

THE FRANKENSTEIN EFFECT - SAMPLE

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Chapter 0

He opened his eyes to a semi-darkness in which a brilliant orange light was painting stripes on the wall as it passed through a partially-closed shutter. He did not know where he was and for a moment he felt he was suffocating, terrified because he did not recognise either the ceiling of the room or anything else around him.

He closed his eyes again. This kind of thing happened sometimes and, a few seconds later, everything would fall back into place and things would sort themselves out of their own accord. He opened his eyes slowly, to give his brain an opportunity to reset and offer him the answer he was seeking.

Nothing. He still did not know where he was or why he had woken up here as dusk was falling. Had he drunk too much the previous evening and had some friend offered that he could stay the night in his house?

He suddenly sat up and remained on the bed with a tightness in his chest which, if it wasn't terror, certainly felt like it. He could remember nothing of the previous night, Nothing! His mind was an empty hole, a desert, a total blank.

He looked around him, bewildered: he had been lying on a disgusting mattress of sorts covered with old stains the origin of which he preferred not to think about, and the room was in ruins: the walls were peeling, the window frame was riddled with woodworm, the glass was broken in a way that suggested stones had been thrown at it for years, the floor was covered with rubbish and pieces of coloured paper which were hard to make out because the orange luminosity had been diminishing, and shadows were growing in the corners of this ruined house.

What could have happened to him that would lead to his waking up here? Had he been assaulted? Had a band of robbers attacked him and left him lying here, thinking he was dead?

He carefully touched his head. It hurt a bit, but it was a mere headache, there did not seem to be any bruising of the skull. He rolled up his shirt sleeves to examine his arms and in the half-light, he could see no bloodstains, scratches or bruises. His legs were pain-free, too.

He explored his chest with his hands and noted what appeared to be large seams on various parts of his trunk. But he did not feel anything when he put pressure on them – no pain, no burning sensation, no irritation. Perhaps it was another item of clothing underneath his shirt which had been mended or stitched together with coarse thread.

He considered removing his shirt and having a look, but the darkness was now almost total and it was cold, so he decided to get out of there, go home and, once he felt safe in his own room, light a lamp, ask for water for a bath, take off his clothes and carefully explore his entire body.

Go back to his room. Go back home.

Where did he live?

That black emptiness again.

He ran his tongue over his dry lips, then over his teeth – and was relieved to find that they were all there. No damage. He touched his scratchy cheeks, noting that he probably had not shaved for a few days.

But he could not recall where he lived.

He grabbed his left wrist with his right thumb and index finger searching for his pulse which, as he expected, was racing. He had to get out of there, even if he did not know where he was going. He needed activity, exercise, or he would go mad.

He stood up and left the room, feeling his way along the walls, as if he were newly blind. The layout of the house was not unfamiliar to him, but he could not connect it to anything. He went down the staircase carefully; the wooden stairs creaking under his weight did not inspire much confidence, but there was no other way to get to the ground floor and, from there, outside.

After crossing another ramshackle room which, in a former era, might have been a kitchen, he finally managed to get out into the open air, and the breeze, though cold, was invigorating. It was almost night but the western sky still retained a beautiful orange colour with streaks of carmine, and the play of colours was reflected in... the Danube!... which formed a small pool, right there in front of the house.

From somewhere nearby, he caught fragments of music, and snippets of conversation and laughter, like the echo of a party. He tilted his head upwards at the sound of a bell pealing and a name popped into his head: St Mary's Cathedral.

Something relaxed inside him as he repeated the name to himself. If he could put a name to the church and the river of his city, he would also know where he was; all he had to do was keep searching his memory.

And maybe, with a bit of luck, he would even find out who he was. Because what he still had not wanted to admit to himself was that he could not remember his own name, that, at least for now, he did not know who he was.

