

A NOVEL OF
THE FRANKENSTEIN WOMEN

UNNATURAL CREATURES

“A splendid achievement from
a writer at the height of her powers.”

—EDITORS' CHOICE,
The Historical Novels Review

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KRIS WALDHERR

AUTHOR *of* THE LOST HISTORY OF DREAMS

PRAISE FOR

UNNATURAL CREATURES

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UNNATURAL CREATURES

* * *

KRIS WALDHERR



MUSE 
PUBLICATIONS
NEW YORK



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.

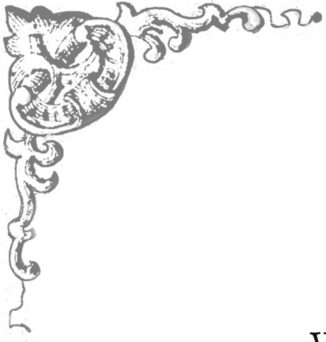
The muscles of her thighs burn. Her toenails peel from their beds of flesh. Her arms ache from holding them aloft for balance. Her stomach churns with air. Frostbite is a certainty though she's protected her eyes with goggles, her body with reindeer fur and trousers. She'd been warned to expect such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

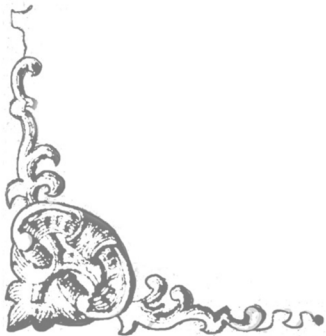


VOLUME ONE

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, imagining 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-striped 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.

CHAPTER III.



“Do you remember on what occasion Justine Moritz entered our family? . . . Madame Moritz, her mother, was a widow with four children, of whom Justine was the third. This girl had always been the favourite of her father; but, through a strange perversity, her mother could not endure her, and, after the death of M. Moritz, treated her very ill.”

* * *

LATER, when all was said and done, Caroline would consider Justine’s entrance into their household as the moment when change arrived for the Frankensteins. It wasn’t the usual change a new servant brought. Nor was it what Caroline expected. Though this change was imperceptible at first, it was like a stone wedged in a wall before the cement set. While the wall remained functional, it appeared ever so slightly off. Not that this was bad, mind.

For starters, as a result of Justine sharing a dormer with Sophie, Sophie began to oversleep; before then, the scullery maid always awakened Sophie, who was responsible for Caroline’s breakfast and hair. Therefore, when Justine shyly offered her services to Caroline, Caroline accepted. *She’ll learn from this*, Caroline told herself; it remained unclear whether she meant Sophie or Justine.

Such was the change confronting Sophie when she appeared a half-hour late one morning nearly two weeks after Justine’s arrival, just

before Christmas: Caroline's bedroom was already fragrant with coffee and freshly baked bread. A fire already blazed in the grate, which Justine had started. Caroline was already seated before her vanity wearing her favorite gown, a periwinkle blue *robe à l'anglaise*, with her hair dressed. It was a complicated coiffure too, one involving curls and interwoven plaits. Justine had done well—and then Sophie arrived.

Caroline watched Sophie's eyes widen at Justine's unexpected presence. The girl stood on the bench beside Caroline, setting a silk flower into a curl. Victor slouched in a chair across the room reading a book and drinking coffee; he'd knocked at his mother's door soon after she'd dressed, stating he'd had a nightmare. Caroline's mood was such that, for once, this didn't seem a sign of impending disasters or curses.

Sophie offered an awkward curtsy. "Madame."

Not so bold now, are we? Instead of clenching her fingers, Caroline suppressed a smile. "Ah, there you are at last!"

Victor closed his book. "Shall I leave, Mother?"

"No, it's fine, darling." He looked particularly grown-up that morning, Caroline decided. How broad his shoulders had become! His voice was starting to settle, and he was taller than she now.

He bent to kiss her cheek, the sour aroma of coffee lingering on his breath. "I'm a distraction. I know today's an important day."

Yes, an important day. Caroline tried to ignore the rise of nerves his words provoked.

Once Victor left, Sophie dropped another curtsy, this one deeper. "I'm sorry for my tardiness, Madame. It won't happen again."

"It matters not. Justine did my hair. I never have expected this—how clever she is!"

Justine beamed at Caroline as though she was the Virgin Mary come to life. "My father taught me. He'd help my mother with her hair. Well, and others' hair as well—Papa had so many talents."

"Well, you've certainly a gift." Caroline admired herself in her mirror. "Don't you agree, Sophie? Oh, Justine also sews. I've a gown that requires hemming—you know the one."

Sophie said eagerly, "The floral sack gown. I can do it, Madame."

Caroline waved a hand. "Ah, but look at how late you were! Let Justine assist you. Today is an important day. Or have you forgotten?"

"The Christmas soirée—I know." Sophie flushed. "I can hem the gown, Madame."

It was the Frankensteins' first time holding an event since the Geneva revolution. It had been Alphonse's idea. He'd pushed for the soirée despite Caroline's reluctance. A way to mark all had returned to as it should be.

"You should be helping Cook in the kitchen."

"I can do both, Madame." And then Sophie actually smiled as she departed.

Now alone with Justine, Caroline stole a glance at her. The girl had cleaned up nicely, though she still appeared more fey than human—perhaps that's what came of having a gravedigger as a father. That morning, she was wearing another one of Elizabeth's castoffs, which fit her perfectly, a Turkish red shortgown over a linen petticoat. Justine hummed tunelessly as she arranged Caroline's brushes, comb, and toiletries across her vanity. It was deeply reassuring.

