



# SUCH WICKED INTENT

A prequel to Mary Shelley's gothic classic *Frankenstein*

KENNETH OPPEL

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About the Author

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## About the Book

When does obsession become madness? Tragedy has forced sixteen-year-old Victor Frankenstein to swear off alchemy for ever. He burns the Dark Library. He vows he will never dabble in the dark sciences again, just as he vows he will no longer covet Elizabeth, his brother's betrothed. If only these things were not so tempting.

When Victor and Elizabeth discover a portal into the spirit world, they cannot resist. Together with their friend Henry, they venture into a place of infinite possibilities where power and passion reign. But as they search for the knowledge to raise the dead, they unknowingly unlock a darkness from which they may never return.

# SUCH WICKED INTENT

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*The Apprenticeship of  
Victor Frankenstein*

Book Two

KENNETH OPPEL

RHCP DIGITAL

*For Sophia, Nathaniel, and Julia*

# CONSUMED

THE BOOKS FLEW open like startled birds trying to escape the flames. One after the other I savagely hurled them into the hottest part of the bonfire, watching them ignite almost before they landed.

We'd hauled everything out of the Dark Library, every alchemical tome, every grimoire, every glass vial and earthenware mortar. Father had ordered that it all be destroyed, and he'd enlisted the help of only our most trusted servants. But even with their assistance it had taken us many hours to carry it all out into the courtyard.

It was well past midnight now. There were no more books left to add to the conflagration, but my body still craved things to tear and throw. I prowled the margins of the fire with a shovel, flinging half-burned debris back into the centre of the inferno. I was hungry for destruction. I looked at my father, the servants, their faces pale and terrible in the dancing light and shadow.

Pain throbbed from the stumps of my two missing fingers. The heat seared my face and brought water to my eyes. There was nothing remarkable about this bonfire, no spectral lights, no demonic whiff of brimstone. It was just cracked glass and burning paper and ink and reeking leather. The smoke lifted into the dark autumn sky, carrying with it all the lies and false promises I'd foolishly believed would save my brother.

The next morning I woke to the sound of the birds' dawn chorus and had my brief blissful moment – always the smallest of moments – before I remembered.

*He is gone, truly gone.*

There was only a hint of light behind my curtains, but I knew sleep had abandoned me, so I sat up, my body stiff from the previous night. The smell of smoke was still trapped in my hair. I put my bare feet against the cool floor and stared blankly down at my toes. The dull pulses of pain in my right hand were the only reminders that time even continued to pass.

In the three weeks since my twin's death, I'd felt neither fully asleep nor awake. Things happened around me without happening to me. Konrad had shared my experiences for so long that without him as my confidant, nothing seemed properly real. My sorrow had folded itself over and over like a vast sheet of paper, becoming thicker and thicker, harder and harder, until it filled my entire body. I'd avoided everyone and sought out places where I could be alone.

We were a house of ravens, dressed in our mourning black.

I clenched my eyes shut for a moment, then stood and hurriedly dressed. I wanted to be outside. The house was still asleep as I made my way down the grand staircase and opened the door to the courtyard. The sky was just starting to brighten above the mountains, the air crystalline and still. The bonfire had all but burned out, leaving a low, ragged pile of faintly smoking ash and fractured earthenware.

'Can't sleep either?' said a voice, and in surprise I looked over to see Elizabeth.

I shook my head.

'Every morning I wake so early,' she said, 'and there's always just a second when—'

'Me too,' I said.

She gave a quick nod. In the severe lines of her black dress, she appeared thinner and paler, but no less beautiful. As a small child she'd come to live with us, an

orphaned and very distant relation. Quickly she'd become part of our family, and a cherished friend to my brother and me – but this past summer my thoughts for her had often been more than friendly. I forced myself to look away. Her heart had always belonged to Konrad.

'So it's done,' she said, staring at the smouldering remains of the Dark Library. 'I saw you all, last night. Did it make you feel better?'

