

The Hunt for the Cursed Unicorn

A Train of
Dark
Wonders
Adventure

Alex Bell

ILLUSTRATED BY BEATRIZ CASTRO

The HUNT
for The
CURSED
UNICORN

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A Rock the Boat Book

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*For my nephew, Zachary Bell.
I hope you enjoy reading this book one day.*





CHAPTER 1

Bess Harper wasn't having a good day. Normally, she loved being the owner of Harper's Odditorium. After all, there weren't many eleven-year-old girls who had their very own museum full of strange curiosities and fascinating things – from haunted dolls to two-headed taxidermy cats. Not only did Bess adore the place and everything in it, but she had successfully revived it too. She had recently discovered that there was a network of troll tunnels hidden under the ground and that these tunnels contained railway tracks leading to magical gateways that took trains to other worlds. Bess had been fortunate enough to journey aboard the Train of Dark Wonders, and during her visit to the Land of Halloween Sweets, she'd obtained some new exhibits for the Odditorium.

Now, visitors flocked to ogle the spectacular fire whale in the lobby, to marvel at the minty mummy

lurching up and down the corridors, and to examine the werewolf's fang. They were also eager to sample the pirate soup in the new café. Bess had even had to hire some additional staff to keep up with the demand, especially as she still had to attend school during the week. Today was a Saturday, though, so Bess was able to spend the whole day at the museum – but things weren't going to plan. Earlier on, one of the visitors had been bitten when they'd tried to pick a whispering flower, and now she could hear screaming. This wasn't completely unheard of in the Odditorium, but in this case there was rather a lot of screaming, along with the thump of running feet.

“What's going on?” Bess asked, opening her office door and poking her head out into the corridor.

“It's the alligator!” a visitor yelled as he raced by. “It's escaped!”

Bess started running at once, fighting against the fleeing crowd. When she reached the old ballroom, she saw that the door to Blizzard's tank was open and the albino alligator was nowhere to be seen. He was very old now and spent much of the day asleep, but it was close to his mealtime, so he'd probably gone off in search of food. She groaned aloud. One of the new

staff members must have broken the golden rule and accidentally left the tank unlocked.

Bess sprinted up the curved staircase to the supply cupboard to fetch his lead and muzzle, praying that she would be in time to prevent any of her visitors from being eaten. Due to the number of deadly, dangerous and downright cursed things in the museum, she already had to pay out a large portion of the Odditorium's income on insurance premiums. She wasn't about to see her exemplary safety record blemished – not today.

She raced from the ballroom and followed the sounds of mayhem, which quickly led her to Blizzard. As she'd expected, he was prowling the corridor, taking a snap at any passing ankle or small child that crossed his path. He might have been old, but he was still a vicious, cold-blooded, three-metre-long killer of a beast, and even Bess felt a chill of fear when she got close to him.

Fortunately, he hadn't yet seen her. She used her best tiptoeing skills to sneak up from behind, thanking her lucky stars that Blizzard was now almost entirely deaf. Her heart was beating painfully fast as she sprang forwards to slip the muzzle over his long snout. Blizzard snapped his jaws at her, but she tightened the

muzzle in one fluid motion, then gave him a hard stare and said in her coldest tone, “*No!*”

If anyone else had spoken to Blizzard this way, he probably would have attempted some type of murder, but with Bess he just shuffled his feet in a shamefaced fashion and then allowed her to tug and coax him back to his tank. No sooner had she locked the door than there were more cries of alarm – this time from the café.

Bess sighed as she pocketed the key. “Now what?”

There was a squawk from one of the cobwebbed chandeliers overhead and a flurry of inky black wings as Jet – Bess’s raven – swooped down to land on her shoulder.

“I don’t know what you expect,” the bird huffed. “This is what comes from having puppet chefs. He’s probably set something on fire again. I do hope it’s not one of the visitors – that *would* be a shame.”

“Jet, please!” Bess groaned, hurrying from the ballroom. “If you don’t have anything constructive to add then—”

“There’s no need to snap at me, Elizabeth,” Jet said in a snippy tone.

“It’s only that I wish you wouldn’t sound so gleeful when you talk about visitors being set on fire,” Bess

panted as she ran down the corridor, past the map room, the taxidermy room and the pressed-trees room.

“I’m not gleeful. In fact, I don’t much care for all this chaos. It upsets my digestion.”

“You *love* chaos,” Bess replied, rolling her eyes.