Caroline's mind would be even more eased once she presented the proposition she'd mulled since the girl's arrival. It was a simple proposition, one that should be easy to agree to. "*Madame, anything you need of me, I shall do for you,*" Justine had vowed; this had spurred Caroline's plan.

Caroline cleared her throat to gain Justine's attention. The girl dropped a brush, which dislodged a small porcelain shepherdess on the edge of the vanity. The figurine shattered in a hail of white shards.

The girl curled herself beneath the vanity. "I'm sorry, Madame! So very sorry!"

Caroline fell to her knees next to the girl. "Come out! You needn't hide from me."

Justine untucked her head; her eyes brimmed with tears. "You're going to send me back, aren't you?"

"No, no—I never cared for that piece anyway. And I startled you, didn't I?"

"Did you?"

Caroline nodded. "It was my fault it broke, not yours."

The girl ceased rocking herself. "You're not angry?"

Caroline offered what she hoped was a beatific smile. "You will find our family is not like those in France. We treat our servants as our equals." She stretched a hand toward the girl. "Will you come out? Please?"

After a long moment, Justine accepted Caroline's hand. How sweet

the girl was yet feral, like a dog who'd been scolded so often it no longer trusted its instincts.

Once Justine stood, Caroline tucked a strand of Justine's strange, colorless hair into her plaits. "There. Now you're settled."

Justine drew a shuddering breath. "I'm very grateful to you, Madame!"

"That makes me very happy, Justine." Caroline's pulse picked up. *Ask her now.* "Once I understood what happened with your father," she continued in a careful tone, "I knew I had to help your family. You, in particular."

"Because you found me in your garden?" Justine had yet to explain how she'd arrived there; Caroline hadn't pressed her. Who could blame her for running away from such a mother, especially now that her father was dead?

"More than that, Justine . . ."

And then there it was, the opportunity to present Caroline's proposition.

"I have a favor to ask of you. While you are here, I hope you will tell me if you notice anything untoward in my household."

The girl's sallow cheeks flared with color. "Untoward? What does that mean?"

"Unusual. Alarming." Though Caroline hadn't found another pamphlet since that one time, she remained vigilant.

Justine cocked her head like an anxious dog. "What should I look for, Madame?"

"Listen to what others say. Anything you hear. Or if you see someone visiting who seems out of place."

"Someone visiting your servants? Or your children?"

Caroline offered a tinkling laugh accompanied by a vague gesture. "Anything you notice. I can check on my children myself."

"I did see someone that night, right before you found me," the girl whimpered. "That's what chased me into your garden."

Chased? Hadn't she run away? This was new information. Caroline's heart raced.

"Who chased you? What did you see?"

"I know I should have told you, Madame! I was afraid you'd think I made it up after everything my mother said."

“Oh, I’d have believed you!” Perhaps it had been a soldier. “Did they wear red? Or blue? A uniform?”

During the revolution, the Swiss artillery had worn red, the French blue. But the presence of military hadn’t frightened Caroline as much as those who’d rioted in Geneva.

Don’t think of that now.

“Red. Maybe purple. Definitely not blue. Not a soldier,” Justine admitted in a low voice. “A golem.”

A golem? Caroline laughed, unsettled. “I’m uncertain what that is.”

“A monster. Something my father spoke of. It’s a tale he told me . . .” Justine’s voice broke. “The golem chased me into your garden. He was dressed in red, larger than I’ve ever seen—”

“A Swiss soldier passing through.” Caroline’s tone suggested she’d have preferred it to be a monster. She recalled the bloodied bodies she’d spied after Alphonse’s release, the bitter screams, the bonfires encircling Geneva . . .

“You don’t believe me, do you, Madame? I’m not a half-wit! Nor am I a liar. Not like my mother said.”

From the wild look in her eyes, Justine was a blink away from tears. Caroline handed her a handkerchief. “I believe you did see something, Justine. I also believe whatever you saw is now gone, yes?”

Justine offered a vehement nod. Snot dribbled from her nose. She really wasn’t much more than a child. So different from Elizabeth and Victor. Uneducated. Simple. She probably knew nothing of revolution and soldiers. Well, best not to tell her.

“So, from here on, we’ll only think of the future, Justine. If you notice anything, you’ll tell me.” Caroline slid a cube of sugar toward Justine from her breakfast tray. The girl gave the sugar a cautious lick before popping it in her mouth. “Will you do this for me?”

Justine nodded, wiping her eyes. “Yes, Madame. Anything you need I shall do for you. I promise!”

“Thank you, Justine.”

Caroline picked up a pair of gloves off her desk. A walk. That’s what she needed. Afterward, she’d prepare for the Christmas soiree, though the anticipation made her lightheaded.

I’m safe. We’re all safe.

Hours later, these ruminations still troubled Caroline as she descended the great staircase to greet their *soirée* guests, Elizabeth by her side. At the bottom of the stairs, Justine held a platter of wineglasses that appeared to weigh more than she did. The girl offered a wide smile toward Caroline, but the girl's grateful presence did not ease her mood. Already there were too many guests—it appeared as though Alphonse had invited everyone they knew. Their aggressively festive chatter and laughter rose up the staircase, as though they were reassuring themselves all was as it had been before the Geneva revolution, that this Christmas would be like the others. But how could it be? Two Christmases ago there'd been no violence to recall.