'Briefly. No, not even that. It was something to do. You didn't feel like burning some books?'

She sighed. 'I couldn't. I felt too heartsick, just thinking of all the hope we'd put into them.'

It seemed an age, but was scarcely three months ago, that Konrad, Elizabeth and I had discovered the secret passage to the Dark Library. It was a hidden storehouse of arcane volumes collected by our ancestor Wilhelm Frankenstein. Father had forbidden us from returning and had said the books were filled with dangerous nonsense, but when Konrad had become desperately ill and no doctor could heal him, I'd taken it upon myself to find a cure. One of the texts in the library held the recipe for the legendary Elixir of Life. With our dearest friend Henry Clerval, and under the guidance of an alchemist called Julius Polidori, we'd sought out the elixir's three ingredients, each more dangerous to obtain than the previous. I glanced at my right hand, my two missing fingers. But even after all we'd risked, it hadn't helped.

Staring over the pathetic remains of the bonfire, for the first time I felt a pang of regret. So many yearning theories and recipes.

'I can't help thinking,' I murmured, 'that perhaps if I'd been faster, or smarter, or found some other, wiser tome . . .'

'Victor—' she said gently.

'And then other times I wonder . . .' I couldn't finish my sentence.

For a moment she was silent. Then she stepped closer and took my hands. Her skin was soft and cool. 'You didn't kill him. Look at me. We don't know what killed Konrad. Whether it was the elixir we gave him, or just his disease, or something else entirely. You're not responsible.'

'There's no colour or taste to things,' I said, 'no hope of things ever being what they were.'

With determination she inhaled. 'He's dead, and no amount of wishful thinking will bring him back. It's a struggle, but I've resigned myself to that. And you must too.'

'You think his soul is elsewhere, though,' I said, knowing that she often travelled to the church to light her candles and pray. 'I've no such consolation.'

She stepped closer and hugged me. Gratefully, my arms encircled her. I could feel her heart beating against my ribs.

'Nothing will be the same again, you're right,' she said. 'We're in the depths of grief. But we're also built for happiness. That I truly believe. We'll find it again. We must help each other find it.'

She lifted her head to look at me. The sun had just cleared the mountain peaks, and in its pure light I saw the three whisker-thin scratches that Polidori's diabolical lynx had left across her cheek. The urge to kiss her dazzled me – and for the briefest moment I wondered if she might *want* to be kissed.

I looked at the ground. My voice was hoarse when I asked, 'And how will you find it, do you think, this happiness?'

'When things are more settled here,' she said, 'maybe when spring comes, I plan to join a convent.'

In utter disbelief my eyes snapped back to hers. 'A convent?'

'Yes.'

It had been so long since I'd laughed that the noise that burst out of me probably sounded like the cawing of a deranged crow. But I was quite unable to stop.

Elizabeth released me as I staggered back, and crossed her arms, eyebrows compressed.

'And why is this so amusing?' she demanded.

I struggled for speech, swiping tears from my eyes. 'Convent . . . *you*?' And then I could only shake my head.

'Keep your voice down,' she growled. 'I haven't told anyone else my plans yet.'

'I can't . . . imagine . . . why,' I gasped.

'I'll have you know, I've given it a great deal of thought,' she said stormily. 'And I'm determined to accept all that's happened, and place my life in God's hands.'

'I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry,' I said, finally regaining some control of myself. I let out a big breath. It had felt good to laugh. I looked Elizabeth in the eye. 'It's just that . . . I can't quite see you as a nun.'

'You doubt my passion for my faith?'

'No, no. You're *very* passionate. That, I think, might be the problem.'

She began to say something, then cut herself short and narrowed her eyes at me. 'You're such an ass, Victor,' she said. And with that, she stalked off.

I watched her disappear inside the house and, with a sigh, took one last look at the sooty remains of the Dark Library. Amidst the grey debris something bright red suddenly flashed in the sun. I squinted. It was just a bit of glass, surely. But when I stepped closer, I saw that it was the spine of a red book – completely unburned.

