

PRAISE FOR

# UNNATURAL CREATURES

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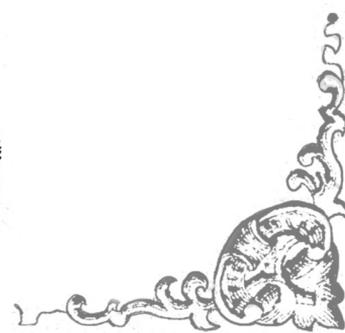


A NOVEL OF  
THE FRANKENSTEIN WOMEN

# UNNATURAL CREATURES

\* \* \*

KRIS WALDHERR



MUSE   
PUBLICATIONS  
NEW YORK

# M SE

*Books that make you think.*

*Books that make you feel.*

*Books that inspire.*

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*For M.W.S.  
Mother of Monsters  
In Gratitude*

*“I am an unfortunate and deserted creature; I look around, and I have no relation or friend upon earth . . . I am full of fears, for if I fail there, I am an outcast in the world forever.”*

— MARY SHELLEY

FRANKENSTEIN, OR THE MODERN PROMETHEUS

*December 1799*  
*North of Archangel, Russia*

THIS WILL BE HER THIRD death since she became a monster.

So far, she has survived a death at the end of a rope, a second born of bullets. Now, as she stares out at the wide frozen sea stretching before her, she'll survive a death of ice—or so she hopes after months of traveling north. For at this stage of her journey, hope is all that remains. She carries it close, inside the satchel she clutches against her breast even in sleep. The satchel has grown so light that she no longer notes its weight. Though it is emptied of the dry tack and dried beef that filled it when she left Archangel, the satchel contains a collapsible telescope and a smashed compass. Finally, there's a locket containing a gentlewoman's portrait, whose provenance she refuses to recall.

Useless as the satchel's contents may be, she cannot bear to lose them, for this would be acknowledgement that she is truly without possessions in this world.

Without hope.

She halts to gather strength. The wind is especially bitter this morning; satchel or no, how shall she go on? She'd begun her journey intending to save others from death. Now she can't even save herself. She tells herself not all is lost. After all, she's resilient. She's learned to subsist on melted ice and hazelnuts gathered long ago, punctuated by unexpected gifts of meat. As a result, she's grown so slight she weighs less than a full-grown wolf. She appears a girl, not a grown woman. Nor does she appear a monster—but she knows better.

She circles and stares. No matter which way she turns, a bowl of white surrounds her. It's so different from the Mer de Glace, whose sea

of ice fed into mountains tall enough to scrape the clouds. This snowscape before her is flat. Affectless. Worse, the snow has hardened into a slick surface.

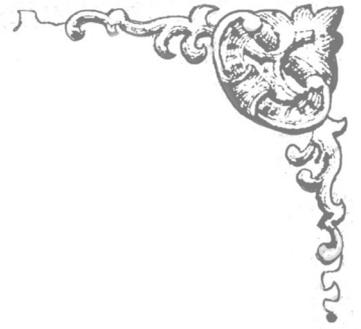
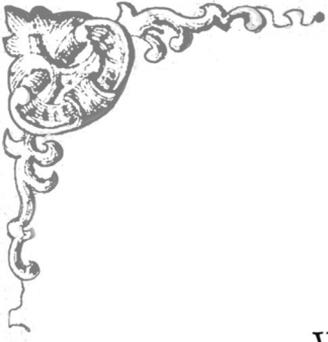
The muscles of her thighs burn. Her toenails peel from their beds of flesh. Her arms ache from holding them aloft for balance. Her stomach churns with air. Frostbite is a certainty though she's protected her eyes with goggles, her body with reindeer fur and trousers. She'd been warned to expect such ordeals when she'd left Archangel to trek north with her dogs and sled, fully provisioned for what may come. But now with a broken compass and cracked telescope, legs stinging, arms heavy, feet limping, and stomach emptied, she has no choice. Time to face her third death.

She lies down upon the ice, praying she'll somehow survive again like the miracle she is. Her eyes grow heavy. Hands numb. And then her mind returns to Geneva. To a time before it all began, when the three of them still lived. Before she knew of the curses plaguing them and so many others.

She envisions herself inside a snowy garden that appears to be Eden. The garden is set a league east of Geneva, by a mansion with a candle-lit tower. However, neither the garden nor the mansion were Eden—she knows this now. Still, if it were possible to go back to those days, she would.

She can never go back. But she can remember.

And so she remembers it all. She watches it all. It all unfolds like a tale as the snow begins anew.