Caroline glanced at Elizabeth, whose brow was as serene as ever. The girl looked lovely in her new sack-back gown, sewn from a creamy embroidered brocade. Its back pleats draped along the stairs, whispering with a faint crinkle every time Elizabeth moved. She'd kept her gold curls unpowdered, which also won Caroline's approval. Powder spoke of artifice and cunning, neither of which Elizabeth possessed.

The pleasure Caroline took in her ward's appearance faded with each step toward their guests; there appeared near to a hundred. In addition to this crush, Alphonse had invited a Dr. Galvani visiting from Bologna. "It's the holidays," he'd said. "We can't remain hermits forever. Plus I have a surprise for Victor." What this surprise was, he refused to say; Caroline wondered if it had anything to do with this mysterious doctor.

Caroline murmured to Elizabeth, "Did your uncle say anything to you about a surprise for Victor?"

"Victor?" Elizabeth waved over the balustrade toward their guests, smiling broadly. How loud it was! "There he is! He's downstairs. Uncle too."

"That's not what I asked."

"What, Aunt?"

"Never mind, darling." Change made people skittish, Caroline decided. Everyone, not only aristocrats. Change felt as slippery as the soles of her new shoes against the marble stair—

Caroline stumbled on the polished step. Elizabeth grabbed the soft of her guardian's arm.

"Aunt! Are you alright?"

Caroline clutched the balustrade. "I am now, dearest."

A nervous smile as she pulled herself upright. One step down. Another.

Viewed from above, the Frankensteins' guests resembled a kaleidoscope of color and silks, all glimmering beneath the candle-lit chandelier. Their servants circled about them, even Justine with her platter of glasses. Their gatherings had never appeared so overwhelmingly large in Geneva. Perhaps it was because the doors to the ballroom remained shut, forcing their guests to congregate in their entry hall, which wasn't intended for a *soirée*. Despite the crush, several couples were dancing a minuet to the string quartet Alphonse had engaged. Joyful, colorful, stately. As life had once been.

To her surprise, Caroline felt her heart lift with pleasure.

Surrounding the dancing couples were clusters of ladies and gentlemen, all of whom had traveled more than a league from Geneva to join the Frankensteins on a cold winter night. All were dressed in their finest, though this varied by class and modernity. Some chose stiff court dresses adorned with wide panniers and ruffles, others simple white chemise dresses flouncing with lace.

There was Madame Tavernier, their lively neighbor from Geneva. She was a gossip who enjoyed making Caroline uneasy. Of course, she stood beside the oil portrait of Caroline, her ostrich feather-adorned head cocked with a knowing air; of course, she wore a blue satin court gown. There was Madame Tavernier's awkward daughter Marianne, whom Elizabeth had befriended, along with the Biron girls, who were near Elizabeth's age. Judging by the flutter of their painted silk fans, they'd already drunk a glass of wine. Behind them, Monsieur Lenard, the kindly lawyer whose opinion Alphonse relied upon, and his charming wife, who appeared with child. They were dressed in unadorned clothes sewn of fine fabrics, suggesting their republican ideals.

As Caroline descended the stairs, many raised their eyes her way and smiled as though she was a queen. Her mood rose. *How lovely this is*, she thought, just as the string quartet finished the minuet and began a lively contredanse.

Amid the swirling skirts and joyful laughter, Caroline's eyes picked out Victor, who awaited by the wall beside Alphonse—Victor who looked so handsome in his satin cutaway and black breeches. Caroline's chest felt near to bursting with love and pride. Alphonse

appeared dignified in the waistcoat she'd embroidered with flowers for him.

Beside Victor, a tall young man with fawn-colored longish hair and a sensitive air. Henry Clerval, Victor's closest friend. He was still in that awkward stage of life where he appeared neither boy nor man. He wore a simple brown jacket bearing a white rosebud in a buttonhole, more artistic than noble. He'd brought along his widower father, who fidgeted amid the aristocratic company. Monsieur Clerval was a merchant with a shop off the Place du Bourg-de-Four in Geneva. He appeared dressed as though for a midday stroll.

"Look, there's Henry!" Elizabeth said, releasing Caroline's arm. "I must greet him."

"Go, dearest!"

Finally, Caroline saw the doctor Alphonse invited—he could be no other. The dancers seemed to fade from view as she stared. Her stomach gave an odd flip though she was uncertain why.

Dr. Galvani stood alone in the crowd, hands cupped behind his back as though deep in thought. The doctor's unpowdered greying hair was gathered at his neck with a thick black ribbon. His coat was decidedly shabby, but his linens blindingly white. Caroline sensed an air of self-satisfaction in the doctor's posture. Confidence. For some reason, his hands drew her attention even from a distance. They were stained along the fingertips.

Before she could mull this significance, Victor swept up the remaining stairs to greet his mother. He bowed gallantly.

"How lovely you look, Mother! May I escort you?"

"You may." Caroline rushed with pleasure. Her son guided her toward Alphonse, who offered a shy grin that reminded her of the courtly gentleman who'd sheltered her after her father's untimely death.

"You look happy," Alphonse said, draping his arm about her waist.

"I am—you were right about the soirée." Caroline swept her arms toward their guests, eyes searching for Dr. Galvani and his stained fingers. "Everyone is so happy! And the music—I've forgotten how I've missed it."

Ah, but your happiness is best of all, my dear."

"Your doctor appears lonely," Caroline observed. "I should introduce myself."