With great determination I forced myself to turn back to the house. But halfway there my step faltered.

No paper could have withstood the searing heat of those flames. How could a book not burn?

I swallowed against the heavy thump of my heart. Some birds trilled as they flew overhead. The courtyard was still

empty, but it wouldn't be long before the servants came to start removing the debris.

I seized a shovel, stepped into the ash, and carefully slipped the blade under the red object. I lifted it out and deposited it on the cobblestone. Kneeling, I saw its cover wonderfully decorated with scrollwork but bearing no title or name. A book that would not burn.

*Walk away.*

But I couldn't restrain myself. I reached out, and the moment I touched the cover, pain seared my fingertips. I recoiled with a gasp. What kind of devilish thing was this? Then, feeling ridiculous, I realized that this book was made of metal and was still hot from the blaze.

Sucking my fingertips, I bent my head lower. The illusion was exceedingly clever. Lines had been carefully scored into the metal sides to look like actual page ends. And, squinting, I could now see that there was a single straight seam that ran all the way around the book, with two tiny hinges embedded ingeniously within the spine. It was actually a slim metal container, meant to look, and open, exactly like a book.

Just another strange book from a room of strange books.

I stood, prodded it dismissively with the toe of my shoe. Why would someone bother constructing a book of metal – unless its contents were so important that they needed to withstand an inferno?

*Do not do this.*

Quickly I took a nearby bucket of water and sluiced some over the metal book. It hissed briefly. Then I took out my handkerchief, wrapped the slim book up, and slipped it inside my pocket.

In the privacy of my bedchamber I opened the metal book. It contained shallow compartments on both the left and right sides.

On the right were packed several bundles of cloth. Hurriedly I unwrapped the first and beheld what looked like some kind of pendant – a narrow loop of slim but sturdy metal with a star-shaped ornament at one end.

In the other bundles were several smaller metal pieces, obviously specially forged, for they were complicated. One was a kind of ball-in-socket pivot, the other like the bits of a miniature horse's harness. They were stiff with rust, but as I moved them they became more supple. Oil was all they needed – to do what, I had no idea.

In the left compartment was a thin sheaf of pages that had clearly been torn from the binding of an ancient book. The first sheet was printed with forceful Gothic type. At the top of the first page was written:

#### Instructions for the Spirit Board.

What in the world was a spirit board? I flipped through the pages and saw careful blueprints for the construction of some kind of apparatus that required the oddly shaped pieces I'd seen. At the machine's centre was a pendulum, and its weight was the star-shaped ornament. Impatiently I flipped ahead until I found more writing under the heading 'Conversing with the Dead'.

A lump formed in my throat. How many times had I wished it were possible, if only for a few moments? And suddenly, hungrily, I was reading. But I made it through only a few lines before looking away, self-disgust welling within me.

Why had I even taken this book from the bonfire? It was just more medieval nonsense, and unlike the alchemical lore I'd put such faith in, this didn't even pretend to have a veneer of fact or science.

With great determination I folded the crinkled sheaf of pages and stuck them back into their compartment. Then I hurriedly began wrapping up the metal pieces. The star-

shaped pendulum was last, and in my angry haste I stabbed myself on one of its sharp points. A drop of blood welled from my finger onto the ornament, and in that instant the thing was as something alive in my hand. It gave only the slightest tremor, but I dropped it in alarm.

It lay in its metal box, an inert object once more.

But an object that contained some strange, compressed power within it.

‘Now do that bit up here,’ I said to my nine-year-old brother, Ernest, and watched him carefully as he tapped the hammer against the nail. ‘That’s it. Good!’

I’d had all the materials brought up to the west sitting room and, after Sunday lunch, had set about building a wooden pendulum, in accordance with the instructions in my metal book. Of course, no one needed to know where these instructions had come from, or their true purpose. It was just a fun and educational activity, and one my mother watched over approvingly as she wrote her letters.

