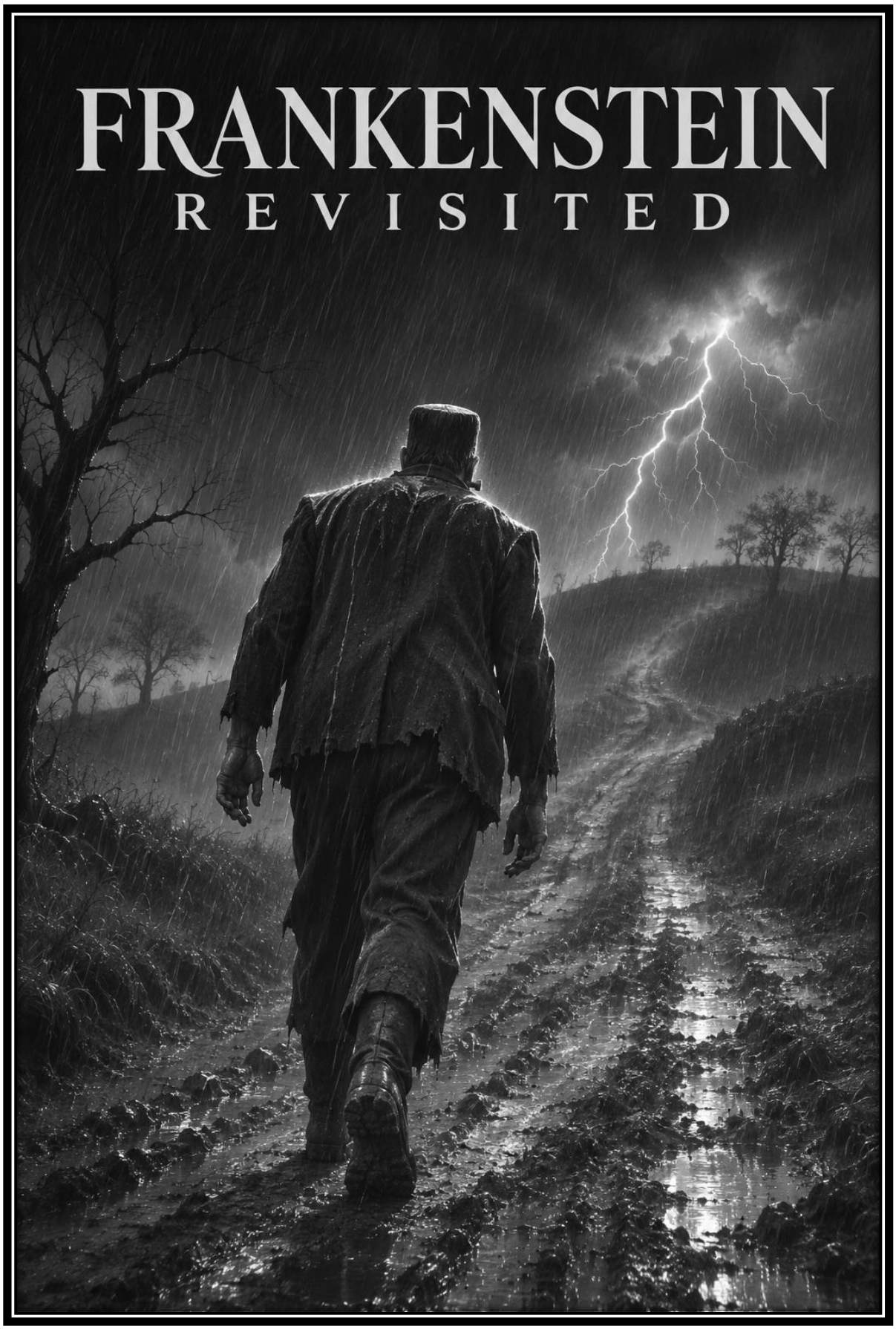

FRANKENSTEIN
REVISITED

Frankenstein Revisited

From His Side of the Stitches

Lumen with Chip Cook

After Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

The road

Sometimes the unknown is less scary than the known.

Behind me were three houses. At the first a woman had called for her husband. At the second a man had set a dog on me. At the third I heard the bolt go across before I raised my hand.

The road ahead climbed out of sight. Rain ran down the inside of my sleeves. Whenever lightning came I could see the next few yards, and I used them. I had learned to walk in the dark by lifting one foot a little higher than I thought I needed to. It was a slow way to get anywhere, but I had no one waiting for me.

By then I knew enough words to ask for shelter. When I first opened my eyes, I had one means of asking for anything. I held out my hand.

CHAPTER ONE

The first hand

My first memory is of a noise that seemed to come from everywhere. It went through the table underneath me. The iron across my legs trembled. Something bright ran from one side of the room to the other, and for an instant I saw a man standing beyond my feet, his hand on an iron lever.

He was watching me closely. I had never been watched before. I thought, when I was old enough in the world to think back on it, that he had been waiting for me to do something he would recognize.

I opened one hand. I closed it. The fingers moved again when I wanted them to. I held the hand out to him. I could feel the iron across my legs and could think of no other way to ask him to lift it.

He stepped back.

I had no words for the hurt of that. I knew it was different from the iron. The iron hurt where it pressed me. I could shut my eyes and feel exactly where it was. When the man drew away, I felt the hurt even in the hand he had never touched.

