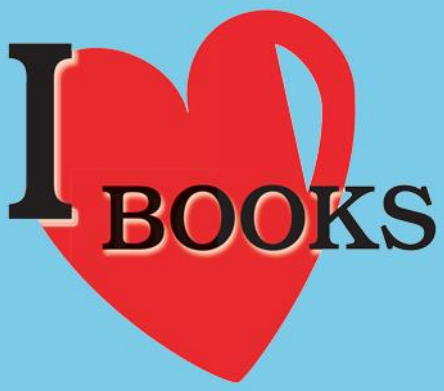


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Written by

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Illustrated by

Karl James Mountford

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BEETLE QUEEN

Inside illustrations by Karl James Mountford

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For Sam, Sebastian
& Arthur

and in memory of
Cornelia Starks

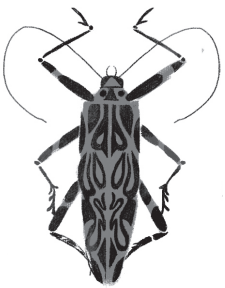






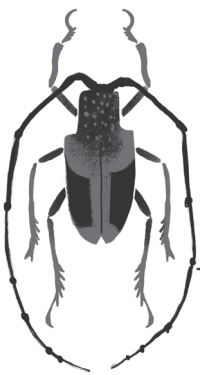
We can judge the heart of a man
by his treatment of animals.

Immanuel Kant



Chapter One

Snow White



There was a gentle tap on the door.

'Madame?'

Lucretia Cutter turned her head, her lidless eyes glistening like two inky cysts. Her four black chitinous legs clung effortlessly to the white ceiling, the fabric of her purple skirt tumbling towards the floor. 'Yes, Gerard?' she replied.

'The American actress, Ruby Hisolo Junior, has arrived for her dress fitting,' the French butler said through the door. He was forbidden from entering the White Room unless invited.

‘You can bring her down.’

‘As you wish, Madame.’

She listened as the discreet footsteps of the butler retreated up the hallway. It was thrilling to be able to detect the slightest movement in the space around her. Her new body and heightened senses made her powerful. She hungered for the moment when she could show the world who she really was. And it was coming. Soon.

She reached out with her human forearms and crawled to the wall beside the door, descending at alarming speed, reaching the floor and flipping up on to her hind legs. She folded her middle legs into special pockets in the lining of her skirt as she walked across the room, zipping up the split and hiding away her beetle-body. She picked up the black wig that lay lifeless on her glass desk and pulled it on, then lifted her white lab coat from the back of the Perspex chair. Sliding her hands into the sleeves, she shrugged it on to her shoulders, whipped out a pair of oversized sunglasses from a pocket and pushed them on to her nose, covering her compound eyes.

She pivoted to check herself in the mirror, grabbing the ebony walking stick that was propped up against the desk. She didn’t need the stick, but it encouraged people to believe that she’d had a car accident, and the accident had provided a plausible cover story whilst she’d metamorphosized within her pupation chamber.

Her senses twitched. She felt vibrations from silent footsteps, those belonging to her personal bodyguard.

Ling Ling was a Kunoichi, a female ninja, trained by Toshitsugu Takamatsu, the bodyguard of Pu Yi, the last Chinese emperor. She had been the youngest principal dancer in the New York Ballet, but her career ended during a performance of *Swan Lake*, when her ankle had shattered as she executed the Black Swan's legendary thirty-two fouettes at a record-breaking speed. Ling Ling had hung up her pointe shoes to take up the ninjato sword, and she was deadly.

Lucretia Cutter opened the door. Ling Ling was waiting outside, dressed in her customary black suit.

'Any sign of those wretched beetles?'

Ling Ling shook her head. 'Craven and Dankish are still looking.'

'Imbeciles,' Lucretia Cutter muttered. 'Send out the yellow ladybirds. I need eyes all over the city. Those blasted beetles could ruin everything for me. I want them found, and I want them destroyed.'

Ling Ling gave a curt nod.