‘It’s good to see you so engaged in something, Victor,’ she said, coming over now to place an affectionate hand on my head. Her eyes, I noticed, were moist.

Since Konrad’s death, I hated everything. I could not concentrate to read. I could not sit still long enough to listen to music. Neither horseback riding nor sailing offered me any pleasure. The world was going on elsewhere, and I had no part in it. I was locked deep inside myself.

But now . . . after opening that metal book, there was something I wanted.

Down the corridor I could hear the tramp of the servants whom Father had instructed to seal up the Dark Library for ever. They would fill in the well at the bottom of the shaft to make sure no rats would get inside and bring plague. And then the masons would brick up the entrance to the Dark Library and, after the spiral stairs were destroyed, plaster over the secret entrance from our own library. Even after

everything that had happened, I did not like to think of it – something being lost for ever, like the lid closing over Konrad's sarcophagus.

The pendulum tripod was all but finished. It stood some three feet off the ground on its wooden legs. I was quite pleased with myself, for the measurements had had to be precise, and as I looked at it now from every angle, it seemed perfectly level. From the tripod's apex was fixed the strange metal pivot that allowed the pendulum to move in any direction. I still had to attach the final piece of the pivot, a kind of second joint, but I could tell Ernest was getting impatient.

'Let's make it go,' he said eagerly, and with a pang I realized that this was one of the first times since the funeral when I'd seen him look happy. Konrad had always been his favourite. Ashamed, I realized how in my own grief I'd neglected everyone else's. I would have to be a better brother to Ernest.

'All right,' I said. 'But remember it's not quite done yet. Right now it's just a normal pendulum.'

Quickly I tied a measure of string to the main pivot and at the end attached the star-shaped pendant from the metal book. The star had one point that was longer than all the others, pointing straight down at the floor.

'That's an unusual weight,' Elizabeth said. She'd been reading in an armchair, and now walked over for a closer look at our work. 'Where did you find it?'

'Just something I found lying around,' I replied carelessly.

She frowned. 'I think I've seen it somewhere before.'

'Care to lend a hand?' I asked, hoping to distract her.

'No, thank you,' she replied. 'I'm enjoying my book.'

'Ah, quiet contemplation,' I said. 'Can never have enough of that. Nice and solitary.'

Her eyebrows lifted satirically, and she then returned to her chair.

‘Can we make it go now?’ Ernest asked impatiently.

Grateful, I pulled back the weight and let it swing in a long arc, back and forth.

‘It’s not too interesting,’ said Ernest after a few moments. ‘It just keeps going in the same direction.’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘But that will change in time,’ said Father, and I turned to see him watching over us. I hadn’t heard him come in. He smiled down at Ernest. ‘If we leave it long enough, you’ll see it change course because of the Earth’s revolution.’

Ernest frowned. ‘How?’

‘The earth is a big ball, remember, making a complete rotation every twenty-four hours.’

‘So it would turn the pendulum?’ Ernest asked, his small brow furrowed.

‘No, the pendulum stays exactly the same. The earth does the moving below it, so it only seems like the pendulum’s direction changes.’

I watched Ernest’s face, and I wondered how much of this he understood. I wasn’t entirely sure I understood it myself.

‘How long does that take?’ he asked.

‘Hours before you’d notice.’

‘Oh.’ Ernest’s eyes strayed to the window, wondering about better entertainments.

My father’s gaze settled on me briefly. ‘An excellent activity. Well done, Victor.’

And with that he left the room, saying he had some business to attend to in his study. I wondered if he was avoiding me – in the same way that, until today, I had tried to avoid everyone else in the house.

I looked back at Ernest, eager to recapture his attention. ‘But watch what happens when we attach the double joint,’ I told him. ‘Now, I’ll need your help here. It’s a bit tricky ...’