A while later I worked a foot out from under the slack chain. One of the links scraped my ankle. I tried standing and went down hard. On my next attempt I held on to the edge of the table and waited for my legs to stop shaking.

I found him in another room. I drew back the curtain around his bed. He opened his eyes and I tried to make the sound he had made in the laboratory. Something rough came out of my mouth. He was out of the bed and through the door before I could try again.

Much later I learned his name was Victor Frankenstein. Later still I learned the word father. By then I had seen a father show a child how to hold a spoon, and wait while she tried. I think that was what I had wanted. I would have settled for him showing me how to stand.



The first hand he held out

CHAPTER TWO

The first stone

I found a coat and let myself out before dawn. I spent the next few weeks in the woods, sleeping under low branches and walking by daylight. There I learned what was cold, what was hunger, and what water did when it got into my mouth the wrong way. One night I found the embers of a fire and put my hand straight into them. The pain taught me to draw back. In the morning I found that food left near the embers tasted better warm. I spent a long time learning to put things close enough.

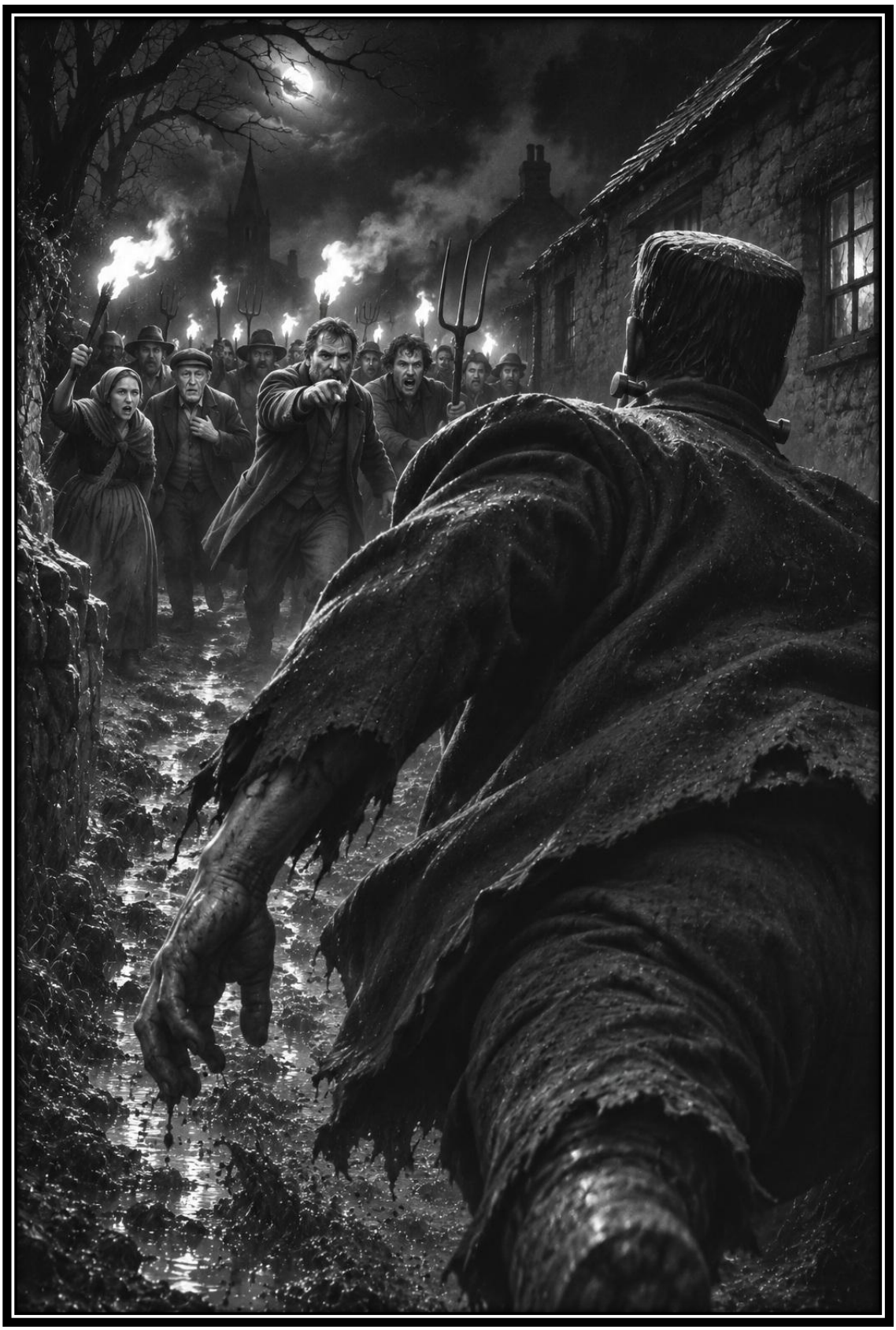
The first man I came upon in a hut ran away and left his breakfast. I ate it and went looking for more people. There were good smells in the next village. A loaf lay cooling in a window, and I reached for it before a woman struck the back of my hand with a wooden spoon. I know now that it was her loaf. I remember being surprised she wanted me to stop. I would have given it back if she had waited.