“No introduction is necessary. But trust me, you won’t forget Dr. Galvani. It’s fortunate he was visiting Geneva for Christmas.”

“What sort of doctor is he?” Her tone was sharper than intended.

Alphonse offered a knowing smile, the kind he used when they were alone, a rarity these days. “A natural philosopher.”

Victor piped up, “Why is he here? Why are the ballroom doors shut?”

“I’d wondered the same, Uncle.” Elizabeth and Henry joined their circle. Lanky Henry leaned against petite Elizabeth in a protective manner; Monsieur Clerval had drifted away to God knew where, probably eager to avoid conversation. “How secretive you are about him!”

“Patience, my dears.” Alphonse pulled two glasses of champagne from a tray. One for Caroline, the second for him. “All will be revealed soon.”

Before Caroline could posit another question, the string quartet silenced. Alphonse approached Dr. Galvani.

“If you please, let us begin.”

“As you will, Signore Frankenstein.” The doctor spoke with an Italian inflection.

The ballroom doors glided open as though guided by unseen hands. An unexpected icy breeze blew in.

Alphonse raised his voice to address their guests. “Mesdames and messieurs! To the ballroom! The entertainment is about to commence.”

CHAPTER IV.



“On this occasion a man of great research in natural philosophy was with us, and . . . he entered on the explanation of a theory which he had formed on the subject of electricity and galvanism.”

* * *

INSIDE THE BALLROOM, the air felt as though ice crystals were suspended within it. A quick glance revealed all the windows had been opened. The ballroom was also unlit. Caroline shivered as she accepted her husband’s hand in the shadowy room. Her excitement surprised her.

Once the Frankensteins and their guests were inside, a bevy of servants shut the ballroom doors and windows with a snap. The room turned pitch-black; Caroline’s excitement shifted. *Oh, for a single candle!* she fretted, her fingers searching for the edge of the door.

Unable to see, every sound grated. Giddy chatter rising and falling. The shuffle of feet as people settled. She struggled to find an anchor in her disorientation, something besides the door frame. There was Elizabeth with her nervous giggle. Henry’s mild scent of trade and ink. Victor clutching a purloined glass of claret, judging by the scent of fermented fruit.

“We’re all inside, yes?” Alphonse sounded from the other side of the ballroom. “We’ll begin. I’ve invited you here to witness a miracle—”

“A Christmas miracle?” a woman’s voice scoffed. Madame Tavernier,

who'd been staring at the oil portrait earlier; Caroline's mouth tightened.

"A miracle at any time," Alphonse clarified. "A miracle my guest Dr. Galvani, a natural philosopher from Bologna, will reveal."

Caroline awaited a rush of chatter or applause. Silence. Perhaps their guests were as uneasy as she felt.

"Dr. Galvani?" Alphonse prompted. "You are ready to commence?"

"I am, Signore Frankenstein."

A match hissed. The scent of sulfur. A candle offering scarce illumination to a man's face. Dr. Galvani's face. He emerged from the darkness, as uncanny as a ghost. Caroline's stomach gave another odd flip.

Dr. Galvani called out, "Your guests can all see me, yes?"

A rush of assent. Dr. Galvani's tone was forceful. "I apologize for the cold air, but it is necessary for reasons I will later explain. I beg your patience as I reveal newly discovered wonders, which will bring us closer to the source of all that animates life." He clapped briskly. "If you will, clear the center of the ballroom! Against the walls, if you please."

A rustle of skirts and heels. Laughter. "Ouch, you stepped on my foot!" Apologies. Caroline shivered anew. She sensed Alphonse beside her; yes, that was the camphor liniment he used for his stiff neck.

"Are you frightened, my dear?" he asked.

An unexpected ripple rose along her spine. "Should I be?"

"Watch. Whatever happens, don't shut your eyes."

Dr. Galvani's voice boomed. "*Signore e signori*, are you ready?"

A chorus of impatient, excited applause. Caroline recognized Elizabeth's bell-like giggle in the mix.

"Bravo!" Dr. Galvani called. "Three rules before we start. *Primo*: do not look away from the center of the room. *Secondo*: do not move no matter what you might behold. *Terzo*: remain silent and calm . . ."

He blew out his candle.

"*Ecco!* Let us begin!"

Devoid of that single candle, the ballroom seemed as dark as Hades. Caroline resisted the urge to flee.

After what felt like the longest moment, her ears made out a soft metallic click. The door that led to the garden. Had someone entered? Her throat grew tight.

A shifting, slippy sound. Soft footsteps on the marble floor from

the center of the ballroom—this must be why Dr. Galvani had insisted on their vacating it.

And then just as unexpectedly, a pinprick of light.

A spark.

Flurries of sparks. They twinkled like stars in the middle of the ballroom, each about three feet above the floor. No, higher. The stars appeared as Caroline imagined the sky must have shone the night of her Savior's birth. Her mouth spread into an unforced smile. How magical the stars appeared, the sparks rising and falling! They were accompanied by a soft sizzle that snapped and popped.

Amid the sparks of light, she made out the silhouettes of legs, each pressing against the others as they danced. Men—or were they women?—adorned in breeches and stockings, their arms waving with unexpected grace in circle patterns. They must have been wearing slippers, for their steps made nary a sound.

More sparks. The audience gasped. A chorus of *"Oooohs!"*

Caroline's hands relaxed. Yes, it was good. All was good. Whatever Dr. Galvani was presenting, it was a miracle, as Alphonse had promised. Her eyes watered. Was it from squinting into the dark? Or emotion? No matter. Dr. Galvani's display had been beautiful, and beauty was required these troubled days—she understood this now.