It took us some time to fix the double joint to the main pivot, but Ernest proved to be a very focused apprentice, as long as I let him hold a tool or occasionally twist a screw. When we were finished, we tied on the star-shaped pendulum weight once more.

‘Now watch this,’ I said. ‘There are two pivots, each at ninety degrees to each other.’

I pulled back the weight and let go. With each swing the weight careened in a new direction, completely unpredictably, as though it were doing some strange dance.

Ernest laughed, delighted. ‘It’s like it knows!’

I glanced at him sharply. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, like it knows what it wants to do,’ he said.

I smiled. There was indeed something eerily alive about the motion of the thing.

Elizabeth came back over and watched with interest as the pendulum flailed about.

‘It goes and goes,’ Ernest said.

‘It will slow down eventually,’ I replied.

I looked at my younger brother, pleased by his delight. ‘So, what do you say, Ernest? Is that a good toy?’

‘Yes,’ he said, stopping the pendulum and then setting it going in a different direction.

‘It’s oddly hypnotic,’ said Mother, ‘like looking at the flames of the fire – never the same from moment to moment.’

I wished Father had not gone off so quickly. I would have liked to feel his hand clap me on the shoulder.

I worried that he blamed me. It was never spoken; it didn’t need to be, but I felt it as an invisible barrier between us. During the quest to make the elixir I had deceived him, and kept secrets from him, and he’d ordered us to abandon the search. But I’d ignored him.

I wanted things mended between us. Konrad’s death felt like a great fissure through my being, and another blow would crack me apart entirely.

And yet here I was, about to deceive Father again.

As we were finishing dinner, Justine, our nursemaid, came to tell me that William, my littlest brother, had been calling for me.

I quickly finished my torte and left the table. In the dim nursery I saw William in his crib, lying on his stomach, with his arms circled around his favourite two toys, a knitted elephant and a soft flannel horse. He was not quite one yet, and at the sight of me his legs wriggled against the sheets in excitement, and he beamed. A more blissful face I don't think I'd ever seen.

'Tor,' he called me.

'What are you doing, wide awake?' I placed a hand on his back, his warm head. He pushed up, and I leaned down to kiss him. 'I love you, Willy. I'll see you in the morning.'

'Yeah,' he said, and dropped back down, hugging his animals closer to his face.

For a moment my resolve melted. My apparatus was finished and waiting in my bedchamber for my midnight business. I could take it apart. I could put it away. I could sink the metal book in the lake. But I knew I wouldn't. Once an idea had set its course in my head and I'd fixed my destination on the horizon, I'd never been able to tear my gaze away.

I embraced William once more. How I envied him - the world was such a simple, good place. All he needed was a soft bed, two toys, and a kiss on the head.

After midnight, by candlelight, I spread upon the floor the spirit board I'd fashioned. It was a large piece of leather on which I had written the letters of the alphabet, well spaced, around the edges, in the particular manner described in the instructions. Rising from the centre of the board was the wooden tripod that held the pendulum.

I placed more candles around the periphery of the board so I could see properly. I had a sheaf of paper, two inkwells, and an extra quill nearby for good measure.

I skimmed over the instructions once more. Rain pattered against my window, and when I glanced up, I had the fleeting sensation that someone was looking in at me. I went to close the curtains, then returned to the spirit board. I crouched beside the pendulum and deliberately, in accordance with the instructions, pricked my finger upon one of the weight's points. I felt its purposeful vibration and quickly stood. I picked up a piece of paper, dipped my quill into the well, and cleared my throat.

'I invite you to speak,' I said to the empty room.

No sudden draught chilled my flesh; no candles guttered.

'I invite you to come,' I whispered.

My door opened, and every hair on my neck bristled as a shadow darted into the room. Almost at once the flickering candlelight showed me the face of Elizabeth, and my terror was replaced with indignation.

'What're you doing here?' I demanded.

'What is it *you're* doing?' she countered, staring at the board, and then my pendulum. 'I knew that machine of yours was no mere toy.'

I made no reply.