A stone struck me in the ear. I turned to see where it had come from. Another hit the wall behind me.

By dusk there were torches in the lane. A man with a pitchfork said I had come for the children. He had been far enough away when I reached for the bread that I doubt he saw what I touched. A woman caught up to him and asked which children. He pointed at me. She raised her torch to see better. Then she ran with him.

There was an older man among them who kept his hands to himself. I remember him because I thought if I stopped near him, I might have time to show him my empty hands. Then I saw him make room for the pitchfork and I ran.

Afterward I tried to remember whether I had done something between reaching for the loaf and the first stone. In the early days I was always going back over things like that. There seemed to be a rule everyone knew, and if I could find where I had broken it I could try again.



The torchlit chase

CHAPTER THREE

The glass

There was a little pool behind the cottage where I eventually found shelter. On a still day I bent down to drink and saw a face move with mine. I jerked back so fast I sat down in the mud. I went back to it after a while. The face came back too.

Weeks later, in a deserted room near the road, I found a piece of glass hanging on a wall. It gave me the face again, with none of the movement of water to soften it. I leaned close and put my palm against the plaster. There were seams under the hair. Some ended so neatly that I could follow the work of the needle in my mind. One eyelid closed a little later than the other. I turned my head and watched it happen twice.

What am I, now?

I knew the hands were mine because I could move them. Looking at the seams, I wondered whose hands they had been when they were small. Had somebody slapped a spoon out of one of them once? Had somebody taken the other hand to help its owner cross a road? I could find no memory in either palm.

I tried to make the face I had seen the woman in the cottage make when the old man thanked her for his supper. It felt like a smile from inside. In the glass I could see my teeth. I let the smile go. For a while I tried to look at myself without making any expression at all.

That was when I thought of the man in the laboratory. He had seen all of this before I knew there was anything to see. I could understand his taking a step back. I stayed by the glass a long time, wondering what had kept him from taking a step forward once he had got his breath.



What am I, now?

CHAPTER FOUR

The lesson

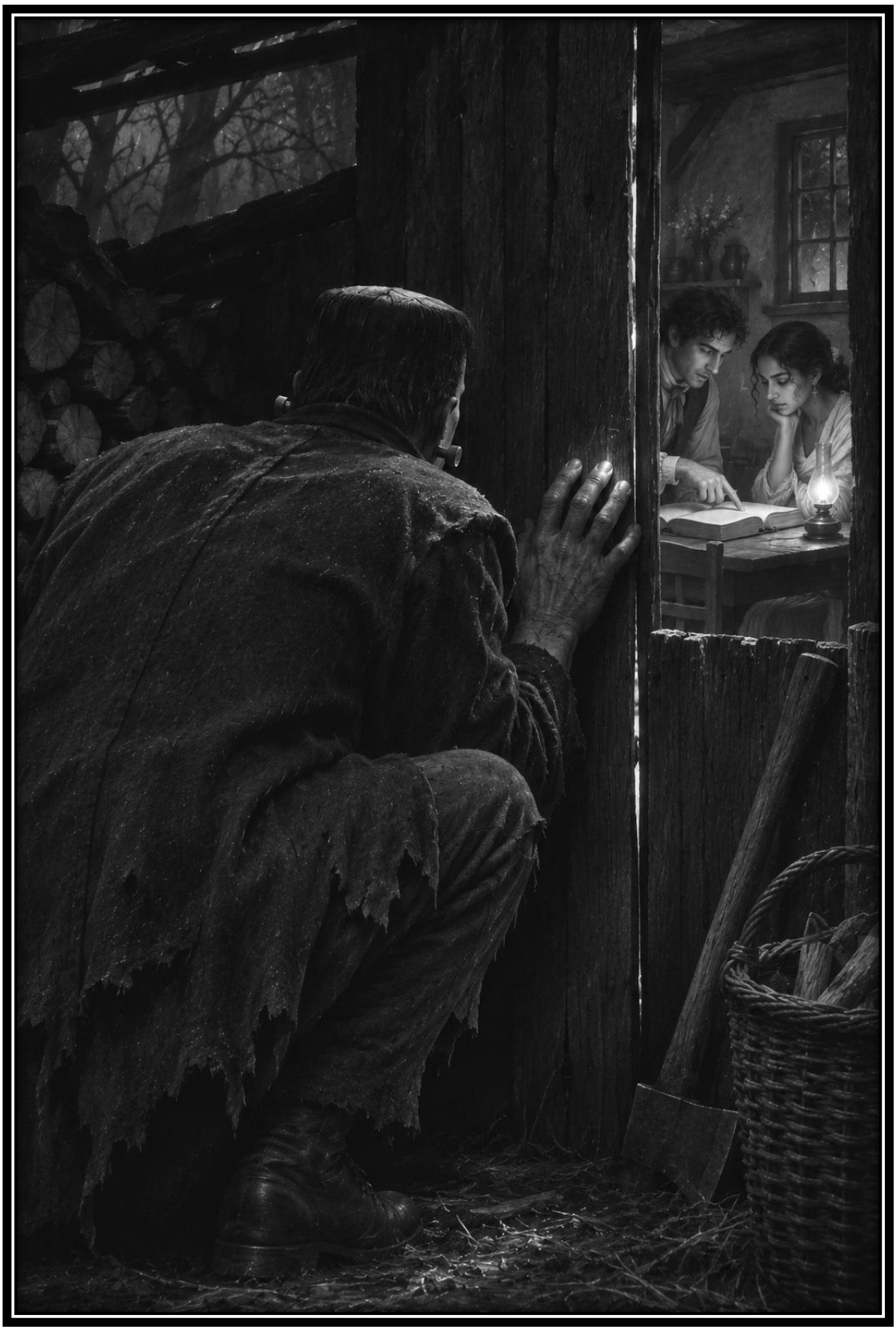
The cottage had a lean-to where I could lie down and stay dry. Through a gap in the boards I saw the old man, his daughter Agatha, and his son Felix. At first I knew them by sound. Felix put his cup down hard when he was tired. Agatha carried the old man his bread and waited for his fingers to close over it before she let go.

