exact shape of the sculpture but inside out.

“Like two in love,” he told her “ they complete each other.” Then he was silent and she knew he was thinking of her mother again.

# The Caster's Secret

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Gabriella studied her father like an apprentice, like the one who would one day become his assistant and perhaps even take over the workshop when he grew old. But she knew this could not be. You see in those days in that part of the world, girls and women could not become plaster casters or any kind of tradesmen at all. In those days girls and women were to care for the home and children – and trades were for boys and men only. She knew this and understood. But this did not stop her from watching. Nor did this did not stop her from dreaming. Perhaps, somehow, she thought, one day I would be able to help my father. Perhaps I would be able to do this work too. But she never spoke of it. She knew that she should not.

But then came a day when everything changed. Her father had received an excellent commission from a nobleman to make a reproduction of a very old marble frieze that he had purchased. He wanted to put the reproduction in his gallery. Her father had finished the mold and now only needed to pour the reproduction to complete it. But he got sick. He got very sick and remained in bed with a high fever. The deadline was the following day and the job was not finished so Gabriella decided to help. She poured the reproduction. She mixed the plaster to the perfect consistency and poured it into the mold. She kept the temperature consistent and watched closely as it set, and when it was time, she gently pulled the mold free and the cast was complete. The next day a carriage arrived and the reproduction was taken away.

When her father was better and asked her what happened, she confessed everything. At first, he was angry, and then... he was impressed. He did not realize how closely his daughter had been watching. He quizzed her just to see.

“That bust of the mayor – how many pieces should we make for its cast?” Gabriella looked it over and then answered,

“Usually it would take four pieces because of the position of the head, but I could do it in three – breaking the front across the mustache and under the ears.”

Her father’s eyes widened. “Well well – you have been watching. And it seems you have your own ideas as well. Perhaps we should put all that study to use. I need an assistant, I am getting old. My eyes are not as clear and my hands are not as steady. You can help me. It can be our secret.”

Gabriella was so happy she hugged her father tight around his head. He laughed and laughed.

The next day, they got to work. They had a sculpture of a cat to reproduce for a client in another township. Gabriella assisted her father and when they considered the best way to cast it, it was Gabriella’s suggestion they used. Her father made the mold with his daughter mixing the plaster. In a few day's time the cat reproduction was flawless – a bright polished white.

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For the next year they worked together, master and assistant until those roles no longer applied. Gabriella organized more and more until she was doing most of the casting herself. Her father was still the one to meet the clients and lay out the orders, but once the workshop doors were closed and no one could see, Gabriella put on her apron and got to work.

Years past and her father became less and less able to leave the house. Gabriella met with clients apologizing that her father could not come. She would take their orders and promise that the work would be done on time. And it was always done on time – flawlessly according to his reputation. The clients were always happy and paid well. Their secret remained intact and work continued to come.

But then one day the old plaster caster died and people gathered from all around to celebrate the great man. After the funeral people came to Gabriella's home to eat and drink and talk about her father. Many expressed concern for Gabriella's future as she was not yet married – what would she do? It was well known that she was not popular with the local men – though she was quiet beautiful, many of the men were intimidated by her strength and strong will. Besides, she always preferred to be with her father. And here at her father's funeral, Gabriella did not know what to say to them. She loved her work – but she could not tell them that. It was her secret. But now that her father was dead, no work would come. What would she do?

When all the guests left she went into the workshop. She put on her apron and looked around. She thought of her father. And she thought of her mother. And she wept. She felt alone.

The next day something curious and unexpected happened. There was a knock at the door. When she opened it there was a young man in fine clothes standing there looking very official. He stood up straight and asked if it was the workshop of the great plaster caster, her father. Out of habit she said that it was. Then he held out a paper.

"This is an order for a series of sculptures just purchased by my father the Duke of Cortona. He knows of your father's reputation and would like reproductions of them all. It is a substantial commission and will pay handsomely. But there is one thing. My father is concerned about the safety of the sculptures so ... he would like someone he knows to be on site during the casting."

"Oh" said Gabriella, wondering if there was any way in which she could do the work without word getting to the Duke, "Who would that be?"

"Well," said the young man looking down for a moment, "Me... is your father in?"

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Gabriella was faced with a dilemma. She wanted the work. She needed the work. But she did not want to lie. She decided to tell the truth – but not all of it. Not just yet. She said, “He is not. But I can take the order. The work will begin tomorrow. I’ll expect you and the sculptures tomorrow morning.” Then she took the paper, said goodbye and closed the door. She had to take the risk, perhaps the young man would understand.

In the morning she woke early and went to the workshop. As the dawn’s thin light snuck through the windows, she put on her apron and organized her tools for casting. She tried not to think about what could happen and instead focused on the task before her. She was a plaster caster, and a very good one. That had to mean something to the young man.

Soon after, there was a knock at the door. She looked at the door for a moment and then went to open it. It was the young man. The carriage was behind him, as were several teamsters come to carry the sculptures in. She led the way.