'What does it do?' she persisted.

'I don't know yet.'

'What is it meant to do?'

'Allow me to talk with Konrad.'

Her face was waxen. 'Is this some invention of yours?'

I shook my head. 'In the bonfire there was a book that wouldn't burn. Well, it wasn't really a book but a metal box, and in it were instructions for conversing with the dead. It claims that their spirits remain a time on the earth, unseen by us, weak and powerless to communicate unless we help them.'

‘And who was the author of this book?’

I shrugged. ‘Some magician or necromancer. What does it matter?’

‘But you don’t even believe in such things!’

I chuckled mirthlessly. ‘I don’t know what I believe any more. My faith in all things is shaken. Modern science failed me. Alchemy failed. I trust nothing but am ready to try anything.’

She looked horrified. ‘The occult? I actually believe in a world beyond ours, Victor. I haven’t seen them, but there may truly be ghosts – and devils, too – and I think it very unwise to try to summon them.’

‘All I know is that I want to talk to Konrad.’

From the corner of my eye I saw the pendulum twitch.

‘Look!’ I whispered, pointing.

‘It’s a draught,’ she breathed.

‘I feel no draught.’ The pendulum weight flinched once more and quivered slightly, as though waiting.

‘How do you make it move?’ she demanded, her voice tinged with both anger and fear.

‘I’m doing nothing!’ I held out some paper and my extra quill and inkwell. ‘Curious? Sit across from me and write down any letters the pendulum points to!’

‘I don’t like this, Victor!’

‘Leave, then! Get thee to a nunnery!’

She looked at me, hesitated for only a split second, and took the paper and quill. I couldn’t help smiling. Elizabeth was never one to back down from a challenge.

‘I part the veil between our worlds,’ I whispered. ‘I invite the spirit of my brother Konrad to join us. I invite you to speak, Konrad.’

The pendulum quivered again.

‘I beg you, speak.’

Elizabeth gasped as the weight suddenly jerked, and my eyes locked on to its long tip, watching the letters it pointed to as it swung. Hurriedly I began writing.

‘Copy them down,’ I panted. My entire body felt suddenly sheathed in ice. Back and forth, side to side, the star-shaped weight jerked swiftly.

‘They’re not forming words!’ Elizabeth said.

‘Don’t worry about that now!’ I said, for the pendulum’s movements were becoming faster still. It flailed about the spirit board, and I could scarcely keep up with its wild motions. I was scribbling madly, the ink smearing in my haste.

The pendulum’s frenzy thrilled me – and terrified me too, for it was like a bird trapped in a room. I lost track of time and was only aware of filling page after page until, with a final violent spasm, the star-shaped pendulum broke its tether, flew across the room, and hit the wall. I realized I was holding my breath and let it out, feeling as though it had been *my body*, and not the pendulum, lashing about.

I looked at Elizabeth, then down at my pages of desperate letters.

‘This isn’t some trick, Victor?’

‘You saw it moving!’

She moved around the board towards me, and for a moment I thought she was going to embrace me, but her arms caressed only the air in front of me, hands brushing back and forth.

‘What’re you doing?’ I demanded.

‘Checking for strings. You might’ve made it move yourself.’

‘Why would I do such a thing?’ I retorted, furious.

She was trembling, and I suddenly realized how frightened she was. I too felt a watery weakness in my joints. Quickly I pulled a blanket from the end of my bed and draped it around her shoulders.

‘Some force animated the pendulum,’ I said quietly.

‘And you truly think it was Konrad?’

‘There might be a message.’ I was almost afraid to examine the pages I held, but I forced myself.

lksjdfkljlskdjflkjcomelsjdfllksjldkfjlksdraiseioureyjnmn  
smeoeriy  
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‘It’s all gibberish,’ Elizabeth said, looking up from her own papers. ‘Nothing.’

I shook my head in dismay.

‘I’m disgusted with myself,’ she said vehemently, and then turned on me. ‘Isn’t there enough misery in this house already, without you inviting more?’

