

**Also by
Catherine Bruton:**

No
Ballet
Shoes
in
Syria

ANOTHER
TWIST
IN
THE
TALE



nosy
crow


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**For Fox Benwell, who helped me
understand what this story was really
about.**

And for the amazing A Level students with
whom I have journeyed across America through
the power of stories:

Boris Adams, Emma Botterill, Mariel
Emmerson-Hicks, Sophie Hart, Saroop Lehal,
Meg Lintern, Minnie Leigh, Bo Stanton, Poppy
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Brown, Leo Fountain, Adam Dudley Fryar,
Lukas Hillman, Cerys Lewis, Will Perkins, Teddy
Spencer, Ella Thompson, Zara Neill, James
Darnton and Vicky Lee.

Always on the quilt, forever in my heart!



Prologue

“Burn the letters.”

Those were my aunt’s dying words.

“Destroy them or they will destroy you,” she said in a parched whisper as she lay on her deathbed, like a doll packed away in lace. “They will ruin you, Maggie – they have ruined your father.”

I took the pile of yellowing parchment from her trembling fingers, looked into my Aunt Margaret’s milky eyes and promised to do as she asked. But I knew it was an empty vow. I could burn the letters, but I could never destroy them. The story they contained was etched upon my soul – it had shaped my life so far, just as it had shaped my father’s, and just as it would continue to shape the course of my destiny long after the yellowing parchments were turned to dust.

“Burn the letters, Maggie!” my aunt whispered again, clutching my hand with paper-thin fingers. “Promise me that the story ends here!”

I made my promise. But I knew even then that it would not be the end of the story.



Chapter 1

“It was on a dreary night in November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. The rain pattered dismally against the window panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out.”

I paused and glanced round at the eager faces looking up at me, a rag-tag collection of dock children – the kids of sailors and sail-menders; waifs and strays and workhouse brats – perched on lobster pots and upturned barrels or crouched on the cobbles of the jetty, all listening with bated breath to the tale of the man who created a monster.

I took a deep breath and continued. “I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay

at my feet...”

I didn't read from a book. I didn't need to, for I had learned the tale of Victor Frankenstein before I was five years old. The story of the scientist who played God, who created a man of threads and patches, then infused the spark of life into its cold form and brought it into being. I had heard the tale from my cradle. My earliest memories were of my father telling me it as a bedtime story, breathlessly recounting how the scientist, so horrified when he saw what he had done, ran off into the night, abandoning the monster he had made. I was rocked to sleep with tales of the creature's misery, then its rage, and finally its murderous revenge. A fine tale to tell to a child!

“Go on, Maggie! What 'appened then?” demanded Tommy Tucker, the harbourmaster's boy, whose regular beatings were etched like a map of the world on his skinny frame.

“Yeah, tell us 'bout when the monster wakes up! I like that bit best!” That was Jenny Stocking, who washed pots in The Leaky Galleon and told fortunes in tea leaves for a penny a go.

I leaned forward and assumed my most sombre expression as I continued. “I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open...”

A fine tale indeed. But a true one, for all that. My father had met Frankenstein's creation long ago, when as a young captain he had encountered the scientist during a voyage to the Arctic. Frankenstein had been pursuing the creature across the tundra, bent on destroying the monster that he had created. The unholy story told to my father by Victor Frankenstein on his deathbed would go on to shape the course not only of my father's life, but of my own too.

“His yellow skin scarcely covered the muscles and arteries beneath,” I went on in my best tale-telling voice. “His watery eyes seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set...”

I felt a collective shudder run through the rag-tag audience listening to the tale, and in my pocket I felt a familiar wriggle as my small pet mouse, Victor, alert to the collective excitement, peeked his nose into the air to see what was going on.

“I likes it best when the monster starts a-killing folks,” said the little girl who sold matches on the corner of Basin Street and Pudding Lane. She was a bundle of bones, dark shadows under her eyes, and she had heard me tell the story so often that I would see her muttering bits under her breath. She knew the words as well as I.

“When the monster kills the beautiful lady – that’s the finest bit of all!” added Tommy Tucker. “I wonder if ’e drinks ’er blood. Does ’e drink ’er blood, Maggie?”

“Don’t be daft, Tommy Tucker. The monster ain’t no vampire!” Jenny Stocking retorted, flicking Tommy with the dishcloth she carried permanently tucked up her sleeve.

“Well, ’e might not be a bloodsucker, but ’e’s a right bad’un,” said Tommy. “Killin’ the little boy an’ blamin’ it on that poor Nanny. Then ’e murders Frankenstein’s best friend – an’ ’is wife too!”

“I think that Frankenstein is to blame!” said the little match girl, whose name nobody knew – perhaps she did not know it herself. “’E’s the one wot abandoned the monster – left him ’elpless and alone to fend for hisself. No wonder ’e turned rotten.”