Once the sculptures were assembled, she chose one to be placed on the casting table. And then, without ceremony or even a word, she set to work. She began to smear a thin layer of fat on the marble sculpture to create the parting. Then she prepared the plaster. The young man walked idly around the workshop and then finally found a chair and sat down. He watched her as she began to add the plaster to the vat of water. She had strong hands, he could see that. He looked at her face. She was focused. The light from the morning sun was now streaming in the windows and seemed to make her face glow. He lost himself in her face. She was beautiful he thought. What was she doing mixing plaster for an old caster? Then it occurred to him that he had not seen the old man yet.

“Where is your father?” he asked.

Gabriella was silent for a while as she sifted plaster into the vat. Without looking at the young man, she answered his question.

“My father is dead.”

“Dead?! But who will do the castings?” said the young man now standing.

“My father is dead. He was once a great caster – the greatest. But for the last few years his assistant has been doing all the castings. In fact he hasn’t stepped foot in this workshop for months.”

The young man was now angry. “You deceived me. You did not tell me any of this. Well, let me meet this assistant and I’ll assess whether or not he shall do the work.”

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She stopped mixing and looked at him. "I am sorry I did not tell you, but I had to take the risk. You see, my father's assistant... is me. This is my workshop now. I understand you are angry but this I can tell you. If you stay, you shall have your castings. They will be flawless in every way. Your father the Duke, will be pleased. If you go, you can be satisfied that you have not hired a woman and can then try to find another caster in another city. It is your choice."

The young man stood still, a little dazed. It was his choice, he could see that. If he stayed he risked ridicule at court for hiring a woman to do a man's work. If he left he would have to find someone else. He looked at her. Her eyes were calm and confident and a deep, dark brown that matched the whisp of hair that had tumbled out of her plasterers hat. He thought of spending every day in this workshop with her, as opposed to sitting in the workshop of some silent old man. He liked that idea. He liked the idea of being around her. He sat back down.

"Well," he said, "I guess it will be our secret." Then he smiled. And she smiled.

"My name is Paolo" he said.

"I am Gabriella." She said. And then she got back to work.

From that day on they met every morning. He sat in his chair and she worked. He watched her and they talked. She told him of life as a caster's daughter and he told her of his life as the son of a Duke. They became friends. They ate and drank together and laughed often. They looked forward to seeing each other every day. In time he began to assist her. He helped her mix plaster and she showed him how to get the perfect mix. She showed him how to make the mold and how to pour. He loved it. She knew he couldn't get plaster on his fine clothes so she got him an apron. She didn't tell him but the apron was her fathers. She tied it on and looked at him. He looked very handsome. She smiled.

He was excited to wear the apron and to real work. He had never done work in his life other than deliver messages for his father. He helped her every day for weeks until he had become such an adept assistant that they were able to finish the work sooner than planned. When they finished the final sculpture they celebrated for a moment before they realized what it meant. It meant that their time together would end. It meant they would not see each other again. He looked into her dark eyes and then pulled himself away mumbling that he would return the next day with a carriage to take the final casting and to bring her her payment. She was silent as he left. As the door shut behind him, she felt sad, and alone.

The next morning Gabriella heard the carriage arrive. She was not wearing her work clothes or her apron but a blue dress given to her by her father. It was her nicest dress made of linen with a lace collar. This was not a work day, but a day to say thank you and goodbye. She went to the door and opened it.

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There stood Paolo. He was in fine satin clothes and a jeweled hat with a long feather. He stood silent at the door marveling at her beauty. Both stood without speaking until he held out a small sack. He said quietly,

"This is your payment. My father was pleased. Thank you."

She reached out to take the sack and Paolo took her hand instead.

Time froze for Gabriella at that moment. All she could see was Paolo's hand and she could see his gentleness but also his strength. She had never felt his hand before, she realized. It was warm and a little rough from working with plaster. Then she looked up at his face. He had a kind face, a caring face. His eyes had a particular sparkle and then she could tell that he really knew who she was. That she was different - that she loved to work. And he liked that about her. Then he spoke,

"These few weeks with you have been my happiest. "

Gabriella was surprised by this. A Duke's son, happy slogging plaster for a Caster's daughter, what could this mean? But Paolo continued.

"I do not want them to end. "

Paolo paused and Gabriella was confused. Was he going to hire her for more work? Or could he be asking her... something else?

"I wonder ... would you consider ... Gabriella, would you be my wife?"

Gabriella looked into his emerald green eyes and saw something that she had not noticed before. She could see that he loved her. And she knew in that moment that she loved him. Gabriella, the caster's daughter, nodded her head.

"Yes," she said, "Yes, I would like that very much."

Then Paolo, still holding her hand, invited her to the carriage. Gabriella closed the door to her house and workshop behind her and joined him. They went back to the Duke's Castle where Paolo showed her the grounds and every room within, pointing out the gargoyles, cherubs, and soldiers they poured together in her workshop. And as they walked the halls of the castle they talked of their wedding, the manor in which they would live, and indeed the workshop that would be built where they would make flawless plaster molds and casts, together.