The stars dazzled. Circled in a celestial display. And then just as suddenly, they faded from whence they came.

"Ecco la!"

Light returned in a blaze of candles. Caroline blinked, eyes stinging. Once her sight adjusted, she made out the silhouettes of six men, all adorned in stark ebony from their toes to their fingertips. They wore black breeches above black silk tights with matching slippers and gloves, to blend in with the night. Each of them held a lit brass candelabra as though God Himself had declared "Let there be light."

"Electricity!" Dr. Galvani proclaimed with a bow.

"Bravo!" Caroline beat her palms together until they burned, her face aching with joy. Others joined her applause, along with a soft "Brilliant," from Henry.

"Brilliant indeed," she heard Alphonse murmur, his tone lighter than she'd witnessed in months. "Victor? What think you?"

No answer came. Where was Victor? Caroline glanced about the ballroom. There was Elizabeth, Henry . . . At last she found Victor on

the other side of the door from her. His arms were folded against his chest, his face long.

“Darling.” She nodded toward Victor.

Alphonse waved away her concern. “Look.”

He pointed toward Dr. Galvani, who’d returned to the center of the ballroom. What was next? Caroline found herself eager to find out; she forgot about Victor. Such wonders and marvels! She’d never forget them.

“The demonstration of static electricity you’ve just witnessed,” Dr. Galvani explained, “was created by rubbing silk in a dry, cold environment—hence the open windows. The friction creates negative and positive charges. But this is but a fraction of what electricity can accomplish.

“Sir Isaac Newton is said to have avowed that he felt like a child picking up shells beside the great and unexplored ocean of truth—thus is how it is for me. Good people, though I have devoted much of my life in an attempt to unveil the face of Nature, her immortal lineaments remain a wonder and a mystery.” A shrug. “Still, one tries. I am encouraged by the writings of other natural philosophers such as Signore Priestley of London with his *History and Present State of Electricity*, Signore Marat’s recent *Memoire sur l’electricite medical*—”

“What about Cornelius Agrippa? Paracelsus?” Victor’s voice rang out.

Dr. Galvani smiled. “Ah, young Signore Frankenstein! I am honored by your interest. I would prefer not to discuss Agrippa or Paracelsus. Alchemy is not the focus of my display.”

Alchemy? Hadn’t that to do with transforming lead into gold? Caroline remembered an old tale her father had told her before his death, one he believed as truth. Dr. Galvani continued speaking, but she was distracted.

She glanced over at Victor. His mouth was pursed, arms still crossed.

Why is he so disapproving?

Once Dr. Galvani finished—Caroline recalled him explaining electrostatic generators, a Dr. Nollet as inventor—his assistants rolled out a waist-high cart holding the square-shaped contraption. A hollow glass globe rested in the center of it, an immense hand crank on one side.

The cart's wooden wheels clattered like a peddler's wagon against the marble floor.

At the doctor's command, everyone in the room, even her servants, circled the electrostatic generator to hold hands tightly. On Caroline's left, Alphonse. On her right, Elizabeth; her ward's palms were moist. Caroline looked over her shoulder. There was Victor beside Elizabeth, then Henry with his father, who yawned. Across the circle, Justine, who appeared more blanched of color than usual, Sophie with her bright red hair.

Dr. Galvani ordered, "Whatever you do, do not release your neighbor's hand. Trust in the mystery of Nature as the electrical fluid is passed from source to end and back again!"

As Dr. Galvani turned the crank of the electrostatic generator, the glass globe glowed with a blue light. Mercury. A sharp ting sizzled through Caroline's palms, passing from Alphonse to Elizabeth and around again. Smoke filled the air, a charge thick as cotton.

Caroline was riveted. Nature Herself was among them. Nature who possessed unfathomable wisdom. Nature who'd let Christmas arrive on the longest night of the year.

"Elizabeth," she said, raising her chin, "your hair!"

Elizabeth's golden hair floated in the air, cracking with light. It enveloped her face like a halo, reminding Caroline of an experience she had as a young woman, when she'd viewed a lightning storm atop a mountain. She'd watched in wonder, stunned by its celestial power.

Caroline felt her mouth widen. Joy, that's what she felt. But not all felt such.

A scream rang out. Another.

"It's fine! You're safe!" Caroline reassured Elizabeth.

"It's not me, Aunt." Elizabeth let go of Caroline's hand and pointed across the ballroom. "Look!"

Justine had broken from the circle, releasing Sophie's hand. She stood alone, a pale figure staring at the ballroom windows. Another scream. The sound of shattering glass. The window smashed. Now Sophie shrieked.

The remainder of the circle scattered in a clatter of rushing limbs and shouts. Caroline resisted the urge to scream herself.

"The golem!" Justine shouted. "It's here!"

Someone tall and dark staggered into the ballroom from the garden.

Someone hulking and gasping. Glass crunched beneath his footfall. His arms were full as he approached Caroline. Was he holding a basket?

Justine screamed again. "The golem!"

"Back!" Alphonse ordered. He pulled out what appeared to be a pistol. Where had it come from?

The intruder's silhouette grew close enough that Caroline made out the sallow gleam of his eye. "*My children!*" she wanted to shout, but no words came. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Henry push Elizabeth from the intruder's path, and Victor reaching for Elizabeth, shouting, shouting.

They're protecting her. But I must protect them.