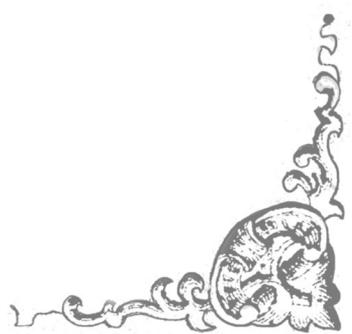
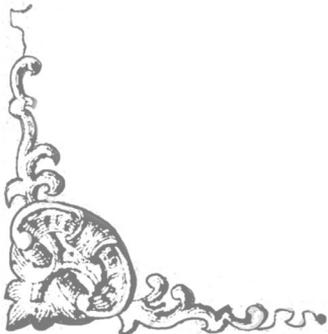


VOLUME ONE

# THE MOTHER

\* \* \*

*Sixteen years earlier*



## CHAPTER I.



*“But Caroline Beaufort possessed a mind of an uncommon mould; and her courage rose to support her in her adversity. She procured plain work; she plaited straw; and by various means contrived to earn a pittance scarcely sufficient to support life.”*

\* \* \*

SOME TALES AREN'T what you think. Nor do they begin when you expect, such as at the stroke of midnight. Instead, this tale starts with a clock chiming five of the morning inside that mansion with the candlelit tower, the one overlooking the snowy garden a league east of Geneva. It's two weeks before Christmas.

As the grandfather clock completed its final toll, the mansion's inhabitants remained asleep, though some would soon need to wake. The youngest maid, Sophie, curled like a hedgehog around her solitary pillow in an attic dormer, resisting the pull of a winter morning. In the same bed, the scullery maid snored beside her. Though she was only a year older than Sophie's thirteen, her stockinged toes poked out beneath the hem of the blanket; every so often, she wiggled them. Beyond their dormer, three other rooms equally spare, which sheltered the cook, butler, footman, and gardener. A floor below, Victor, the eldest son of the house, and Elizabeth, the adopted ward, lay in their far grander chambers, enjoying the oblivious slumber of the wealthy. In a

room down the hall, the master, who'd dozed off while rereading the philosophical works of Rousseau.

None in the house stirred save for the mistress, Caroline Frankenstein, who occupied the solitary room in the candle-lit tower.

Caroline's eyes twitched as she shifted in her bed, revealing she was dreaming unhappily. It was a nightmare she'd suffered regularly since becoming a bride two decades earlier. In it, she was a girl of nineteen again, cursed by her father's ineptitude and pride. To support them, she was trapped plaiting straw for hats in a cold dark hut—a humbler labor than any of her servants ever experienced. Caroline's blistered fingers seeped blood at their tips. "*Faster, faster,*" she heard inside her dream. "*More, more.*" As she dropped each straw plait into the basket beside her, the window shutters juddered against a persistent wind. Yet all she sensed was pain, for her mouth ached from a tooth extraction. Aching gums or no, she'd no choice but to keep her fingers flying or all would be lost.

Suddenly, the shutters snapped open. Piles of straw flew about Caroline's head, prickling her eyes and ears. She leapt from her stool to harvest straw from the wind. To begin anew just as her father arrived to urge her.

*Faster, faster. More, more.*

Caroline awoke gasping for air, deeply thirsty, and most importantly, alone. Morning had arrived, though so early that the sky appeared watery with a purple luminance. The snow had ceased. So had the thunder. Her candle, which she insisted on keeping lit while she slept, had devolved into a puddle of beeswax.

These days, her husband Alphonse never joined her in her bed. After suffering two miscarriages and a stillborn since the birth of their youngest son Ernest seven years earlier, Caroline was eager for her body to settle into complacency. Her heart couldn't suffer more loss. If that wasn't cause enough, Ernest's health was delicate as a milkweed. They'd had to send him to the Alps for his lungs; her doctor whispered this was due to Alphonse's age, for he was nearing sixty-five. Ernest wasn't sturdy like Victor, their eldest, or exquisite, like Elizabeth, their ward.

But now, after that dream, she wished Alphonse was there. He'd understand. He'd hold her, promise she was safe. He'd light a new candle for her, as many as she wanted without scolding for the waste.

Though he'd never been the dashing young nobleman she'd yearned for as a maiden, he'd proven the loyal companion life required. No woman's life was truly her own, but hers had been saved by Alphonse, who'd remained her father's only loyal friend after their ruin.

Caroline pulled herself up against her pillows. She rang for Sophie to bring her morning tea.