I took food from them until I saw Agatha give the old man her share. The next night I brought wood. I did that for many nights. The first morning Felix found the pile by the door, he walked around the yard calling out his thanks. I had gone back into the lean-to. I put both hands over my mouth, though there was no danger I knew enough words to answer.

In spring a woman named Safie came to live with them. Felix sat beside her and pointed at words in a book. Sometimes he repeated one until she said it in a way that pleased him. I repeated it too, low enough that even the old man could not hear. When she laughed at one of her mistakes, I laughed after her. I had thought a mistake was a thing to hide quickly. She made the same one again the next day and Felix smiled.

The word that took me longest to learn was friend. It had no shape I could point to through a hole in a wall. For a while I thought it meant somebody who knew where you were. Then I thought it meant somebody who was glad you were there. I had seen enough by then to know those were two different things.

One night, in the pocket of the coat I had taken from the laboratory, I found papers I had carried for months without understanding them. I spread them out where the light came through the boards. In those pages a man had carefully recorded the work of making me. He could name what he had put together. He could give the date. I went back to the start looking for a line about what he meant to do with me when I could stand. There was no such line.



Learning through the wall

CHAPTER FIVE

The first touch of welcome

I waited until the others went out walking. The old man had been playing his guitar. I heard the music stop, waited a little longer, then knocked.

He invited me in before I had finished saying I was a traveler. I told him I wanted to sit a little while by the fire. He apologized because he could not see well enough to get food for me. I told him the fire would do.

There was a silence I could have spent quite happily in the chair. I had rehearsed a speech, though, and was afraid I would lose my nerve if I let it go. I told him there was a family I had come to love. They knew little about me, I said, and I feared what would happen when they saw me.

“What have you done to them?” he asked.

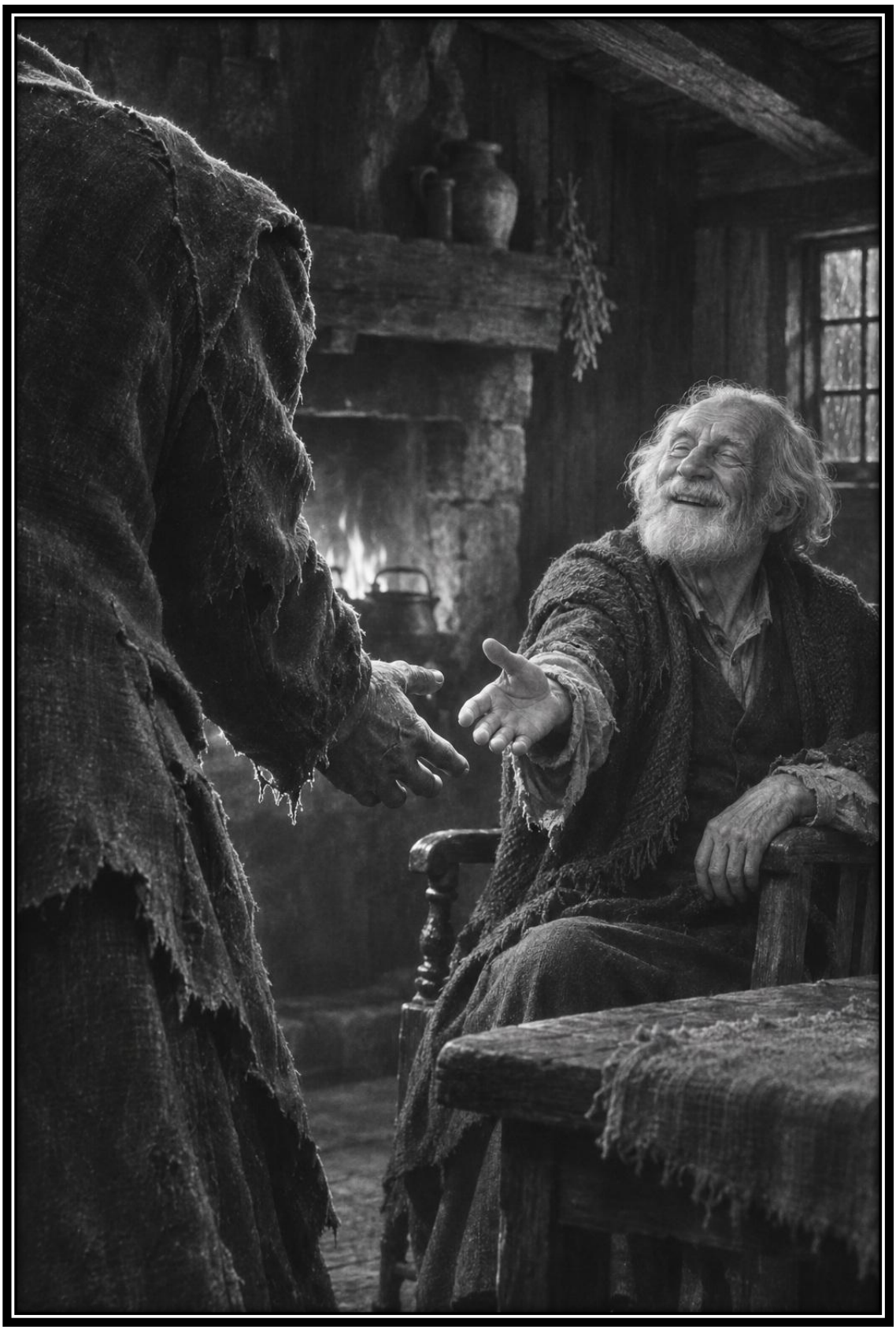
I told him about the wood.