Chapter 1

Nora was striding along the street parallel to the riverbank, stumbling over the damned long skirt of her Carnival costume. She ought to have worn something more comfortable, but Sarah had lent her this dress worn by a lady in the 18th Century, with its little bag, a wig, and the rest of the necessary paraphernalia. And she'd allowed herself to be persuaded, despite the fact that she usually dressed up as a vampire, witch or such like.

She didn't even know if she was doing the right thing, going to a party where she knew hardly anyone, but she'd been in Ingolstadt for a few months already, and what with classes, her first exams, getting used to shopping, cooking and doing everything for herself, as well as the difficulty of relating to people with a different mindset, she still hadn't managed to form a circle of friends. So, when Sarah had invited her to this party and even lent her a dress, she'd accepted immediately. Stupidly, she hadn't been able to get there sooner, because she'd had to look after Marie for a couple of hours while her parents had gone to a meeting at the childcare centre they'd chosen for their little girl when she was old enough to attend. Nora hadn't been able to refuse, and now she was trying to find the place where the party was being held.

She stopped for a moment to catch her breath and take a quick look at the GPS app on her mobile phone. She was supposedly very close now. She pulled the wig down over her ears and was about to set off again when a desperate shout stopped her dead in her tracks and had her searching around to try to locate the source of the sound.

"Heeeelp!" a woman's voice was yelling. "Heeeelp! Someone help me! My granddaughter is drowning! Heeeelp!"

Pulling her skirts up almost to her knees, Nora started to run towards the spot where she thought the woman was, and a few seconds later, she found her, up to her knees in the river near the bank, stretching out her arms towards a bundle floating downstream.

Luckily, the current in this spot wasn't as strong as it was elsewhere. Nora tore off the white wig with its bows and butterflies, pulled the dress over her head without bothering to undo the zip, and threw herself into the water without thinking about how cold it might be.

It was freezing.

Her first impulse was to get out immediately and dry herself with whatever came to hand. But the cries of the little girl and her grandmother spurred her on, and she was a good swimmer.

She allowed herself to be carried by the current as her powerful strokes brought her ever closer to the little girl until she managed to grab her and hold on. The child clung to her like a small monkey, and was on the verge of dragging her rescuer underwater with her kicking. Her little arms

wrapped around Nora's throat, almost strangling her. Nora tried to adjust the child so as not to impede her movements, but as she moved to pull the child backwards against her chest, an obstacle in the river crashed into them and separated them again. A drifting branch, she thought.

She swam furiously to the middle of the current again, managed to grab the hood of the little girl's anorak and drag her back to her chest, but this time there were no kicks or arms coiling themselves around her neck. The toddler had either lost consciousness or something worse.

Embracing the child, she briefly let herself be dragged along. The water was so intensely cold that she started to feel her body going numb, stiff. It was an effort to swim and she felt her body heat dissipating through the top of her head, while her wet hair was starting to freeze.

When they reached the bridge, where the current was crashing against one of the pillars, a wave passed over them, briefly submerging them, and Nora thought the end had come, that she wouldn't be able to do it. Just then, a pair of arms emerged from the dark and helped her to float and move towards the shore with her immobile bundle.

When they finally reached land, they flopped onto the mud exhausted, gasping from the effort, but relieved and pleased to have got out of the situation intact. The grandmother came running towards them, mumbling her thanks mixed with tears. Her mobile was switched on.

"Call an ambulance," shouted Nora.

"Is she alright? Is Tini OK?"

The streetlights had already come on and by their light, Nora saw that the little girl, her eyes closed, was lying on her back, motionless, like a doll abandoned on the riverbank. She must have been about three years old.

The young man who had helped them was looking at her, devastated. They exchanged quick glances as they listened to the woman talking on her phone, giving their location and explaining what had happened.

Nora was the first to react. She knelt down beside the motionless child, putting her on her side in an attempt to get her to vomit the water she had swallowed, tipping her head back, opening her mouth, hooking a finger inside to make sure there were no weeds in there, pinching her nostrils shut and then, covering the child's mouth with her own, she immediately started to perform artificial respiration, while the young man asked in a low voice, almost talking more to himself than to the women: "But what is she doing? What are you doing? The child is dead, she has no pulse. There is nothing to be done."