And then she recalled what spurred her nightmare. The pamphlet she'd found near her garden before the snow.

*The Private History of Marie-Antoinette* the cover said, accompanied by pornographic illustrations that made Caroline flush. The cover was ridged with mud, probably trampled beneath a rushing coach. Fearful of someone finding it, Caroline had brought the pamphlet home to burn, but the paper had proven too damp. She'd settled for hiding it under her bed, hoping no servant would dust there. She'd burn it later, though an important question prodded her: who'd brought the pamphlet so close to her home? Could it have been a university student, a traveler? Or even a disgruntled soldier? She prayed it wasn't one of her servants.

Though Caroline bore little interest in the French queen, there was no mistaking the pamphlet's dangerous rhetoric. Pamphlets encouraged violence. Pamphlets seeded rebellion beyond borders. France was not Geneva, but as a city-state republic without an army Geneva was dependent on France—especially after the Genevan Revolution the previous year, which had been incited by similar pamphlets. French troops had helped end the uprising, and made it possible for the Frankensteins to flee to the safety of their country house in Belrive—but not before armed rebels had closed the city gates and taken Alphonse and other aristocrats hostage. She'd truly feared he'd be murdered.

*What happened then can no longer harm us. We're safe.*

She wished she could believe this.

Another rush of anxiety rose, wrapping itself around Caroline's throat. Such emotions were unworthy of her position. She was the wife of a syndic, which was as close to nobility as Geneva possessed; syndics ruled akin to magistrates. The girl she'd been with the plaited straw, the blistered fingers, was long gone. Though she would soon turn forty, her chestnut hair revealed only a few strands of grey. Her face bore faint wrinkles on the corners of her mouth and dark eyes, which flashed

with brilliance under sunlight. She appeared as she wished to be seen: the grace-filled wife and loving mother of two children and one much-adored ward. Not that it mattered to her dreams.

Without thinking, she tapped her fingers against her slim thigh beneath the bed linens. Ten times. One for each finger. Only that, nothing more. Her anxiety receded. Where was Sophie? She rang her bell again, welcoming the arrival of irritation over fear.

“Late as usual,” Caroline murmured.

At last Sophie arrived. No apology, no smile.

“Madame,” she greeted, dipping a quick curtsy. (Hadn’t her curtsy been deeper a year earlier?) She set a painted tray bearing a silver pot, pitcher of milk, and accoutrements onto the nightstand. As she poured the thin amber stream into a china cup, a strand of auburn hair fell across the saucer. Sophie’s hair.

Instead of an apology, the maid brazenly met Caroline’s eyes before she blew the strand away.

Caroline bit back a retort, horrified. *It couldn’t be her with the pamphlet.* She’d never have considered Sophie capable of such. But then again . . .

*Faster, faster. More, more.*

Just as Sophie curtseyed and turned for the door, Caroline coughed delicately.

“Madame?”

“Open the shutters, if you please.” Caroline flushed as the words emerged from her mouth slurred. Her teeth had been so pretty once, so perfect, but they’d been affected by malnourishment: she’d never been able to conquer the lisp they caused. Alphonse said her lisp was charming, like the lilt of a song.

Sophie obeyed.

“Wake Mademoiselle Elizabeth and bring her to me. Afterward, I’ve a gown that no longer suits. You may have it, if it pleases you. The yellow *indienné*.”

A show of benevolent generosity cultivated loyalty from servants. Wasn’t that what Alphonse advised?

Once Sophie left the room, Caroline set down her teacup, her hand shaking. She’d feel better once Elizabeth was there. Elizabeth, who knew how to soothe her worries.

Caroline glanced toward the window overlooking the lake. It was a

fine December day, bright with the promise of a clear sky after last night's snow. Perhaps she'd take Elizabeth and Victor for a carriage ride toward Cologne, where the coast rounded. Now that Elizabeth was twelve, the girl was starting to appear more grown than not. Her beauty drew admiration wherever they went—but the real question was whether Victor admired Elizabeth too. Caroline suspected he did, judging by the lingering looks he stole when Elizabeth was unaware. His thoughtful manners made him seem mature beyond his nearly thirteen years. He was a gifted student. A devoted son. She adored him.

*All is well. You just need to remain calm.*

A knock sounded, giving Caroline a start. Sophie was alone, face taut like she'd broken a plate.

"Madame? I beg your forgiveness . . ."

Caroline's heart tripped. "What's happened?"

"Mademoiselle Elizabeth is gone."