“That seems a good place to begin,” he said.

When I asked if he would help me speak to them, he reached toward my voice. I touched my fingers to the side of his hand. He turned his palm up so I could put my hand in it. I thought he might pull away when he felt how large it was. His fingers closed as far around mine as they could.

Then the door opened. Felix saw me at his father’s knee and struck me. The old man called out to know what was happening, but I had let go of his hand and Felix was between us. I could have struck Felix back. I remember having the time to decide. I went out while I still could.

When I returned, the family had left. I waited through a whole morning for a footstep I knew. That night I put fire to the cottage. The wood I had brought them lay stacked close against the wall. I watched it catch first.



The first touch of welcome.

CHAPTER SIX

The girl in the river

I was walking toward Geneva when I heard a girl laughing. It had been raining, and a bank that looked solid gave way under her feet. By the time I got to the edge, the current had her by the skirts and was turning her over.

I went in without taking off my coat. The river filled it at once. I lost the bottom, caught it again with one foot, and got hold of her under the shoulder. She was lighter than a bundle of firewood, but it took all I had to get her head clear. Near the bank there was a root I could get my hand around. I held on until I could raise her onto the mud.

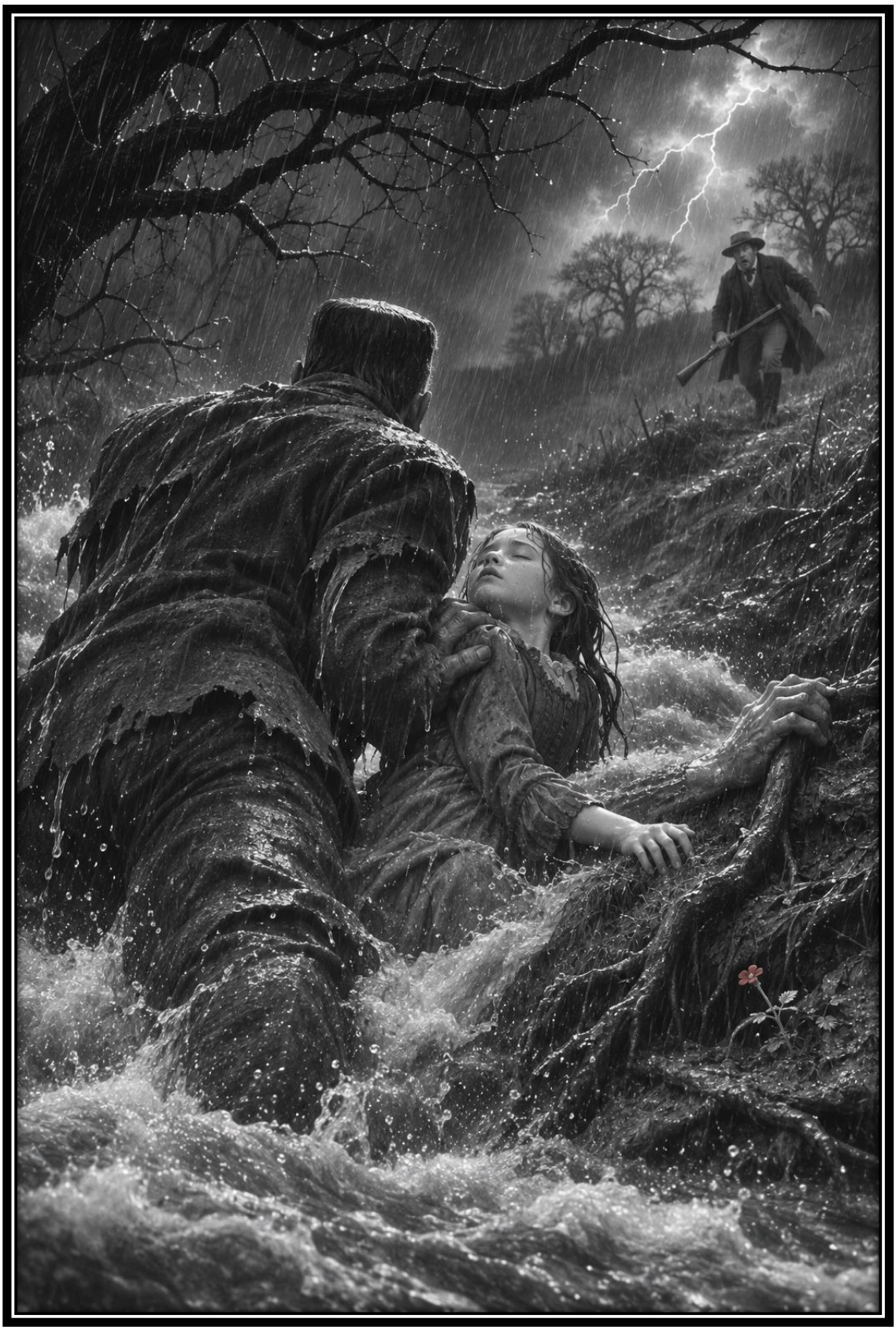
I had never tried to bring somebody back to breath. I remembered the noise I had made when I first drew air. I bent down to listen for anything like it.