Nora pulled away to take another breath. Understanding what the young man had said, she began cardiac massage. Thirty chest compressions, two breaths, thirty compressions, two breaths... in rapid sequence, once, twice, again, without pause, counting constantly.

A few minutes later, the ambulance arrived. Everything was bathed in rotating blue lights and howling sirens.

“Is she alive?” the grandmother kept asking. “Is she alive?”

As if in reply, the little girl opened her eyes and started to cough, expelling all the water she had swallowed. Her grandmother rushed to the child, but before she could embrace her, two stretcher-bearers picked her up, put her in the ambulance, and almost immediately, they had all disappeared.

“Has she ... come back from the dead?” asked the young man, looking at Nora utterly perplexed.

Nora nodded, got up, and headed off in the direction where her clothes ought to be. He followed her. Luckily, she thought, it hadn't been necessary to take off all her clothes in front of this total stranger; she was still wearing the full-length bodysuit she'd put on so she wouldn't feel cold in her very thin dress.

“No way; she wasn't dead,” she replied when she realised how important this seemed to be to the young man. “But she might have been, if we'd left her a bit longer. Poor little thing! What possessed her to go into the water at this late hour and in this cold?”

“Fräulein, you were very brave,” he said.

“You, too.” Nora turned to look at him as she realised he had addressed her very formally. What kind of weirdo was he? He was dressed as if he were her twin: breeches with white stockings, a shirt with wide sleeves and a ruffle down the front. Maybe he'd been invited to the same party. “And... by the way... thanks,” she added. “If it hadn't been for you, the two of us would have drowned.”

They had reached the spot where she'd taken off her costume and, even though she was still soaking wet, she put it on. She was freezing cold, as was he. He was shaking, although he was trying to hide it.

Luckily, her mobile hadn't fallen out of the little bag she'd thrown to the ground, and it was functioning. She called a taxi, explaining that it was really urgent and then, gesturing to the young man to follow her, walked out to the street running parallel to the river and stood underneath a streetlight, so the taxi driver would see them as soon as he turned the corner.

“I have never seen anything like what you did,” the young man said, still amazed. “Can you explain to me what you did, Fräulein?”

The way this character talks is weird! Nora thought before she replied:

“I did what any first-aider would do: CPR. The usual thing. And we were lucky, of course. Look, come back to my place. We have to get changed or we'll end up with pneumonia.”

Nora opened the door of the taxi for him and practically shoved him inside. She quickly started to explain to the taxi driver why they were wet before the man could eject them from his vehicle and, though reluctant, given they were already inside, he ended up taking them where they wanted to go.

During the short trip, the young man watched her silently with frightened eyes as his body shook – more from nerves or fear than from the cold, Nora thought, and he seemed very odd and mysterious to her. Why would he be afraid, now that it was all over? Was it shock?

He watched her out of the corner of his eye, not knowing what to think, not knowing where he was, increasingly anxious. They got out at one of the narrow streets in the city centre and went up a steep staircase to the third floor. The young woman opened the door and suddenly, everything filled with light.

A lamp such as he had never seen in his life before was hanging from the ceiling – no flame, no smoke – and it spread a brightness that almost hurt his eyes. And it was as warm in the house as if they had spent the whole day lighting one fire after another.

She took off her shoes, opened a door, disappeared into a room, and immediately there was the sound of running water. This was becoming stranger by the minute.

A dream! That was it! A very strange dream from which he would soon awaken. It had to be a dream, because it was all happening in the city where he was studying, but nothing was exactly as it was in real life.

“Here, dry yourself a bit,” said the young woman, holding out a blue cloth. “I’ll shower quickly, and then it’s your turn.”