\* \* \*

"What do you mean, *gone*?" Caroline hissed as she rushed down the marble stairs, nearly tripping on the Alençon lace hem of her dressing robe. Such was the clamor of her steps that Alphonse bolted from his room, and Victor had thrown his arms around his mother's waist like he was still a child. "How can Elizabeth be *gone* without anyone's notice? Didn't you bring her breakfast?"

"Mademoiselle's door was closed," Sophie said, avoiding Caroline's glare. "I thought she was sleeping. I did not wish to wake her. Then I noticed her bed hadn't been slept in."

"You mean you did not wish to bring her breakfast," Caroline snapped.

*That pamphlet. What if her disappearance had to do with it?*

Caroline's panic rose as she imagined a revolutionary stealing into their home, coming across Elizabeth alone in bed, thinking her older than her years. Caroline's fingers clenched against her thigh. *One. Two. Three . . .*

"She's not downstairs," Alphonse reported, gasping for breath. "I'm sure she's fine, darling. I suspect she's outside. She probably made her bed herself." How vulnerable he appeared with his nightcap askew, his

beard stubble. His face was especially pallid that morning too. “You remain here. I’ll look in the garden.”

“No, no. I’ll come with you.”

*Faster, faster. More, more.*

Out into the walled gardens they rushed, Caroline shivering in her too-thin silk robe and her soaked embroidered slippers; the soil was muddy beneath the snow. At this time of the year, the gardens were a scant shadow of their summer glory, when they’d spilled roses of every hue looping with bees and dragonflies, scented with honeysuckle and lilacs and lavender. The arrival of the first frost had brought the water in the tiered fountain to a frozen hush, along with the lily pond, which wasn’t much bigger than the long mahogany table they used for formal dinners. Knowing Elizabeth, she’d probably given way to an impulse of inspiration, for she was a dreamy child unlike Victor who was bookish, or Ernest, who was frail. Still, they had to find her.

Once Caroline reached the terrace’s first step, her eyes strained into the lily pond’s dark waters. The icy surface remained unbroken. Anyway, Elizabeth knew not to fall into a lily pond. Still, Caroline’s heart pounded as though it would leap from her body.

“Do you see her?” she called out.

“I see footsteps,” Victor shouted from across the garden.

“One set? Or two?”

Sophie answered, “I can’t tell if they’re from last night. So muddy!”

“She couldn’t have gone far,” Alphonse assured. “When did you last see her, dearest?”

“After supper.”

“You didn’t check on her in bed?” Alphonse asked.

“It was late . . .” And she’d been too distressed by that pamphlet—so troubled she’d found herself unwilling to confide in him, though what could she have said? That she still feared loss though it had been years since her last miscarriage and months since the revolution? That she still had nightmares? That she feared one of their servants might be a revolutionary?

Just then a fox dashed before Caroline’s feet before it dissolved into fog. White furred. Pink-eyed. It looked freakish. Where had it come from?

Sophie kneeled on the ground. “Breadcrumbs. They appear fresh.”

“Look!” Victor pointed toward the large oak that lay in the center of

the garden. "Over there."

"What do you see?" Alphonse's voice quavered.

"Something red beneath the oak, Father. I can't tell what."

Caroline's heart pounded in her ears as Victor ran toward the oak, outpacing Sophie.

And then Caroline saw it. Or, rather, *her*.

Half-hidden under muddy leaves, much like that pamphlet had been, a pair of thin grey legs protruded. A torn petticoat. A girl smaller than Elizabeth. A child really, perhaps ten years of age, with hair of an indiscriminate color. She was so pale, like snow. As for the red Victor spied, it wasn't blood. It was a painted bucket; presumably it belonged to the girl. The red bucket laid beside her tangled in ivy. Abandoned.

Caroline drew closer.

The girl was curled into a tight ball. Her mouth gaped like a crack in a wall. Her lips were chalky. Silent. She was thin, boney. Her clothing, sewn of a rough linen, was torn in places and mended in others. Her flesh was colorless, more akin to a coating of wax than a substance bearing blood and nerves. Her blanched cheeks wore the yellowed remains of a bruise. Her forehead scratched by random scars. A burned hand. Her lank silvery hair loose from its plaits. Worst of all, the girl's torso twisted abnormally. Someone, or something, had snapped her like a twig. Someone unimaginably strong and cruel.

Such was Caroline's shock that it took her a moment to realize the snow girl wasn't alone. Elizabeth lay beside her, her arms curled around the child's waist.

Her ward's eyes snapped open at Caroline's approach, pupils dilating.

*Praise God, she lives.* Caroline grabbed Elizabeth from beneath the oak, and embraced her so hard that she squeaked.