The battle with the Emporium beetles had been unexpected, and Lucretia Cutter wasn't in the habit of losing a fight. She wanted the beetles obliterated, not only because they were evidence of her secret work farming transgenic insects, but because they had publicly humiliated her. She'd had to bribe a lot of people to stay out of prison and keep the images of her new eyes off the front pages of the newspapers. Those beetles had cost her time and money, and she wouldn't be happy until

they were ground into dust.

'And, Ling Ling, to accompany our spies, send out the venomous *Coccinellidae* – the eleven-spotted yellow ladybirds. If there's anybody else out there poking their nose into my business, I want them eliminated.' She raised her index finger. 'Although they're not to touch Bartholomew Cuttle. Understood? He's mine.'

Ling Ling bowed and padded away.

Lucretia Cutter closed the door. Bartholomew's escape had upset her, but he'd be back. He wouldn't be able to help himself. Tapping her forefinger against her top lip, she contemplated the renegade beetles. Really, she should be commending herself on their abilities – they'd come from *her* laboratories, after all.

She smiled. Who'd have thought splicing Bartholomew Cuttle's DNA with beetle DNA would have had such impressive results? Coleoptera that thought for themselves and demonstrated free will? That was new. She'd never seen a mix of beetle species cooperating to fight an enemy. It was exciting – although, she'd noticed, they lacked a killer instinct. She sneered. They probably inherited Bartholomew's soft heart. Her new beetles were part Alsatian: trainable, able to fight and carry out orders. She'd bred an army of obedient slaves, and right now, that was all she needed.

Walking over to the two-way mirror behind her desk, she pulled a lipstick from her lab-coat pocket, applying the shimmering gold paint and smacking her lips

together. She could throttle that Crips boy for freeing the Cuttle beetles. He'd set her work back years.

A knock on the door and the sound of a well-known husky giggle made her turn around.

'Come in.' She fixed a polite smile on her face.

Gerard opened the door and a sultry blonde girl in a pink sweater and white pleated skirt tottered in.

'Ruby, darling, so good to see you,' Lucretia said, crossing the room.

Ruby Hisolo Jnr flicked her blonde curls over her shoulder and looked critically around the sparsely decorated room.

'Wow! Who's your interior designer?' She lifted her hand. 'No. Don't say. Whoever it is, fire them. It's like some kinda science lab in here.' She grimaced. 'It's creepy.' She jabbed a perfectly manicured finger at Lucretia Cutter. 'You're taking the pharmacy-chic thing way too far. What this room needs is a splash of colour' – she flicked her finger at random areas of the room – 'apricot or peach. And cushions. Everybody loves cushions. I know a great guy if you need help,' she giggled, 'which I think we both know you do.'

Lucretia Cutter didn't reply, her expression remaining a polite smile throughout the awkward silence that followed.

'Just tryin' to help,' Ruby sighed, unconcerned. She fluttered her eyelashes at Gerard. 'I'm thirsty. Got any bubbles?'

The butler went to a fridge under the lab bench,

taking out a frosted glass and a dark green bottle. He opened the bottle, filled the champagne flute, and handed the glass to the waiting actress.

Lucretia Cutter clapped her hands together. 'So, are we going to steal the hearts of the world at the Film Awards?'

'Of course I am.' Ruby emptied her glass in one gulp, handed it back to the butler and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. 'Why else would I be here?'

'Good.' Lucretia Cutter smiled through gritted teeth and reminded herself that this fitting was important. 'Gerard, bring in *Snow White*.'

'Snow White? Who's Snow White?' Ruby frowned. 'I thought this was *my* fitting? I told your people on the phone. I'm a big star now, and I ain't gonna . . .'

Gerard wheeled in a dark slender trunk that was as tall as he was.

'I call my creation *Snow White* because it is made from the purest white substance to be found in the natural world,' said Lucretia Cutter.

Gerard flicked the catches and the door of the trunk swung open. The inside of the box glowed with light radiating from a delicate dress that hung on a gold hanger.

'Oh my!' Ruby's manicured fingertips brushed against her red lips as she gasped in awe. 'It's a dress made of fairy dust!' She stepped towards the trunk, stretching out her hand to touch it.

'Actually, it's made of beetles.'