At this my little mouse friend gave a small squeak, and I glanced at the match girl, who was staring out across the harbour where the great ships were docked, her wide eyes rimmed with dark shadows. Yes, the match girl knew something of being abandoned, I thought. She knew all about loneliness.

So did Frankenstein’s creation.

And so – thanks to that same creation – did I.



Chapter 2

Sometimes I was jealous of the creature of Frankenstein. I grew up believing my father cared more for him than he did for me. And was I wrong?

My father’s fateful encounter with the scientist and his creature in the Arctic sowed the seeds of an obsession that stole him from me. He abandoned all other pursuits, made voyage after voyage back to the icy wastes; expeditions that lasted for months on end, which cost him every penny he owned and far more besides, always resulting in the same heartbreak – and eventually in ruin.

My father borrowed from friends, from moneylenders, from anyone who would listen to his tales of the marvellous creation, the key to eternal life, the secret of

the universe. In his pursuit of Frankenstein's monster, my dear father extended his credit, his friendships, his sanity ... to breaking point.

"Thanks be that your dear mother never lived to see him brought so low," my Aunt Margaret said after friends and family had disowned him; after he had lost his fortune and his reputation; after we sank down in the world. I have early memories of an elegant townhouse in Grosvenor Square, with a carriage and a line of footmen. But by the time I was six years old we had lost the house and moved to Shadwell Basin in London's East End, where most of my life had been spent in a poorly furnished lodging near the docks, surrounded by the smell of fish and damp.

Not that life on the docks was all bad. I had inherited my father's restlessness and curiosity – and the Basin was full of wonders: ships from all over the world, people speaking in a thousand tongues, trading in everything from silks to scorpions' eggs. I might have fallen low in the eyes of the polite world, but I never lacked for company so long as I could spin a tale to chill the blood and thrill the soul. And if my father was absent in his endless hunt for the monster, I always had my aunt, who loved me as if I were her very own.

Until now.

"It's just you and me now, Victor."

My little mouse scrunched up his nose and blinked his tiny eyes twice before returning his attention to the crumb of cheese on my finger.

"It's down to us to look after Father," I told him, my finger running along the soft fur between his ears. "Though how we are supposed to do that, I'm sure I don't know."

It was the day of my aunt's funeral. I was wearing a black ribbon in my hair, and old Mrs Carney from next door had lent me a length of black linen to sew around the hem of my threadbare woollen dress. My hands were raw from scrubbing the house for the funeral party, my eyes red-rimmed and ringed with shadows from crying most of the night. Outside, rain fell in desolate drizzly sheets.

Victor looked up from his contemplation of the cheese, as if he knew what I was thinking. He had been my companion since I saved him from one of Ma Carney's rat traps when he was just a tiny mouseling. Now my aunt was gone, it felt as if he were the only family I had left, for she had been like a mother to me, after my own dear mama died giving birth to me.

Perhaps that is why my father was so rarely at home; why he dedicated his life to pursuing Frankenstein's

creation – for he believed it represented the opposite of death, the chance to hold the spark of life in your hands and resurrect the dead. I was the opposite – I had cost him the one person on earth he loved more than any other. And he could never forgive me for it.

And so it was that my dearest aunt had been in many ways both father and mother to me. After my father lost everything, she moved with us into the shabby little dwelling in Shadwell Basin and used her knowledge of herbs and healing, acquired from planning ornate flowerbeds in the walled gardens of Grosvenor Square, to provide comfort to those too poor to afford medicines or a surgeon.

I helped my aunt grow her herbs and prepare tinctures, and she taught me to read by poring over my father's letters. His tales of Arctic adventures filled me with wanderlust, on the trail of elusive creatures, voyaging towards the Northern Lights, enduring frostbite and snow-blindness, polar bears and vicious wolves, travelling by sled, tugged by huskies, following giant footprints in the ice that went nowhere – visions of monsters in the snow that led only to icy tundras, crevasses ... and finally to ruin.

And now my aunt was gone. And my father's last voyage had cost him his ship, the last of his fortune,

two fingers on his left hand and the last shreds of his sanity. He was a ruined man. And he felt further away from me than ever.

“We need to find a new project for him or he will go away again,” I told my tiny mouse companion, who had crept up my sleeve on to my shoulder, where he liked to perch to get a view of the world. “We need to make him forget about this quest. Keep him here in London, make him happy again...”

I ran a finger over Victor's ears, but his eyes remained questioning.

“There's no need to look at me like that!” I said. “There must be something – some way to bring him back to us.”

But Victor just twitched his nose. I could see my own face reflected in his bright little eyes, two miniature portraits gazing back at me. Neither of them looked convinced.