As for the snow girl, Victor spoke first. "Dead. She must be."

"The poor child . . ." Caroline breathed.

Her arms tightened around Elizabeth, imaging her in the snow girl's stead. Where had she come from? Who'd killed her? She couldn't be alive. Not with such injuries. Caroline's eyes filled. It was all her fault. She should have told Alphonse about the pamphlet. Should have warned everyone. Now it was too late.

"Look!" Victor pointed toward the snow girl.

Her chest rose and fell, shallow but true.

## CHAPTER II.



*“They consulted their village priest, and the result was, that Elizabeth Lavenza became the inmate of my parents’ house—my more than sister—the beautiful and adored companion of all my occupations and my pleasures.”*

\* \* \*

INSIDE THE KITCHEN, the Frankensteins and their servants laid both girls before the fire after displacing the kittens sleeping there in a box. Elizabeth shuddered from the heat, muzzy from shock. As for the snow girl, Caroline’s heart tripped as she considered her limp body, which Victor had carried inside. Caroline pressed her fingers against the girl’s icy wrist.

The snow girl’s pulse was so faint. Slow, like a clock winding down.

“She’s alive,” Caroline announced. “Let’s get her a hot bath.”

“I’m so sorry!” Elizabeth blinked rapidly, bunching her dressing gown in her fists. “It’s my fault! I woke early. I’d gone outside to feed the swans. I found her there under the oak. I-I thought to save her. Comfort her.”

“The best comfort is a full belly and a warm fire, not a hug in the snow,” Sophie accused as she gathered hot water for the tub, which Alphonse had set before the fireplace. “How could you lay with her there like an idiot? Why would you let her freeze instead of calling for help?”

“Hush!” Caroline snapped. “Don’t speak like that to her or—“

“No, Sophie’s right.” Elizabeth’s words were muffled by sobs. “I should have run for help, especially once I saw her spine was broken.”

“Her spine isn’t broken,” Victor explained. “She’s a hunchback. Scoliosis.”

Scoliosis. Was that the scientific term? Caroline hadn’t known. Whatever her illness, the girl remained pale as frost and as peculiar of stature even out of the cold. Pale hair. Even paler skin. Otherworldly. An unnatural creature. Hunchback or no, she was as ugly as Elizabeth was exquisite. The girl’s face was wide as a moon, her eyes deeply shadowed. Her lashes were long and grey-pale, akin to torn cobwebs. Mud and dead leaves matted her hair. She stank like she’d been dunked in a chamber pot.

“I don’t recognize her from the village,” Alphonse said.

“Nor do I,” Caroline agreed.

“Out of the way!” Sophie ordered, struggling with a bucket of steamy water.

“I’ll take that,” Victor offered. Caroline smiled; her son appeared a knight from a fairy tale, a prince in waiting. But then her attention returned to the hunchbacked girl, who’d let out a whimper. Perhaps they should call for a doctor. She’d decide after the bath.

“My dear, you should return to bed,” Alphonse said. “Sophie will take care of her.”

Caroline waved away her husband. “No, I’ll bathe her.”

“I’ll help,” Victor said, his brown eyes bright. “I’d like to look at her spine.”

Caroline’s brow crinkled. “The poor child requires privacy, not an examination.” To Sophie: “Tell Cook breakfast can wait.”

Now alone with the hunchbacked girl, Caroline set to preparing her for her bath. First, she dosed the girl with laudanum in case she was in pain. (She’d assumed it was pain causing her to whimper. Or was she calling for her mother?) The girl’s color had improved, but her fine-boned hands were ruddy, hopefully not from frostbite.

Caroline tested the bath water. Not too hot. Not too cold. An unconscious smile rose across her lips, one she hadn’t forced for once. Children loved Caroline. Caroline loved children. Fate had brought the girl to her much as it had Elizabeth. That must be it.

Though it was nearly a decade since Caroline had welcomed Elizabeth

as her own, the details of that autumn day had never faded. She and Alphonse had been traveling by carriage near Lake Como, accompanied by Victor, who was then only four; after his birth, she'd remained barren of womb. She'd been weeping, for that morning another cycle had arrived to dash hope, when a glimmer of gold curls caught her attention. A set of large, inquisitive eyes as blue as the Alpine sky. A small girl. The most beautiful child she'd ever seen. She resembled an angel from a Renaissance fresco.