She finally arrived at the old orangery, where the café was located, and threw open the door. The tables and chairs had been repurposed from other rooms in the building, and none of them matched. They were positioned around a chef’s station in the centre. A few remaining orange trees gave off a zesty scent of citrus that nowadays was mixed with the aroma of gunpowder and rum.

Bess had been very grateful when her friend Beau had given her one of his magical puppets. In his large white hat and striped apron, André looked every inch the traditional chef, and his speciality was pirate soup, with a little pirate galleon floating in the bowl. Each miniature ship could fit in the palm of one hand but was perfect in every detail, from the rigging and masts to the sails and anchor. They reminded Bess of ships in bottles, except that these ones all flew a Jolly Roger flag and had a real pirate crew. The pirates were prone to firing the ships’ cannons, but since the cannonballs

were only about the size of a raisin, no real damage was ever done.

The problem occurred on the rare occasion when a mermaid popped up in the soup. She would start singing and, like most singing mermaids, she wanted to drown people for reasons that Bess still didn't totally understand. There wasn't much in the way of water in the orangery, so her enchanted victims made do with pouring drinks over their heads, which only served to frustrate the mermaid and upset the visitors.

Sure enough, today there was a tiny blue-haired mermaid warbling away on one of the tables. The visitors were drenched and complaining, soup was getting knocked over, and it was all rather disordered. Bess took a pair of earplugs from her pocket and thrust them into her ears before racing to one of the cupboards and pulling out a jar. The next moment she'd scooped the mermaid up, poured in a glass of water and screwed the lid on tight. The combination of the water and the lid dampened the singing enough to loosen the spell over the visitors. Some of them rushed up to Bess to complain and threaten one-star reviews. Bess wasn't too bothered by this, since shocking, sensationalist tales only seemed to draw people to the museum all the more, but she was glad that it was almost closing time.

She loved having visitors usually – it felt like honouring her grandfather’s memory. When he’d passed away a few months ago, he’d left the Odditorium to Bess rather than her father or uncle because he’d known how she loved it and that she would fight to keep it and take care of it. But some days it was still a relief when the last visitor left and she could finally close up.

As she went to shut the doors at the end of the day, the new staff filed past her, eager to head home. None of them wanted to linger in the museum after dark. There were too many spooky, cursed, bizarre things within. The only person who remained in the museum with her after hours was Jamie, the elderly caretaker who’d worked there as long as Bess could remember. He’d been a close friend of her pops and wasn’t afraid of anything in the museum, even Blizzard.

In his gruff way, Jamie had always been kind to Bess, and she liked to think that they were friends. Still, it wasn’t the same as being with friends her own age. She hoped that Beau, Maria and Louie all thought of her as much as she thought about them. She wondered what sort of fantastic adventure her new friends might be having right now aboard the Train of Dark Wonders and couldn’t help feeling a flash of regret that she wasn’t with them.

Bess and Jet made their way to the ballroom, where they found Jamie mopping the floor. As always, his white hair stuck up at peculiar angles and he wore his customary blue overalls and the gloves he never took off, even in the summer. Blizzard's escape had left a certain amount of swampy water and alligator droppings to deal with, but it looked like Jamie was just coming to the end of the clean-up.

"I'm sorry," Bess said. "I would have been here to help sooner, but there was a mermaid in the orangery."

Jamie grunted. "The gator's tank never should have been unlocked in the first place. It's all because of having new folk in the Odditorium."

"We need the extra help," Bess reminded him. "There are too many visitors for us to handle on our own now."

"Personally, I preferred it when there were no visitors here at all."

Bess shook her head. "Jamie, the whole point of this place was that Pops wanted to share his collections with the world."

"Ordinary people don't appreciate them," the caretaker replied with a sniff.

It wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation and Bess sighed. But before she could say anything

further, there was a loud crash from upstairs. Jamie and Bess both looked up at the ceiling.

“That sounded like it came from the attic.” Bess frowned.

The attic was used as overflow storage for items not quite interesting enough to be put on display, along with exhibits that the public had grown tired of.

To Bess’s surprise, Jamie looked a bit shifty. “Probably a bat that’s somehow got in,” he said. “You stay here, miss. I’ll see to it.”

“No way,” Bess replied. “Bats don’t make crashing sounds like that. If something’s going on in the attic, I want to see what it is.”



CHAPTER 2

There was a different sort of atmosphere in the Odditorium after dark. As Bess climbed the stairs, with Jamie at her heels and Jet swooping ahead through the shadows, she could hear some of the exhibits shuffling and scuttling about. There was also the soft murmur of the whispering flowers that grew over the building's exterior. None of this especially bothered Bess because they were sounds she was used to, but she wasn't at all sure about the noises coming from the attic.