I let the papers slip from my ink-stained hands and sank to the floor.

‘You’re not the only one who suffers, Victor,’ she said. ‘Everyone in this family is suffering. I’ve seen my entire future change.’

‘I lost my *twin*,’ I growled.

‘And I lost my future husband.’

I said nothing, the word ‘husband’ clattering painfully inside my mind.

‘But what if it was Konrad?’ I asked. ‘*Trying* to talk to us?’

Her eyes closed for a moment. ‘I should’ve walked out on this. You’ll only torture yourself – and me, too.’

My eyes settled on the pendulum. ‘There is a definite power in it,’ I persisted. ‘I felt it.’

'If there is,' she retorted, 'it's not one we're meant to harness.'

'Where is that written?' I said defiantly. 'By whose law?'

'You didn't need to build this device, Victor,' she said. 'You had a choice. But I can see you're intent on dwelling only on the darkest things.'

I watched as the door closed behind her, and with a sigh I bent to gather my papers from the floor. Blinking to clear my tired eyes, I suddenly saw, among the garble of letters, a word.

I stared, then snatched up my quill and circled it. My eyes roved across the lines, and I circled another word, then another and another. The same three words repeating again and again.

Heat and ice squalled across my flesh. Could it be coincidence? Or my own mind, knowingly forcing my hand to write the words, so desperate was I for a message from my twin?

Outside the window rain pelted the glass. I hurriedly gathered Elizabeth's discarded papers, and my gaze flew over them. There. And there! And there!

*Come raise me.*

*Come raise me.*

*Come raise me.*

## A KEYHOLE IN THE SKY

‘IT SEEMS BEYOND dispute,’ said our friend Henry Clerval, running a hand through his wispy blond hair as he looked between the two sets of pages. ‘You’ve both recorded the same letters – and words.’

I looked over triumphantly at Elizabeth.

‘I never doubted they were the same,’ she said. ‘But it doesn’t mean they came from Konrad.’

On a table in the music room I had spread out our transcripts from the previous night, as well as the red metal book and its contents. We had the chateau to ourselves. After our morning lessons, presided over as usual by Father, both my parents had left for Geneva, Father to attend to his magistrate’s duties, and Mother to help ready the city house for our return in October.

Before Konrad’s funeral, their pace had been frenetic. They’d received visitors offering condolences from near and far; there had always been preparations and meals to oversee. Our house had always seemed full. And even after, my parents seemed intent on keeping to their usual schedules – if anything, more vigorously than ever. Father resumed our morning lessons with Elizabeth, Henry, and me, and afterwards he carried on with his own work. Mother threw herself into her duties about the house, carving out time to begin another pamphlet on the rights of women.

Henry fluttered his fingers, giving his characteristic impression of an agitated bird. ‘And you truly think Konrad spoke to you from beyond the grave?’

‘Why would it be anyone else?’ I countered.

There was an uncomfortable silence before Elizabeth replied. ‘I was taught that the dead who need to atone for their sins are sent to purgatory, and sometimes they wander the earth in the hope of somehow making amends – and that they may try to communicate with the living.’

‘Very well, then,’ I said. ‘By your way of thinking, Konrad is communicating to us from purgatory.’

‘But,’ Elizabeth continued, ‘the Church also believes there are devils whose only aim is to beguile us and lead us into temptation.’

Henry was nodding emphatically. ‘Remember that play of Marlowe’s, *Doctor Faustus*? The doctor foolishly makes a deal with the devil, and in the end he’s dragged down to Hell. I’d never felt such horror – not in the theatre, anyway.’ He paused. ‘With you two I’ve felt far greater horror, of course.’

Despite myself I laughed. ‘Why, thank you, Henry. I’m flattered.’

‘What is it exactly you think you can achieve?’ he asked me, removing his spectacles to polish them. I was surprised by the steadiness – the hint of challenge, even – in his blue-eyed gaze.