The beggar woman accompanying the golden-haired girl had explained she was an orphan with no worldly possessions save a noble name. "She's meant to be ours," Caroline whispered to Alphonse. "We'll save her. Offer her a home." In the end, Elizabeth accompanied the Frankensteins back to Geneva as the daughter of Caroline's heart, if not her blood, though she addressed Caroline as aunt rather than mother.

Caroline's memory faded as her thoughts returned to the hunch-backed girl in her lap. Perhaps Caroline could save her too.

Caroline asked in her gentlest voice, "What is your name, child?"

The girl flopped in her lap; the laudanum had affected her.

"I'm going to bathe you. I promise I won't hurt you . . ."

Caroline carefully unbuttoned the girl's collar and let out a yelp. Lice crawled along her nape.

"Is everything all right, my dear?" Alphonse called from outside the kitchen door.

"All's fine." A nervous laugh.

*Lice won't harm you. It's nothing you haven't seen before.* There'd been plenty of vermin in that cottage with her father. Caroline sucked in her lip and flicked lice from her wrist.

The girl moaned softly as Caroline unbuttoned her shabby canvas smock. Beneath the smock, her chemise was stained with what appeared to be dirt. *Not dirt. Worse.* The girl had fallen in horse dung—that's what Sophie had smelled. Caroline glanced inside the girl's drawers. They were clean. She was also older than Caroline expected; soft down crested the cleft of her sex.

Caroline threw her clothes into the fire. The girl snored gently, unaware of her nudity.

By then the sun had broken through, flooding the kitchen in morning light. It revealed the girl's flesh to be laced with bruises and scars. Burns, some pale from age, others raw and new. Either the girl

was clumsy or she'd won someone's acrimony. As for the scoliosis, her spine twisted like a tree, granting her right shoulder an unusual height. She was perhaps the ugliest child Caroline had ever beheld, but it wasn't because of her hunchback. It was because of neglect.

Caroline's eyes filled. *How could someone be so cruel?* She couldn't comprehend it.

The girl didn't resist as Caroline settled her into the bath; the laudanum had done its job. She met Caroline's stare. Her eyes were a strange colorless hue, akin to trout beneath a stream. Laudanum or no, she bore an intelligence in her gaze. An awareness. She shuddered as the heat of the water rose up her bony limbs, crossed her arms over her breast buds.

"What's your name?" Caroline asked anew. "Where did you come from?"

The girl blinked, eyes tearing. Her mouth opened, shut. She bit her lip. What if she was a mute? Caroline hadn't considered this.

It took Caroline a half-hour to wash and comb out her matted hair; the girl dozed and woke, shivering as though she'd couldn't recall how she'd arrived naked in a tub of water. Caroline carefully drowned each louse, smashing the corpses inside a rag.

"Shall I keep you?" Caroline asked as she toweled the girl's hair. Her clean hair was a silvery hue, like moonbeams. Straight, without a hint of curl. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

*As would I.*

The girl forced an ungainly smile before her eyelids flagged anew. She wasn't ugly. Not really—all it took was some soap and care. As for the scars and bruises, those would heal in time.

Humming, Caroline plaited the girl's hair into a crown and dressed her in one of Elizabeth's cast-offs. It fit her perfectly. Like a doll. Again, that strange hope rose. *It's a sign she's here. Fate.*

"There! Better?"

The girl's mouth twisted slowly. She could talk. She would talk.

"What is it?" Caroline pressed.

Tears filled the girl's eyes. A sob.

Before Caroline could comfort her, a knock sounded.

"Madame?" Cook's voice came from outside the kitchen door. "I know whose child she is. She's the daughter of the gravedigger,

Monsieur Moritz. He died two days ago. Her name is Justine—I'll fetch her mother."

\* \* \*

"She ran away," Madame Moritz announced an hour later; she'd arrived at the Frankensteins' door clutching the hands of two children, both as colorful as Justine was pale. A boy and a girl. Rosy-cheeked cherubs with brown curls, blue eyes. Oil paintings beside a silverpoint. "I'd sent Justine out to fetch water, and had no idea where she'd gone. Certainly not trespassing in your garden!"

Madame Moritz's low tone belied the ruddiness of her face—Caroline sensed she was fighting her temper. She was also, from the looks of it, about six months with child, belying the grey hair peeking from her linen cap. She perched on the only chair large enough in Caroline's morning room to contain her bulk, children clutched against her swollen belly, which her black wool cloak barely covered. Caroline rushed with envy at Madame Moritz's fertile state—three children including Justine, a new baby underway—before reminding herself that her husband had just died.

Madame Moritz scowled at Justine. "I apologize for the disturbance she's brought, Madame—forgive me, what's your name? Your servant never told me."