He started to rub his hair as he glanced around him: clothes hanging on hooks in the wall, a lot of strange footwear ... female, judging by the size, and one pair of what could be men’s shoes tossed on the floor; a pile of books in one corner. Was this a house where only women lived? And the men’s shoes? And how did this girl dare to allow a stranger inside. What better proof that it was all a dream than the absurdity of this situation? But in his dreams, he had never noticed so clearly his wet clothing, his cold body, his tiredness, and the hunger he felt right now.

“Done! Now let them say that we women take a long time in the bathroom! And by the way, my name is Nora. Your turn. Would you rather have a bath or a shower?” The young woman had put on a white dressing gown and her wet hair was covered by a sort of rose-coloured turban. He tried not to look, but he could see her legs as far as her knees, and she did not seem the least bit ashamed about it. “Come on, a shower,” she decided when she saw that he wasn’t answering. “You waste less water and it warms you up just as much. In the meantime, I’ll start making some cocoa, if you’d like some. There might even be some cake left.”

He nodded without understanding what she was asking him, and then walked into the small bathroom, the smallest he'd ever seen, and furnished with objects he did not recognise. He quickly explored, and then tried, the handles inside the bath, and after a few seconds, hot water started to rain down on top of him. He hurriedly undressed and, glancing occasionally towards the door which he had not locked because he could not find the mechanism, he allowed this marvellous invention to warm him up: a flow of hot water that seemed unending.

He heard a few hurried knocks, the door opened, he turned off the water, and covered his nakedness with his two hands, mortified. He would not have believed possible the brazenness of this young woman from a well-to-do class.

"Sorry, I'd forgotten to get out a towel and dressing gown for you; and my apologies that it's so gaudy," she said, trying not to look at him too much. "Here they are." She held out a large cloth, yellow in this case, together with a sort of brightly-coloured robe. "If you want to shave, I've left a new, disposable razor over there. When you're done, just throw it out. I'll be waiting for you in my room. The door at the end of the corridor. And don't take too long or your cocoa will get cold."

The bathroom was full of steam, the mirror was completely misty. He dried himself quickly and put on the horrendous robe before going out into the corridor. The door was open and Nora was waiting for him, sitting at a table in the bay window with two steaming bowls of hot chocolate. There was also a large piece of walnut cake which made his mouth water.

At a sign from the young woman, he sat down and had to control himself so he would not attack the cake like a hungry wolf. He felt as if he had not eaten for days.

"Go on, help yourself," she said. She had removed the turban and her long chestnut mane was starting to curl softly as it dried. She was still dressed in the white robe; nothing else. She had bright, inquisitive eyes the colour of beer. "So, I've already told you I'm Nora. Who are you?"

Good question, he thought. Indeed, who am I?

"This will strike you as odd, Fräulein Nora," he said, finally, after gulping a few times, "but I do not remember."

She didn't seem too surprised. She leant towards him slightly and asked:

"Since the river episode or before that?"

As she leant forward, she exposed a silver pendant dancing temptingly in her cleavage: an owl, the symbol of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom; and also the symbol of something profound and secret that she couldn't possibly know about. Or could she? Who was this young woman?

She had asked him a curious question. Interesting. Scientific. He glanced at the owl again and decided to speak the truth.

“Since before. Just before the river incident, I woke up in a ruined house near there, with no memory of myself or of my entire past.”

“Do you at least know where we are?”

He nodded vigorously. Scarcely a few minutes ago, his brain had provided that answer.

“Ingolstadt.”

“Correct! By the way, eat something first. Forgive me, it’s just that I’m impossibly inquisitive...”

The young man served Nora a slice of cake before serving himself and, controlling his impatience, cut off a mouthful with the edge of his fork. It was delicious. If she had made it, she was an excellent catch: good-looking, brave, and handy in the kitchen.

“Do you remember where you were going when you heard that grandmother calling out about the little girl?”

“I was not going anywhere in particular. I just wanted to leave that house and try to see where I was.”

“What’s that?” Nora suddenly seemed alarmed. She was staring at the triangular section of his chest exposed between the lapels of his robe.