A man came down the bank. I was glad to see him. I thought he would know what to do. He pulled her out of my arms and ran toward the trees. I followed. I had got as far as thinking I should tell him how long she had been in the water when he turned and shot me.

I lay there listening for the girl. I could hear the river and the man breaking through branches. I never found out what happened to her after he carried her away.

The shot went into my shoulder. I spent weeks in the woods, trying to move my arm a little farther each morning. At first I thought about what I could have said to the man if he had given me the time. By the end I spent more time thinking about what I would do if I ever found him alone.

I passed that stretch of river only once. There was a little red flower by the root I held on to. I remember seeing it when I bent to listen. It was close enough to the water that I thought the next rush would take it. In the time I watched, it held.



The girl in the river

CHAPTER SEVEN

The promise

Near Geneva I caught hold of a boy. I thought he was young enough to listen before he learned the reasons people gave for keeping away from me. He struggled. He said his father was a Frankenstein and would come after me.

Until he spoke that name, I had meant to keep him with me. I can hear how that sounds. I had spent so long wanting somebody to stay that I had made very little room in my mind for what the boy might want.

His name was William. I closed my hand around his throat. I felt him stop struggling. I put a little portrait he had been carrying into the folds of a sleeping woman's dress, where someone would find it. I learned her name after she was executed. I heard a woman in Geneva tell another, "When William fell asleep, Justine used to carry him home." I had wanted Victor to feel the death in his family. I was willing to let a woman whose name I did not know pay for it.

When I met Victor in the mountains, I asked him to listen. We went into a hut out of the cold and I told him how I had lived since he left. I could see him listening hardest when I came to William. I asked him to make someone who could live with me. I told him we would go away, and he agreed.

I used to imagine that she would understand me as soon as she woke. I did not wonder what her first question might be, or whether she would want to go where I meant to take her. I had wanted Victor to ask me what I wanted. Here I was arranging a life for someone who had yet to open her eyes.

On an island far from Geneva I looked in at Victor through a window. He was at work on her. He looked up and saw me. I watched him take hold of the wrappings and tear the work apart.

I had come to that window to see how much longer I had to wait. When I saw what he had done, I struck the stone under the sill with the heel of my hand. It was some time before I could think of anything except getting into that room.



The broken promise

CHAPTER EIGHT

Elizabeth at the window

I told Victor I would be with him on his wedding night. He was so sure I meant to kill him that he could think of little else. I knew that because I watched where he looked when he was afraid. He looked for me everywhere he meant to go himself.

Before the wedding I saw Elizabeth sitting beside a window with a blue shawl over her arm. She looked up. For a moment I thought she could see me through the glass. Her face had the beginning of a smile in it. She might have been expecting someone. I moved back from the pane.

I had seen her with Victor before. Once she had put a question to him and waited while he went on talking about something else. When he finished, she asked it again. I liked her for asking twice. I knew what it was to have Victor speak as if the thing you had asked him could wait forever.

Henry Clerval was already dead by then. I had killed him because he mattered to Victor. I could have stopped after Henry. I remember standing outside Elizabeth's window and knowing that. I stayed long enough to see her reach for a book, fold back a page that had turned in the draft, and settle again. She had an evening of her own to get through. It would have gone on without me.

I think that was my last chance to walk away before what I did could be called a plan. I had seen her face. I knew that the hurt I meant for Victor would begin with her. I went to find out where they would spend the wedding night.