"Frankenstein," Caroline said, her tone hollow. "I'm the syndic's wife."

"I'd been the gravedigger's wife myself." Madame Moritz's tart tone was at odds with her swollen eyes.

Caroline was uncertain how to respond. Nothing about the morning had gone as expected; at least Elizabeth was safe. As for Justine, Cook explained the girl had been a favorite of her father, whose doting had annoyed his wife. Hence, the bruises and scars. She was also older than expected—twelve, which made her close in age to Elizabeth and Victor. The girl still dozed, eyelids fluttering with laudanum-induced dreams. Justine's situation was sad, tragic even. But children were misused all the time—Caroline couldn't save all of them. Though at least she'd saved one . . .

She glanced at Elizabeth, who was seated beside her on the chaise. Angelic Elizabeth. Adored Elizabeth.

“Mama, what did Justine do now?” Madame Moritz’s other daughter mewed. “Why is she here?”

“It’s our fault, Madame Moritz,” Caroline said, careful to enunciate each word to avoid lisping due to her bad teeth. “Forgive us the delay in returning your daughter. My cook recognized Justine, but this took longer than I wish.”

“Has your daughter done this before?” Elizabeth asked, a nervous giggle marring her question. Her gaze slid between Madame Moritz and Caroline as though she was watching a game no one wanted to play. “Run away, that is?”

Madame Moritz turned her glare toward Elizabeth. “You’re cheeky, aren’t you?”

Elizabeth appeared set to cry when Caroline rose from the chaise. She flushed as she grabbed a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the mantel. With all the turmoil that morning, her hair still spilled in chestnut-hued curls around her shoulders, like she’d just risen from bed; she remained dressed in the French-style chemise gown she favored for mornings. She looked half-dressed, frivolous compared to mourning garb. Still, Caroline would do what she could.

She clasped Madame Moritz’s hands. “Again, I am so sorry for your loss. I’ve been told Monsieur Moritz was a good man from those who required his—” she searched for an appropriate word “—services. If we can help your family . . .”

Madame Moritz sniffed at Justine. “I’ll take her and trouble you no more.”

“She still sleeps,” Elizabeth said eagerly. “We can bring her home once she wakes. Your other children are invited to remain as our guests. We’ll amuse them for you.”

Caroline said, “As for Justine, I can fetch a physician, for which I’ll bear responsibility. For her spine. Please.”

“You’d be wasting your time.” Madame Moritz’s voice broke. “She’ll never improve—believe me, I know! The girl’s a half-wit. No doubt she made up some story about how she ended in your garden.” She tapped Justine’s arm. “Wake! We must return home!”

As Caroline watched Madame Moritz lead Justine and her sisters from the morning room, Elizabeth stood beside her aunt.

“Her father’s dead,” Elizabeth said in a restrained tone. “And a new baby soon. They’ll starve.”

“The mother seems the sort to refuse charity,” Caroline answered. Anyway, having a father was no guarantee against starvation—this she understood too well.

The front door shuddered. Slammed. Through the window, Caroline and Elizabeth watched Madame Moritz drag Justine toward the gate, the other children skipping ahead. Justine’s feet shuffled against the gravel walk. “Hurry, girl!” Her mother slapped the side of her face.

Caroline cringed. Was the girl crying? She was.

Caroline’s eyes stung in response. She recalled how trusting Justine had been while she’d bathed her, the improbable hope that had bubbled. Her mind returned to that seditious pamphlet hidden beneath her bed. She’d actually forgotten about it in the turmoil. Strange how hope and fear could dwell together, like nettles beside lilies.

Caroline turned from the window. Time to get on with the day. Time to do something—anything—besides stare at a girl she hadn’t known existed until hours earlier. The world was full of sorrows. There was nothing to do but endure.

*Or was there?*

Caroline spoke quickly. “What if there was another way to keep the girl? One that wouldn’t wound her mother’s pride?”

Elizabeth immediately understood. “Don’t we have need for another servant, Aunt?”

“Yes. Yes, we do.”

And like that, hope returned.

“Hurry!” Caroline called. The door. Her shawl. They rushed outside in the cold, breath pluming, just as Justine and her mother reached the iron gate.

“Stop, Madame! I’ve a proposal for you!” Caroline cried.

Madame Moritz glared over her shoulder. “Haven’t you done enough, Madame Frankenstein?”

“I’ve use for your daughter. Employment.”

Madame Moritz shook her head. “We’ve no need of your charity. No need!”

“Not charity, Madame Moritz. I’ve use for a maid!”