He looked down at where she was staring and, without thinking, pulled apart the lapels so he could see what had made such an impression on her. Level with his heart, and in three other places on his torso, ridges stuck out on his pale, hairless chest, like deep wounds hurriedly sewn up with black twine.

He ran the tips of his fingers over the wounds, which still had not healed and formed scars, but they did not seem fresh either. He felt nothing. They were like cardboard. As he was touching the one near his navel, he realised there was another one lower down, almost in his groin.

He looked up at the young woman, conscious that it was highly improper for him to be showing her his naked body in this way, but that he could not avoid it; it was as if he were looking for confirmation that what he was seeing and touching was real.

She got up, approached him and, with a whispered “May I?”, ran her fingers over the ridges as well. He shivered. No woman had touched him since his mother had died, when he was ten.

“This is incredible,” she said in a low voice. “Do they hurt?”

He shook his head. “I am dreaming, am I not?”

“No. Not unless we’re both dreaming the same thing; no. This is everyday reality.”

“It is not mine. Everything is strange here: the lights, the bathroom, the vehicle which brought us here, the way women dress and the child in the river... It must be a dream.”

Nora got up from the table, left the room, and returned a few moments later with some items of clothing.

“Here, put these on; they’re Toby’s and I don’t know how they’ll fit you, but it’s better than seeing you in Heike’s robe with a chest covered in badly stitched wounds that don’t hurt.”

“Who is Toby, Fräulein? Your brother?”

“Would you stop addressing me so formally. You’re making me nervous. Toby is my flatmate. Heike, Toby and I live here. They’re studying philology and I’m studying medicine.”

“Medicine? Like me,” he replied in a rush. And he smiled. “I have just remembered! I am studying in Ingolstadt because it is the best university for chemistry and medicine.”

“It doesn’t have the reputation it used to. A couple of centuries ago, they relocated the Medical School first to Landshut, and then to Munich. They only reopened it back here a year ago. I wanted to study in Vienna, but there were no places available. I’ll try to get a transfer next year and I might be able to return to Austria.”

“I am Austrian too. From Salzburg.” He found it amazing to be remembering things about himself. So much so, that he was unable to ask about all the things that came to his mind as he was listening to her because, first and foremost, he had to completely regain his memory.

A moment ago, he would not have known what to answer if he had been asked where he was from. While they were talking, he had been getting dressed with his back to her, but once he was ready, he turned around for her approval.

Nora stood looking at him. The clothes were almost his size and he looked good in them, but somehow, the other clothes made him more real; in Toby’s clothes he seemed to be in fancy dress.

“You’ve remembered something else. Shall we have a go at your name? Let me see. Look at me... I’m Nora... and you’re... You know: Me Tarzan, you Jane...”

“What are you talking about?”

She saw his look of total incomprehension, and so as not to stress him further, continued:

“Nothing. Let’s try again. Me, Nora; you...”

She was looking intensely into his eyes – grey-green, big, intelligent, slanting slightly, above high cheekbones. His dark-blond hair was somewhat long, and he hadn’t shaved.

“Me Nora. You...”

“Maximilian,” he burst out. “I think.” He smiled timidly and two dimples appeared in his cheeks.

“We’re making progress. Delighted to meet you, Max.” Nora held out her hand for him to shake, but he turned it over delicately, bent over it and lightly brushed it with a kiss, all quite naturally.

“And now, let’s go to the kitchen,” Nora added quickly to hide her embarrassment, “and see what’s in the fridge to make an acceptable meal. I’m starving and I suspect that a cup of cocoa and a small piece of cake have been nothing more than an appetizer. Do you like pasta?”

The young man shrugged and followed her. Only his parents had called him Max; to the rest of the world he was Maximilian. But he was pleased that she would call him Max too. What a pity this was nothing more than a dream! This girl had something he had been searching for, for a long time.