I took a breath. My own thoughts were far from clear. ‘I don’t know. To see him again, I suppose. To help him.’

‘Admit it, Victor,’ said Elizabeth. ‘You’d make your own deal with the devil if you could play God.’

‘Don’t listen to her,’ I told Henry dismissively. ‘She plans to join a convent.’

Bewildered, Henry looked from me to Elizabeth. ‘Is this true?’

Elizabeth glared at me. ‘Why did you say that?’

I shrugged. ‘Why keep it secret?’

Henry looked truly distressed. ‘You really mean to become a . . . a *nun*?’

‘Why does everyone seem to find this idea so incredible?’ she asked.

‘Well, it’s just’ – Henry cleared his throat – ‘you’re very, um, *young* to make such a drastic decision – and have you thought about the family? They’ve just lost a son. If you entered a convent, it would be like losing a daughter, too. They’d be devastated.’

‘Of course I’ve thought of that! Which is why I wasn’t planning on doing it right away.’

‘Well, that’s some comfort,’ murmured Henry. ‘Still, it would just be such a terrible loss to, well, everyone.’

‘She has no intention of becoming a nun,’ I said impatiently. ‘Anyway, she wouldn’t last two days.’

‘I resent that very much!’ Elizabeth said.

I held up two fingers. ‘*Two days* before the mother superior throws herself from the bell tower.’

Elizabeth bit at her lips, and by the light in her eyes, I knew she was suppressing a giggle.

But now Henry levelled his gaze at me. ‘You, Victor, are just trying to change the subject. What exactly are you planning? You used to joke about being a god. But this is taking things too far, don’t you think?’

I rubbed at my temples, impatient. ‘I tell you, I want to see my twin again!’

‘But how?’ Henry demanded.

I sighed. ‘I’ve no idea, not yet. Here’s all I know: that the world is uncontrollable. Chaos reigns. That anything and everything might be possible. I won’t subscribe to any rational system again. Nothing will bind me.’

‘That is the way to madness,’ said Elizabeth.

‘If it makes me mad, so be it. But leave me to my method, because without it I’ll fall into a despair so deep, I’ll never claw my way back out. I’ll see him, damn it! As far as I’m concerned, he asked for my help. Come raise me. Over and over he said it. Wherever he is, he’s not happy.’

‘Stop,’ Elizabeth said.

‘He’s suffering,’ I persisted.

‘Stop it, Victor!’ Her eyes were wet.

‘Victor, you’re upsetting her,’ Henry said, softly but firmly.

‘You two don’t need to have any part of this. I’ve bullied you enough – you especially, Henry.’

I was startled to see anger animate his face. ‘I’m not quite so easily bullied, Victor. I may not be the bravest of men, but I’m not the weakling you suggest.’

‘I wasn’t suggesting any such—’

‘I was with you when Polidori amputated your fingers and tried to kill us all. I fought then, and I fought that wretched lynx alongside the rest of you.’

‘Absolutely you did, Henry, and—’

But he was no longer listening to my reassurances. His eyes had strayed to the red metal book.

‘I’ve seen that before,’ he said.

‘Possibly in the Dark Library,’ I told him. ‘We spent enough time looking through the shelves—’

‘No. Not there.’

Purposefully he walked past me, opened the door, and left the music room. Elizabeth and I looked at each other in puzzlement, then followed. We found him in the great hallway, standing before the huge portrait of Wilhelm Frankenstein, our notorious ancestor who’d built this chateau some three hundred years before.

His face was handsome and pale, unblemished except for a mole on his left cheek. His full mouth was well-moulded, almost feminine. His eyes were a piercing blue, with a curious speck of brown in the lower part of each iris. Eerily he stared out at me, meeting my gaze directly, his right eyebrow lifted slightly, conveying a hint of mockery.

‘There,’ Henry said, pointing.

I looked and shook my head in amazement. ‘How is it possible I’ve lived here my entire life and—’