There hadn't been any further bangs or crashes, but now she could make out a faint whir, low and grumbling. She racked her brain but couldn't think of any items stored up there that would make a sound like that.

"Whatever it is, I'm sure I can sort it out on my own," Jamie said, slightly out of breath in his attempt

to keep up with Bess. “It’s late. Don’t you want to go home for a nice cup of—”

Bess cut him off. “Trying to persuade me to go home is only making me want to investigate more.”

Jamie sighed but didn’t say anything further as they headed down the portrait hall. It was lined with old oil paintings of people whose eyes moved to watch as they passed by. They reached the door at the end that opened on to a spiral staircase. The air turned cool and musty as Bess hurried up it, with Jamie trailing behind. As she stepped out into the attic, the wooden floorboards creaked underfoot and the whirring noise was louder than ever. It was definitely a mechanical sound – a bit like the one Isabella the clockwork fortune teller made whenever she lurched into life.

It was impossible to see anything in the inky dark, so Bess fumbled for the light switch. She turned it on with a snap and a weak, sickly glow filled the room from the grimy lightbulb. Her eyes swept over an accumulation of familiar items – stacks of old books, a pile of dolls’ heads, travelling trunks covered in stickers from exotic locations, a couple of cursed teddy bears, a haunted mirror, a dressmaker’s dummy and much more besides. But everything was completely,

unnaturally still. There wasn't so much as the flicker of a ghost in the mirror or a rude gesture from one of the bears.

Bess narrowed her eyes. "What's going on here?" she said. "What's making that noise?"

"Could be rats," Jamie suggested hopefully.

"Doing what?" Bess replied incredulously. "Riding motorbikes inside the walls?"

"Stranger things have happened in this place," Jamie muttered.

Bess picked her way through the piles of stuff, following the noise to the far side of the room.

"It's coming from behind this wall panel," she said. Her eyes fell on Rubric, an improbably enormous stuffed swordfish that had previously been mounted on the wall but now lay on the ground. "That must have been what made the crash. The vibrations knocked him off."

Bess ran her hands up and down the wall, searching for a keyhole. She was an expert lock-picker and had her kit in her pocket, as always. But there was no need to use it this time because the wall panel shifted slightly at her touch and she was able to prise it open with her fingers. It swung open like a door, revealing the secret compartment behind. About the size of a large

cupboard, it was just big enough to contain a single antique spinning wheel.

Bess heard Jamie give a little groan behind her. The wheel had come to life and was spinning a strange silver thread. It fell into mirrored spools upon the floor, growing larger by the moment.

“A cursed spinning wheel!” Jet exclaimed in delight. “About time. Which princess are we going to send to sleep?”

“We’re not sending any princesses to sleep.” Bess glanced over her shoulder at Jamie. “What is this?”



The caretaker shook his head and Bess saw that he'd gone pale. "Your pops shouldn't have brought it back," he said hoarsely. "He shouldn't have taken anything from that place."

Bess could easily guess what Jamie was referring to. The other world that both he and her grandfather had originally come from – the Land of Fairy Tales. She knew now that it was a dark and dangerous place that her grandfather had had no wish to visit or even speak of ever again.

"Mark my words," Jamie said. "Any fairy-tale thing is bad news."

"Excuse me," Jet said tartly. "I'm right here."

Jamie glanced at him. "You don't count, seeing as you didn't come from there originally."

During her visit to the Land of Halloween Sweets, Bess had been gifted the raven by Ember, her fairy godmother. She'd also learned there that she was descended from a long line of wicked stepsisters.

"As for that," Jamie said, waving his hand at the spinning wheel. "I'd seal up the wall and never speak of it again."

"But...Pops must have brought it with him for a reason," Bess said. "And why is it starting up now, after all this time?"

“Probably just malfunctioning,” Jamie grunted. “It’s very old.”

Bess could see that just by looking at it. The spinning wheel had the rickety appearance of something ancient and she guessed it was easily the oldest object in the Odditorium. The dark wood gleamed in a way that was somehow sinister and sly and, despite herself, Bess shivered. She still hadn’t completely come to terms with the revelations about her heritage. She’d always been drawn to strange and peculiar things, but she didn’t think of herself as a villain and she certainly had no wish to harm a princess, or anyone else for that matter.

“Do you think it might be something to do with—” she began.

“*Don’t!*” Jamie cut her off. His voice dropped to a whisper. “Don’t say her name.”