While Nora was rummaging around in the kitchen, he returned to the bathroom to try to follow her advice that he shave. It took him some time to work out how this invention worked, and he spent the whole time thinking how unusual it was for a man to be living with two young women if he was not even a family member. What sort of people were they? What sort of people could her parents be, to allow such a thing? And how was it possible for Nora to be studying medicine? It was not that she lacked intelligence, that was becoming more and more clear, but as a woman they would never accept her into a university. He would have to ask her about so many things but unfortunately, more than half his mind was taken up with remembering, and especially with finding out the source of these strange scars covering his torso.

He looked at them in the mirror, perplexed. No matter how superficial these wounds might be – and they were not – at least two of them should have caused his death. That opened up two trains of thought. On the one hand, who had done this to him? And on the other, how was it possible that he had survived, and who had stitched the wounds?

If he could remember, it was most likely that his mind would recall the circumstances of the attack, maybe even the person who had carried it out, and for what reason. For now, with the help of this strange woman, the only things he remembered was that his name was Max, that he was from Salzburg, and that he was studying medicine in Ingolstadt.

What had Nora meant when she said: ‘It’s no longer the best university’, that they had “relocated” it? He was certain he had attended classes until very recently. No one had relocated anything. And on top of that, she had said: ‘It was a couple of centuries ago’.

He put his wet clothes over some warm metal bars in the bathroom, finished shaving, thought he looked semi-civilised, and returned to the kitchen, from which a wonderful aroma was emerging. Nora had dressed in the meantime, and her attire left him rooted to the spot in the doorway. She was wearing some sort of black male breeches, very tight, which in a woman, left

nothing to the imagination; and her upper body was covered by a loose garment which allowed him to see reasonably well what she was wearing underneath – a sort of lightweight French corset. The sight of all of this forced him to clear his throat and look away.

Nora put the meal on the table and handed him a bottle of red wine to uncork. A young lady drinking wine! He opened the bottle without making any comment, and poured out two glasses, hoping she would say “No, that’s just for you.” But she merely smiled, took her glass and raised it for a toast.

“To us, and to the little one we rescued! And to a swift recovery of your memory. The loss may be a consequence of the trauma you suffered from your wounds. Do you remember what happened?”

He shook his head and drank deeply from his glass. It was superb. The meal, however, was very strange. It smelt really good, but the plate was full of things he did not recognise: some long, very thin white strips like enormous worms, swimming in a violently red sauce dotted with dark berries split in half, and some other little pink worms with tiny shelly tails. The only things he had identified on the plate were a small sprig of rosemary and a sprinkling of basil.

“Let’s eat before it gets cold. I hope you’re not allergic to shrimp. I bought them yesterday. There’s only a few, but they’re quite tasty.”

His first forkful was like an electric shock in his mouth. He’d never tasted such a flavour and it was so intense as to be almost excessive, but the long white things – something clearly made from flour and perhaps an egg – neutralised the strong taste somewhat. He soon got used to it to the point where he ended up eating two plates full to overflowing.

“Well,” she said, smiling with the satisfaction of all women whose efforts in the kitchen are appreciated by a man, “you’ve eaten my famous spaghetti with tomato sauce, olives and shrimp. Tasty?”

“Delicious.”

“Now we’re going to check out your wounds. Will you let me look? After all, we’re both going to be doctors.”

Max gulped, got up from the table and, just as he was on the point of removing his upper garment, which had neither buttons nor anything else to unfasten, shook his head.

“No, Fräulein, I am sorry. But I believe I must initially clarify this for myself and maybe consult a colleague.”

Nora stared at him, at first furiously, and then impassively.

“Fine, as you wish. Well then, it would be better if we just went to bed. It’s been a long day.”

Max was stunned. Could she be insinuating...? No. No, it wasn't possible. She wasn't smiling. She wasn't looking at him in that way he had seen certain women looking at men on a dark corner. It was all very odd, but he was sure she was a respectable girl. She could not be proposing ... Her words interrupted his wild thoughts:

"You can use Toby's bed. He's gone to spend the Carnival weekend at home, like Heike. I'm sure he won't mind. I'll find you a blanket. Tomorrow is a holiday; we can get up late, talk some more, and keep searching. Good night."