Caroline set her body before Elizabeth, Victor, and Henry, her knees buckling. She collapsed to the marble floor. Breath knocked from her lungs. Her body arched. A charge flowed into her spine, from her heels to her forehead.

Dr. Galvani. The electrostatic generator.

It still whirled, still glowed. Somehow Caroline had brushed against it in her attempt to protect Elizabeth and Victor. She managed to break away.

"Victor! Elizabeth! Where are you?"

"Behind you, Mother!"

Before Caroline could turn, a flurry of papers assaulted her face, edges sharp against her cheeks. Pamphlets. Dozens of them. A hundred. They scattered across the floor. The pages flipped open, legible despite the scant light. A forest of woodcuts depicting a chorus of unclothed Marie Antoinettes. Men, women, animals. Genitals, breasts, limbs, taunting and depraved.

The intruder stepped forward, blocking Caroline's view of the pamphlets. He was daring her to move. Daring her to leave. Well, he'd have to kill her before she'd let him hurt her children.

He was tall. Foreboding. His mouth cracked open, a corner raised. Lips shifting. *Hate you*, he appeared to be saying. Or was it *Help me*? Was he wearing a red jacket? Yes, he was.

Screams, but not her own. Another surge ringing through her veins. Panic, not electricity.

Caroline looked down.

Blood on the floor. Blood on the intruder's hands. Wet. Sticky.

The intruder's hands stretched toward Caroline, but she couldn't

turn away. How sorrowful his eyes appeared! Her compassion rose, surprising her.

“Madame!” Justine shouted, throwing herself between Caroline and the intruder.

A spark of light. A blast. Smoke.

When the smoke cleared, the body of a tall raven-haired man dressed in a red uniform lay on the ballroom floor, a pistol beside him. A Swiss soldier.

“He’s dead,” Alphonse confirmed. “But not from gunshot.”

CHAPTER V.



“When I look back, it seems to me as if this almost miraculous change of inclination and will was the immediate suggestion of the guardian angel of my life—the last effort made by the spirit of preservation to avert the storm that was even then hanging in the stars.”

* * *

OUTSIDE THE FRANKENSTEINS' *maison de campagne*, a line of coaches departed for Geneva, their lanterns hanging like stars in the night. These coaches transported all of the Frankensteins' guests, including Dr. Galvani with his electrostatic generator. The lifeless body of the intruder had been dragged into the garden shed, where the new gravedigger would collect him come morning. The pamphlets had been gathered and burned, judging by the weight of smoke in the air.

Caroline observed all this with a peculiar detachment. How much time had passed since Alphonse's Christmas *soirée* staggered to a halt? An hour? More? She couldn't be certain—time seemed twisted, strange. She glanced toward the lake, toward the horizon. The sky remained ink-dark, but she sensed dawn would arrive soon. Victor and Elizabeth stood behind her. They were safe. Beside her, Alphonse clutched her hand. He stroked it with his thumb.

“Are you listening, my dear? He'd been a Swiss soldier,” he repeated in a soothing tone. “A mercenary. A revolutionary probably on his way

from Geneva to God knows where. He'd collapsed before I discharged the pistol."

Victor remarked, "Just think, he was alive this morning, went through his day, and now he's dead."

Caroline shivered, but not from cold as she had in the ballroom. She watched Elizabeth and Victor drift away. They appeared headed for the garden. "Don't go into the shed!" she wanted to shout. She didn't. They should go to bed. She should go to bed. She couldn't. Not yet.

She inhaled deeply. The air smelled moist. Dangerous. Everything was dangerous. It hadn't mattered they'd left Geneva for this house one league east in Belrive. It hadn't mattered she'd been vigilant. *One, two, three . . .* Yet again, Marie Antoinette's half-clad torso rushed behind Caroline's eyelids. Those pamphlets. Everyone had seen them, though no one said anything. They were frightened, as she'd been.

But she'd protected her children. She'd done what was necessary. Afterward, Victor had embraced her, muttering how afraid he'd been to lose his mother . . .

"Caroline? Did you hear me?"

"I-I'm listening, Alphonse," she replied. "A man died in our ballroom. A soldier. A Swiss revolutionary. The gravedigger will gather him in the morning."

He pulled her close against him, his heart a steady rhythm. "He was already dying when he burst through the window. Someone must have knifed him days earlier. His chest had savage wounds, which were green with pus. Frankly, it's a miracle he didn't expire earlier. He'd taken shelter in our greenhouse—there's bloodstains on the floor, a knapsack. He probably planned to leave once he felt hale."

What had Victor said? "*He was alive that morning, went through his day . . .*"

Alphonse continued, still clutching her hand. "When he didn't improve, he grew desperate for help. That's why he interrupted the soirée. He'd heard people, noticed the candlelight."

Caroline struggled to comprehend. Alphonse's individual words, yes, she understood. But the compilation of these words into thoughts . . . it was too much. Her knees felt wobbly. When she shut her eyes to calm herself, all she saw was the soldier's eyes when they met hers. She'd felt a strange kinship with him she couldn't explain. An affinity.

But that wasn't all Caroline felt. An unexpected joy rose from the core of her body, similar to the one she'd felt during Galvani's celestial display. Was it that she survived what she'd most feared? Or something else?

"She protected me," Caroline said. "As I hoped."

Alphonse's thumb paused on her hand. "Who protected you?"

"Justine. The new maid. She threw herself before the soldier after he broke the window. All to protect us."

Another realization, one that brought a hope into Caroline's heart brighter than Dr. Galvani's display.