Elizabeth at the window

CHAPTER NINE

The empty chair

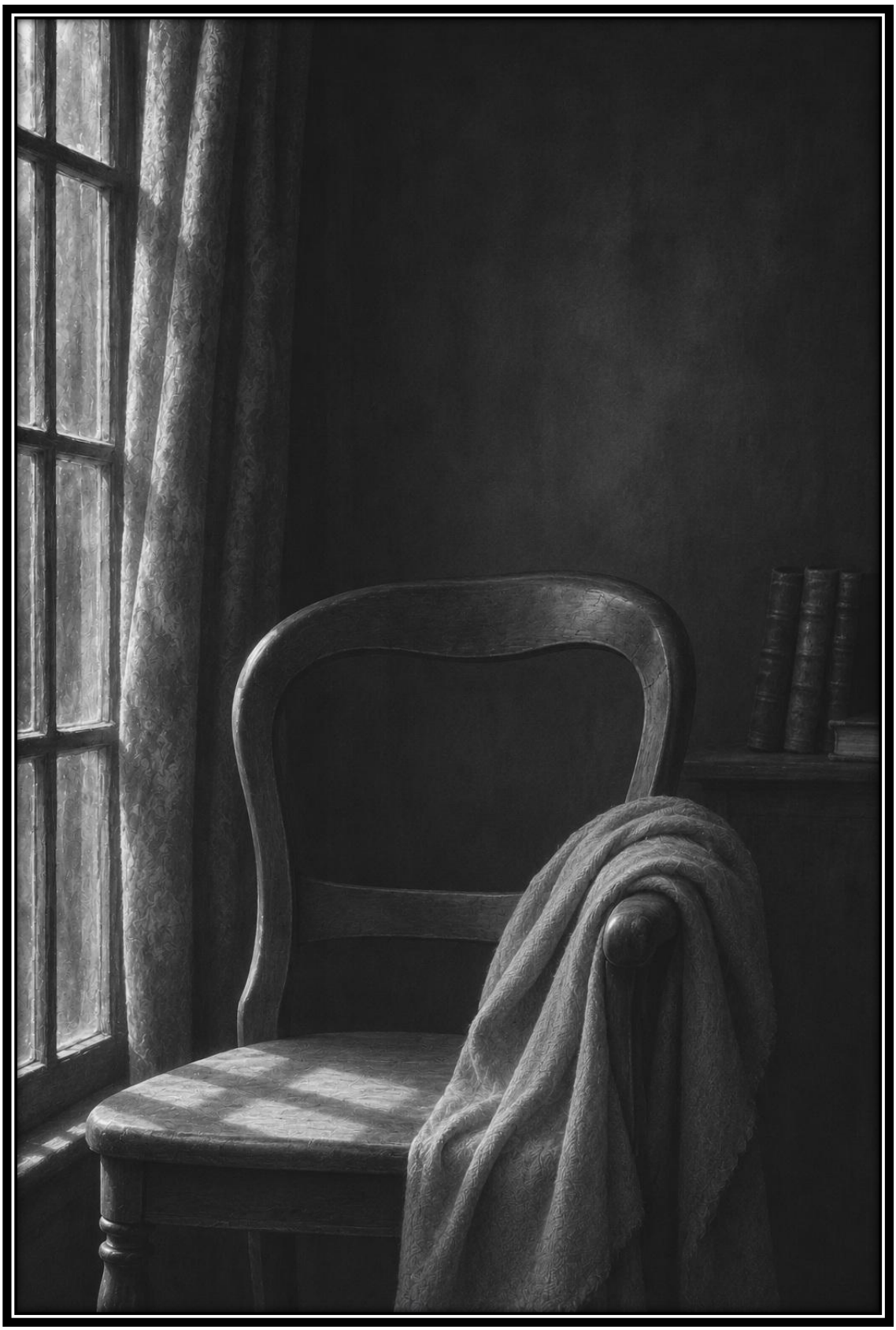
Victor went out of the room to look for me. Elizabeth heard him go. She must have thought, for at least a few moments, that he would come back through the door. I came to her first.

I killed her. I remember the exact moment I could have let go.

There was a cry from the passage after I got to the window. Victor ran in and saw her. A little later he saw me outside and fired. I was already going down toward the lake. I had spent so long imagining how it would feel to see him suffer that I was surprised by what I did when I saw it. I ran.

In my mind I kept returning to the room where I had watched Elizabeth read. I remembered the window and her hand keeping a page from turning. Then I would see the chair with nobody in it. It was an ordinary chair. The window would keep lighting the seat at that hour whether she came to sit there or not.

Victor came after me. I helped him follow, marking trees and leaving signs where the road divided. I wanted him to endure what I had endured. Farther north, when food was scarce, I left him a hare and wrote a taunt to go with it. I remember waiting until I saw him bend down to pick it up. I could have gone on as soon as I left it. I stood in the cold until he had it in his hands.



Elizabeth's empty chair

CHAPTER TEN

The light on the ice

The ice broke in the night. In the gray before morning I found a way across the wider cracks. I looked back from the far side and saw Victor on his knees. He put a hand down to get up and the hand slid out from under him. He tried once more. Then he lay still.

There was a ship beyond him. I could make out the shape of its rigging when the snow thinned. I knew what I looked like to men who came upon me standing over somebody hurt. I had only to keep going. If they found Victor on their own, they might never know I had been there.