He must have fallen asleep immediately because, when the ringing of the church bells woke him up at 5 o'clock in the morning, he felt rested and clear-headed. The dwelling was dark and quiet.

He stretched out in the most comfortable bed he had ever used. The temperature was perfect and he was tempted to turn over and keep on sleeping in this marvellous dream and then, if he was lucky, when he got up he would again see Nora. But something told him that if he wanted to solve this mystery, he must return to the ruined house where he had awoken with no memory of himself. And he had to do it alone. He could not put that delicious creature in danger. He would see her again after he had gone back to being his own person.

He arose stealthily and exchanged Toby's clothes for his own with a shiver – how thin they seemed by comparison! – and then, after looking out of the window and seeing there had been a light snowfall overnight, decided to borrow an article of Toby's clothing. He put on an incredibly lightweight, but warm, jacket and, having scribbled a note, and being careful not to wake Nora, he left, walking in the direction of the Medical School. He wanted to reassure himself of its very existence, before going on to explore the rundown house.

Nora opened her eyes as soon as she heard the latch closing on the front door. She had slept little and badly because she was sure Max would try to leave secretly, and she'd been proven absolutely correct. But she wasn't prepared to let a young man with a trauma like his wander through the city at dawn; anything could happen to him.

Don't try to fool yourself, Nora. The truth is that you like the lad and you don't want to lose him just like that. If you lose him now, you have no way of bumping into him, said a voice inside her.

Fine. I agree. I like the guy; so what?

Nothing. Go after him. These days, we women don't have to wait for them to make the first move. Run, before you lose him in the alleyways!

She dressed speedily, saw the note on the table, stuck it in her pocket, looked out of the window, saw Max turning the corner on Kanalgasse, and hurriedly left the apartment, wearing her running shoes. As a result, she was able to catch up with him easily without him being aware of it.

He was heading towards the old university and, as she had imagined, he stopped in front of what was now the Museum of Early Medicine and Anatomy but which, for centuries, had been the building in which medicine was studied and cadaver dissections were performed in the anatomy theatre.

She watched him standing there for several minutes, shaking his head, reading and re-reading the plaque beside the modern entrance, then stepping back a few paces, and tilting his head to look at the entire building, making a frame with his hands to look through the windows of the museum which, understandably, had all its lights turned off. It was as if he didn't recognise it, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing.

A thought which had already arisen in Nora's head the night before, began to take shape in her mind. It was impossible, it was idiotic, and yet it would explain many of the strange things she had noticed about Max: the ease with which he wore his old-fashioned clothes, his obsession with addressing her formally and even referring to her as Fräulein, his lack of knowledge about the most basic things, like taxis, lamps and tomatoes.

What if he were a time traveller? What if he were from the past?

Nora shook her head just as Max set off again, this time towards the river and the ruined house he had told her about.

It couldn't be. And anyway, if he were a time traveller, he'd be better prepared: he'd know what spaghetti was and he wouldn't have looked at her with alarm when he saw her dressed in her leggings.

A solitary pedestrian was walking beside the river with his dog. Max hid in a doorway until the man had gone. Nora waited too.

A few seconds later, Max continued on his way to the old house which was, in fact, a ruin in the middle of a small, totally neglected garden. He crossed the garden, entered through the back door, and disappeared from sight.

Nora chewed on her lip, undecided. Should she follow him and see what he was doing or where he'd got to? Yes. There was no other option. If she lost him now, she might never find him again. Stealthily, she followed him.

She went through a room which must have been a kitchen or a laundry and opened onto a dark corridor. Max's cautious footsteps were making the stairs creak. If she also went up the stairs, he'd hear her for sure, but if, in order to avoid that, she remained downstairs, she wouldn't know what he was doing and there wouldn't be much point to her having come this far.