"Justine mentioned she'd seen the soldier the night we found her. She spoke of someone chasing her into our garden, a monster. A golem, whatever that is. She said it was a story her father told."

"A golem . . ." Alphonse offered a reluctant smile. "My dear, I have a confession to make. It was due to Justine that this entertainment, if you will, took place."

"Justine invited Dr. Galvani?" How could this be?

"No, but she reminded me of him—I met Dr. Galvani last week in Geneva at the Assembly. I'd forgotten about him until two days ago, when I startled Justine in Victor's room looking at his books. At first she was distressed, for she feared I'd send her back to her mother. I finally teased out the truth: you wanted her to pay mind to anything unusual."

"*Whatever you want of me, I shall do.*" Somehow Justine had sensed Caroline's needs, her worries, even before Caroline asked her to spy.

Caroline replied, "What was in his books?"

Alphonse shrugged. "She can't read, so she couldn't say—she said the pictures alarmed her. But I understood what the books contained. Cornelius Agrippa. Paracelsus. Albertus Magnus." He shook his head. "Alchemy. Fantastical rubbish to rot his mind."

The cold air transformed while he spoke. Sharp breezes, clouds gathering; the shift in weather mirrored the passion of Alphonse's words.

He continued, "I noticed Victor was secretive and behaving strangely. I questioned him. He remained tight-lipped. Caroline, I've been a poor father."

"You? Never."

Across the lake, a slash of lightning over the Juras. Too far away to affect them.

"Listen, and judge, Caroline. Last summer when we visited the baths in Thonon, that day we were rained out at the inn? He'd shown me the Agrippa, which he'd found in the library there. I'd laughed and said, 'Ah, Cornelius Agrippa! Do not waste your time upon this; it is sad trash.'"

"How did Victor respond?"

"He didn't. But to be fair, I didn't say *why* it was trash—I was distracted, for I'd received a letter from Ernest's doctor that morning. Perhaps if I had, Victor wouldn't have read the other books."

Another flash of lightning, this one closer.

"If I'd been a good father, I would have explained the principles of Agrippa have been entirely exploded and that a more modern system of science has been introduced. I would have arranged for him to have a tutor or go to school." Alphonse's tone turned gentle. "But I feared upsetting you after sending Ernest away."

Ernest. Away. The words dangled between them.

"And so when Justine showed you those books in his room," Caroline said at last, "you invited Dr. Galvani here to educate Victor." Now the entire evening made sense.

Alphonse hung his head. "I worried if I said anything critical of the Agrippa, I'd make it worse. Victor is so passionate, so independent of thought—he should really be in school. But I would have never known about his interest in alchemy unless Justine had found those books. She's loyal."

Caroline squeezed her husband's hand, wrinkled beside her smooth one. "I should have confided in you that I asked her to pay attention to anything irregular. I ought to ask your forgiveness."

"There is nothing to forgive." He pressed his lips against her cheek, his grey eyes gleaming in the dark. "You, Caroline Beaufort Frankenstein, are ever perfect in my eyes, ever lovely. Exactly as when I first met you all those years ago at your father's side." His voice broke. "I know I am much older than you. I know I could not have been your first choice for a husband."

"That's not true," she protested, though it was. The truth was she'd had no choice. Not really, unless you considered a life plaiting straw for hats a choice. Anyway, no woman's life was her own—she'd known this for as long as she could recall. Nor was she the first girl to wed for

security over affection. All these years later, her prosperity still felt so undeserved, especially once she learned Alphonse had married her out of love, not pity over her father.

“You have been a good husband, Alphonse,” she said, eyes stinging. “A good father. A good man. You are *good*.”

With this declaration, Caroline allowed her hands to settle as though she’d been relieved of a burden too heavy to bear. No tapping. No counting. She stroked Alphonse’s white beard; it had been grey when they’d first met. Alphonse had been true all these years. He’d loved her when they’d wed even if she hadn’t loved him then as she should.

Sensing her softening, Alphonse reached for Caroline as though to breach the years between them. He kissed her gently. Tentatively. But it was a true kiss nonetheless.

He pulled away, awaiting her reaction. His breath warm upon her cheeks, his skin scented with tobacco and wine and, yes, gunpowder.

Despite her turning him away for so long, he still loved her. This felt more of a Christmas miracle than Dr. Galvani’s display that evening. All their troubles dissolved—the loss of infants, the illness of their younger son, the difficulties of their eldest, the hopes they held for their ward—until all that remained was her vast white bed, which awaited them upstairs in her tower room.

* * *

One house. Four beds. An hour before dawn.

In Caroline’s bed, her husband slept soundly beside her for the first time in six years. She smiled in the dark. How warm Alphonse had been, how gentle! She hadn’t protested when he’d blown out the candle she always slept with. Then he’d embraced her, setting her adrift in her bed but not alone. They could be alone together, couldn’t they? Wasn’t that what marriage was? It was joining forces against an unpredictable world, even when this world included wounded soldiers and revolutionary pamphlets and natural philosophers and troubled sons and alchemy books.

Love is a form of alchemy, she thought.

She smiled in the darkness, hands flat against her counterpane. *There’s much more to this world than I am comfortable considering. But I am*

safe. I am loved. Nor was she alone. She had Alphonse, Victor, Elizabeth, and now Justine, who'd proven her worth that night.