“A maid? Really?” Madame Moritz advanced toward Caroline, Justine dangling from her grasp. “You’re too good for her. Look at her—she’s a monster! You should take my other daughter.”

“Only Justine will do.”

Madame Moritz offered a bitter laugh. “Why her?”

Caroline flailed for words. “Because she’d work hard. Because she’s close in age to my niece. I’ll send you her pay.”

Madame Moritz shoved the girl Caroline’s way. “Take her then.”

\* \* \*

Midnight. One house. Three beds.

Upstairs in her solitary bed, Caroline said her prayers and crawled beneath the blankets after burning the pamphlet, which had finally dried out. Her chest released as the threatening pages flared then blackened into ash; she’d soon forget that shocking drawing of Marie Antoinette’s half-clad figure. As for Sophie, Caroline decided she’d had nothing to do with the pamphlet. For whatever reason, rescuing Justine had eased Caroline’s fears, though she still questioned how the girl came to be in their garden.

*Fate*, she told herself again. It was fate Justine ended up in her garden. Fate Elizabeth had found her. The girl was fatherless. The mother abusive. Who could blame Justine for running away?

Already, Caroline’s spirit was lighter. Once she’d rescued Justine from her mother, the girl had pressed against Caroline’s hand like a cat. And then at last, Caroline heard the girl’s voice for the first time. Her voice was high-pitched, broad-voweled. Fated.

“Madame, anything you need of me, I shall do for you. This I promise.”

Which was exactly what Caroline yearned to hear. After all, what was more useful than a loyal child?

Smiling, Caroline wrapped her arms around herself beneath the covers. For the first time in months, she didn’t light a candle before sleep or think of curses. Her hands relaxed. Instead of tapping, she counted blessings.

Before she reached ten, her eyelids grew heavy. Therefore, she didn’t hear an owl swoop toward the white fox hidden beneath the great oak, where they’d discovered Justine that morning. Nor did Caroline hear Elizabeth, who couldn’t sleep, abandon her bedroom to seek Victor.

As Elizabeth strode through the darkened house, the long hallways were shadowed save for the shimmer of moonlight reflecting the lake. Once she reached Victor’s room, she crawled into his soft warm bed

beside him, like they were still children as when they'd met. Without awareness they lived in a world different than the one they'd grown up in . . . a world that now judged them for their rank and privilege.

Elizabeth inhaled deeply, pressing her nose against Victor's neck. One of the kittens from the kitchen slept beside him in a haze of grey-stripped fur. A leather-bound book rested on Victor's chest. Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia libri tres*—he'd fallen asleep reading it. A candle burned on the table beside his bed, spilling gold across his features. He was so good. So kind. So smart. How she loved him.

He cracked an eye open. "Sleep, dearest friend."

And Elizabeth did, but only after she blew out the candle.

Her breath sent the thin scent of beeswax drifting toward the attic where, in a third and final bed, Justine lay beside Sophie in a dormer room; the scullery maid had been moved downstairs next to the kitchen. Once Sophie's shoulders rose and fell with sleep, Justine's eyes blinked open. She abandoned the bed to silently pad downstairs in the dark.

Justine reached the third floor, then the second, which bore the unexpected comfort of carpeting. Past Caroline and Victor's room, where Elizabeth still slept in his arms. Down hallways and past doorways; anyone watching would say the girl possessed a distinctive limp, one different than a sprained ankle.

As Justine explored the house, her hands trailed along the wood, the wallpaper. She paused every few steps to stare. The gilded mirrors. The Persian rugs. The damask curtains. She wiped her cheeks, which were wet. Happiness and sorrow. Loss and gain.

She continued her solitary tour toward the stairway that curled into the entry hall, where carpeting returned to cold white marble. She halted in front of a life-sized painting, which hung over the mantle there. A portrait of Caroline.

The oil painting was the first thing everyone noticed as soon as they entered the Frankenstein mansion. Its style was darkly florid, like something from a century earlier. Everyone knew Alphonse had commissioned the portrait soon after he'd wed Caroline. The painting depicted a mournful girl in rustic dress kneeling beside a pine coffin, which was surrounded by piles of straw. Caroline at her father's funeral. Some gossiped it would have been more respectful to portray

her wearing court clothes, but Alphonse disagreed. He claimed the painting revealed the nobility of Caroline's soul.

But Justine did not know this then. She only knew it was a portrait of the woman who'd rescued her.

"Anything you want of me," she whispered, "I will do for you."

A long moment later, she backed away. She returned upstairs.