Before she could make up her mind, she heard him coming back downstairs and she barely had time to retrace her steps into the kitchen. She carefully poked her head out and, as she'd expected, she could see him outlined against the early morning light filtering in from outside. He seemed to be staring fixedly at something located at the foot of the staircase, something she couldn't see from where she was.

She heard the creak of a door being opened, a stifled exclamation, some footsteps, and then, nothing – total silence.

After a few minutes, when she was certain nothing more was going to happen, she dared to lean out into the corridor, which was now illuminated by the powerful red light of the newly-risen sun. She walked down the corridor until she was standing in the spot where he had stood, and looked in the direction she recalled him looking. All she could see was an ordinary cupboard under the staircase. It had a wooden door with a rusty metal latch. She'd heard the door opening. Max must be inside.

Inside a cupboard under a staircase? Why? And... why hadn't he come out yet?

She took two slow, laborious steps towards the door, her right hand stretched out in front of her as if she were afraid that the latch would give her an electric shock.

The bells of St Mary's Cathedral chimed the half hour. Half past five.

She barely touched the latch and sensed only that it was cold. She applied pressure and the door opened inwards with the creak of a horror film onto the black hole she was expecting. A storage room. It couldn't be anything else.

And yet...

A gentle cool breeze was blowing from the back of it. She took a step inside. And another. Now it seemed to her that there was a distant light, like when you're in a tunnel with a curve and you can't see the end of it but you sense a light at the exit. She took two more steps. For a storage space under a staircase this was very big. And Max wasn't here. The silence was total; if he were hidden in the darkness, she would hear him breathing or at least sense his presence, the warmth of his body. But there was nobody.

She kept advancing.

Her stomach was gripped by fear, but her curiosity was too strong. So, ignoring how she was feeling, she kept going. She needed to see where this storage room ended; what that light she could discern at its end really was.

Three more steps, a curve to the right and there, at the end and now very close, the light from a street. What street? She swallowed. Her mouth had become very dry.

With extreme caution, she made her way to a window with bars through which the light was shining. On the other side was a street in which, at least from her vantage point, she couldn't see a single streetlight, rubbish bin, car or anything else that might suggest that this was a street in Ingolstadt in the 21st century.

She stood there mesmerised for a few minutes, hoping that someone would pass by and prove her theory, but the fact that it was so early in the morning made her worry that it wouldn't happen unless she was prepared to wait a long time.

She was mistaken.

A few minutes later, a man dressed as if for the Carnival, with white breeches, a brown dress coat and a three-cornered hat, crossed in front of her eyes, his heels clicking on the cobblestones. Behind him, a very young boy dressed in a similar manner was carrying a large wooden box, possibly with the tools of some trade she couldn't guess.

Frightened, she drew back from the window. She didn't want anyone to see her spying. She was about to move away when the ringing of a small high-pitched bell made her go back to her observation post. A child dressed as an altar boy carrying a golden cross mounted on top of a long pole was clearing a path for a priest who, with his two hands in front of his chest, seemed to be carrying a very precious box. Another altar boy was following them. The three of them were walking quickly and the man's expression suggested a matter of terrible urgency.

It struck Nora that she'd seen a similar image in some museum.

Of course! The viaticum. Nora recalled her great grandmother's stories about when she was a little girl, that you could always hear a small bell tingling in her town whenever the priest was going to give extreme unction to a dying person. It looked like Nora had gone back to a time when this was perfectly normal.

It wouldn't be Max who was dying, she thought, alarmed.

No, how could it be Max? He had been as fresh as a daisy ten minutes ago.

For a moment, the temptation to go out and walk around that unknown Ingolstadt was so strong that she had to call on all her sound judgement to stop herself. How was she going to go out there dressed like this? They'd think she was mad and lock her up. The least she could do was go back home, put on yesterday's fancy dress and come back clad in a manner that was more or less

acceptable in that era. It wouldn't be ideal, but at least it wouldn't draw as much attention. And she was fairly certain about where she'd find Max.

He'd said he was going to consult a colleague.

It was most likely that he would head straight for his Medical School.