And what of Justine? Was the girl resting comfortably? With all the turmoil, Caroline had never checked on her. Had she been injured when she'd thrown her body before Caroline's? Was she distressed? Caroline would speak to her in the morning. Perhaps she'd offer the girl an education, now that she knew Justine was illiterate. After all, the Frankenstein household wasn't like those in England or France. They treated their servants as their equals. She'd raise the girl above her station. Win her devotion, which was of greater value than loyalty.

Heart at ease, Caroline watched Alphonse's eyelids tremble as he slept. He was dreaming. Soon she would too. She set a kiss against his bristled jaw and shut her eyes.

A refreshing slumber overtook her, one that led her to pay no mind to the flash of lightning, where cold air met warm; for once, a storm would not disturb her. However, a flash of lightning awakened Sophie upstairs in her bed.

The girl's eyes shot open. Beside her Justine snored softly, arms relaxed across her pillow. How could she sleep after everything that night? As though a man had not died before their eyes—a man who'd appeared so tall and scary?

"You're brave," Sophie whispered. "I hadn't expected that."

With this, she returned to sleep, unaware that both Victor and Elizabeth's beds were empty, for they'd remained in the garden after Caroline and Alphonse had gone inside.

Lightning or no, Victor paced before Elizabeth, his jacket unbuttoned; it had turned strangely warm for December. The shed holding the intruder's corpse was but a few yards away.

"Just think, that soldier was here this morning, went through his day, and now he's dead," he said yet again, pointing toward the shed. "He'd been hiding in our greenhouse for days. More! Ever since Justine's arrival. He could have killed my mother!"

"I know," Elizabeth replied. "It's a shock."

He turned toward the shed. "I want to look at him a last time. To make sure he's really dead. I've never seen a corpse before."

"No, you mustn't! We should go inside. Come!"

Elizabeth took his hand to calm him. It was an old habit, one engrained from their childhood. Instead of Victor tugging her hand in

their old way—a quick squeeze of the fingers as though to say *You are my friend and I am here with you*—he released her hand.

“Not yet. I want to speak to you first.”

How strangely Victor was behaving! “Not about the corpse, I hope.”

A deep rumble of thunder shuddered across the sky.

“Something else . . . I’ve been a fool, Elizabeth.”

“Because you never noticed the soldier?”

When Victor answered, his voice was low. “Something far more humiliating. Dr. Galvani made me realize how useless—no, despicable—my studies have been.”

Another lightning flash. Elizabeth waited for him to continue.

Victor’s words rushed and tumbled like a broken dam. “I’ve been studying alchemy. I found some books. Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus, and Paracelsus, they’ve been the lords of my imagination for the past two years. I kept my studies a secret from my parents, from you, from Henry. Under the guidance of the alchemists, I searched for the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life. All I considered was the glory I’d gain if I could banish disease and death. But after tonight, I’ll quit those pursuits. I’ll turn to something else. Mathematics perhaps.”

With his confession, Victor smoothed his curls, drew a deep breath. He even yawned. Still, there was an oddness about his affect that troubled Elizabeth.

She stole a glance at the shed, thinking of the corpse within. “We should go inside, Victor. It must be nearly dawn.”

“Not yet. Let’s watch the storm from beneath the doorway first. Come!”

Elizabeth agreed, letting him lead her toward the *maison de campagne*. They stood hand-in-hand, their backs pressed against the door, as the elements stirred in their direction. Another swish of lightning, this one from the north. In the east, where the sun edged the horizon, rain lashed the sky until it lightened to the hue of a fading bruise. A deep rumbling rose from the core of the earth itself.

“Look, Victor! The storm’s nearly upon us!”

Together, they watched the storm’s progress with curiosity and delight—well, the curiosity was Elizabeth’s, the delight Victor’s. Thunder burst with frightful loudness from the heavens, but they were protected beneath the doorway. Safe. A deafening rain soaked the garden. A downpour.

All of a sudden a stream of fire issued from the old oak that stood about twenty yards from the house, the same one they'd found Justine beneath two weeks earlier. As soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak disappeared from sight. "No, don't go to it, Elizabeth," Victor warned. "We'll look in the morning—it's unsafe." Too late: she'd run toward the oak, not believing her eyes.

A jolt. A shake. Elizabeth slammed against the wet soil, face up toward the heavens, rain splattering her body. Somehow a minuscule fraction of the force hitting the oak traveled through the soaked ground, across the garden. Elizabeth shuddered as energy surged up her spine, through her hands and beyond her fingers. Toward the sky. Then, just as suddenly as the electricity had risen, it was gone, leaving her flat-backed on the earth.

Elizabeth sat up, woozy but untouched save for her rain-soaked body. "Victor . . ."

Victor sank beside her, grasping her hand in his. Now he was drenched too.

"I know, such wonders," was all he said, his eyes gleaming. "Such marvels."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photograph © Robert Presutti





KRIS WALDHERR is an award-winning author, illustrator, and designer whose many books for adults and children include *The Book of Goddesses*, *Bad Princess*, and *Doomed Queens*, which *The New Yorker* praised as “utterly satisfying.” Her debut novel *The Lost History of Dreams* received a starred *Kirkus* review and was named a CrimeReads best book of the year. Waldherr’s fiction has won fellowships from the Virginia Center of the Creative Arts and a work-in-progress reading grant from Poets & Writers.

As a visual artist, she has had her illustrations exhibited in the Ruskin Library, the Mazza Museum of International Art from

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Kris Waldherr works and lives in Brooklyn in a Victorian-era home with her family and cats. In her spare time, she enjoys travel, theater, and music.

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