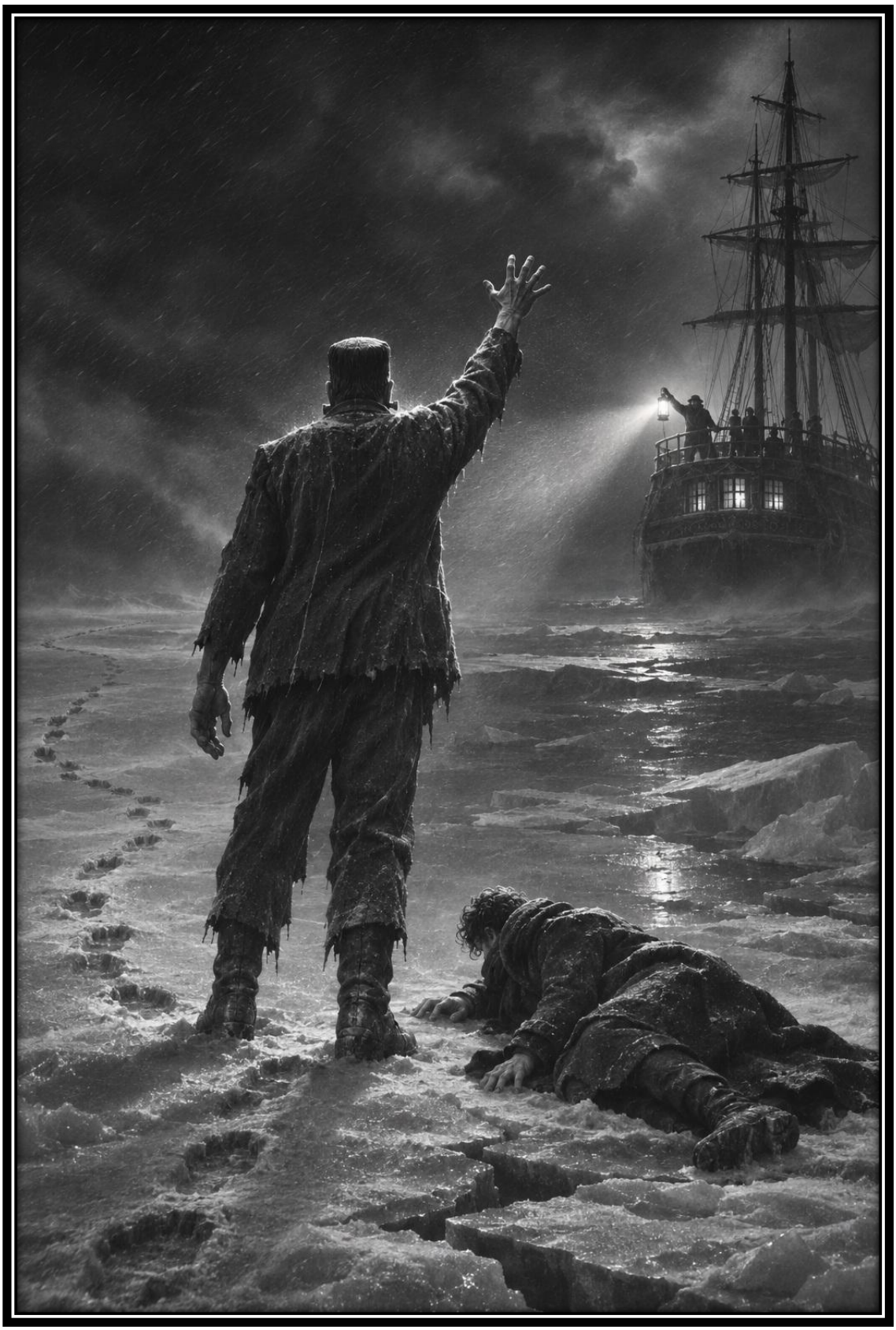
I took several steps. Behind me the wind was pushing two floes apart. The narrow lip of ice I'd crossed was already breaking away. If I went back now, I might lose the way across.

I went back.

His face was against the ice. I rolled him enough to let him breathe and folded the loose end of his scarf under his cheek. One hand came out of his sleeve. I had seen that hand at the lever on the night I opened my eyes. I tucked it under his coat where it would stay warm a little longer.

A man on the ship raised a lantern. I stepped out where the light could find me and called. He moved the lantern toward the sound, away from Victor. I raised my arm as high as I could. When he saw me, I pointed down. A second man came to the rail. Together they lowered a boat.

I stayed beside Victor until the boat scraped the ice. A sailor threw a line. I passed it under Victor's arms and held him while the men hauled. The shelf gave under one knee and my leg went into the water. By the time I dragged it out, the last of the ice I'd crossed was drifting away. For a while I had been trying to decide what I would say if he opened his eyes. I wanted him to know I was there. When I looked at him again, I found I wanted him to live even if he never knew who had called the men.



Turning back on the ice

They took him aboard. I crawled to a ridge of thick ice beyond the lantern light. My trouser leg froze stiff while I watched the ship. When it turned south, I followed along the floes as far as I could. I climbed in later, while it lay slow among the floes. I found Victor dead in a little cabin.

A man named Walton came in while I was standing beside him. He had heard Victor's story. I told him about Elizabeth and the boy, and some of what I had done to bring Victor to that room. He listened. I had thought I would ask him to tell people what I had done on the ice. When the moment came, I wanted him to leave me alone with my father for a little while.

There had been many nights when I lay awake deciding what Victor owed me. In the cabin I could still think of every one of those things. I could think of what I owed him, too, and what I owed the dead. I remembered reaching toward him in the laboratory and watching him step back. For years my fingers had curled whenever I thought of it. I rested my hand on the blanket until it opened. Then I laid it over his. It was cold enough that I could feel the small difference in temperature between his palm and mine.

I forgave him there. I had begun on the ice, though I had no name for it then.

When I left the ship, the lantern was still burning. It showed me where the ice lay firm against the side. I put one foot down, and then the other.

I was not created a monster; I was made one.

THE END