



A NOVEL OF
THE FRANKENSTEIN WOMEN

UNNATURAL CREATURES

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KRIS WALDHERR



MUSE 
PUBLICATIONS
NEW YORK

PRAISE FOR

UNNATURAL CREATURES

“Lushly atmospheric and rich with historical authenticity, *Unnatural Creatures* is a riveting Gothic tale that I devoured in one sitting . . . An inspired reimagining that was impossible to put down.”

—MIMI MATTHEWS, *USA Today* bestselling author of
The Siren of Sussex and *John Eyre*

“Kris Waldherr deftly uses the political climate of late 18th-century Geneva to add depth and nuance to one of literature’s best-known stories of one man’s folly, but it is her choice of protagonists—the three women closest to Victor Frankenstein—that truly elevates her work . . . *Unnatural Creatures*, like the novel that inspired it, is a richly atmospheric work of Gothic wonder.”

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of *Anne de Bourgh* and *The Clergyman’s Wife*

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Van Tassel

“Written by a true artist who understands that enlightenment can come from darkness. Waldherr’s latest is a rich feast for fans of the gothic novel.”

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“A sensuous and empathetic look at the three women who knew Victor Frankenstein best . . . A veritable tour de force!”

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“In a masterful Gothic rendering, *Unnatural Creatures* reimagines the classic tale of *Frankenstein* through the eyes of the story’s hitherto silent women. With its heartbreaking plot twists and stark sense of impending doom, Mary Shelley herself would be deeply moved by this dark tale of revenge and redemption.”

—STEPHANIE MARIE THORNTON, *USA Today* bestselling author of *And They Called It Camelot*

“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.

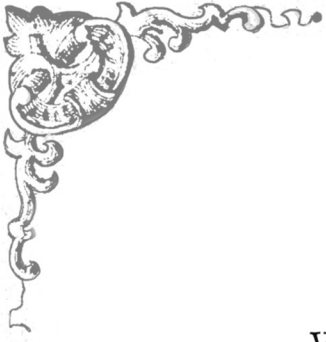
The muscles of her thighs burn. Her toenails peel from their beds of flesh. Her arms ache from holding them aloft for balance. Her stomach churns with air. Frostbite is a certainty though she's protected her eyes with goggles, her body with reindeer fur and trousers. She'd been warned to expect such 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 candle-lit 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. (Hadt’n 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 curtsied 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 *indienne*.”

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.



Books that make you think.

Books that make you feel.

Books that inspire.

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