Bess glanced at the window and saw several whispering flowers pressed up against the glass. They got their name from the way they whispered secrets non-stop, night and day. Usually, they produced an indecipherable hush of sound, but occasionally they spoke with one dark, rustling voice. They had done so a couple of months ago and their whispered warning still echoed inside Bess’s head: *Queen Cinderella is*

looking for that slipper. One day she's going to work out where it is... Then we'll all be in danger...

When Bess had told Jamie about it, he had brushed off her fears. "The door to the Land of Fairy Tales doesn't open for another hundred years," he'd said. "There's nothing to worry about."

The whispering flowers hadn't spoken to Bess since, although she'd tried to get more information from them. She took a step towards the window now, but the flowers were already rustling their leaves and withdrawing.

"I'm going home for my tea," Jamie announced, turning away from the wheel, which was still spinning. "If you've got any sense, you'll do the same."

Bess glanced at her UFO watch and sighed. Her parents *would* be expecting her. They were normal, unadventurous people who were really nothing at all like Bess. They didn't lay down lots of silly rules, but they did ask that she make it back to the dinner table on time. Reluctantly, she conceded that she would have to go too. One way or another, though, Bess was determined to find out what the spinning wheel was up to.



CHAPTER 3

After making sure the lights were all out and the Odditorium doors were locked tight, Bess headed for home. It was only a short walk to her house, which was plain and ordinary and always made her feel like she didn't quite belong. She was far more comfortable among the strange and peculiar things in the Odditorium. To her relief, her parents had reluctantly accepted Jet's presence, but they knew nothing about the fact that Pops had originally come from another world. Bess was sure that if she tried to speak to her parents about spinning wheels, stolen slippers and furious queens, they would have absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

She felt another burst of yearning for her friends aboard the Train of Dark Wonders. Bess hadn't heard from any of them since Professor Ash, the train's

owner, dropped off a supply of magic beans for her whispering flowers a couple of weeks ago. It would be so wonderful to see her friends again, especially now that she had a mysterious spinning wheel on her hands and no one to confide in. Apart from Jet, of course.

“Don’t worry, Elizabeth,” the raven said, once dinner was over and they’d escaped to her bedroom. “We’ll get to the bottom of this spinning wheel business. Perhaps start with the book?”

“Good idea.”

Bess didn’t much like being called Elizabeth, but it didn’t seem to matter how many times she asked Jet to call her Bess, he only ever called her by her full name – although, if he was in an especially good mood, he might refer to her as “mistress”. Jet’s role was to be her loyal companion, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be a bit contrary and sarcastic from time to time. Most of the time, in fact. Bess supposed that helpful mice and chirping birds were better suited to princesses, whereas wicked stepsisters matched better with quarrelsome ravens.

She unlocked the bottom drawer of her desk, reached inside and pulled out another gift from her fairy godmother – a heavy tome, bound in purple velvet. The black letters stamped across it read: *The Comprehensive*

Guide to Being a Wicked Stepsister (and Changing the World). Bess had dipped into the book multiple times over the last couple of months, but she still hadn't read it cover to cover. There were many fascinating chapters, describing everything from talking ravens to poisoned apples. Jet swooped down to perch on her shoulder as she flicked to the index at the back, scanning it for any mention of spinning wheels.

"Here we are," she said.

The thick, creamy pages crackled beneath her fingers as she turned them. She found herself gazing down at a drawing of a spinning wheel that looked very much like the one in the Odditorium's attic. There was a paragraph of text underneath.

Spinning wheels are traditionally the remit of evil witches, used especially for the purpose of casting sleeping curses, but wicked stepsisters may also find them useful for the creation of protective clothing. No curse or arrow can penetrate a garment made from mirrored thread.

Bess frowned. "The question is...if the spinning wheel has been there for decades, why has it just started spinning now?"

Jet stared at the page with bright eyes. “Mark my words,” he said, “it’s not a coincidence. If it’s making protective clothing, it must think there’s danger approaching.”

Bess thought of the whispering flowers again and what they’d said about Cinderella. “We should call the Train of Dark Wonders,” she said, pleased to have a real reason to do so. “I need to see the almanac.”

The almanac contained information about the different worlds, as well as locations and timetables for the gates. Jamie had told her that the gateway to the Land of Fairy Tales wouldn’t open for decades – but what if he was wrong? Bess needed to check for herself and the almanac was the easiest way to do that.

“Does the book say anything else about spinning wheels?” Jet asked, peering over her shoulder.

Bess flipped through the pages, but there was no further detail about spinning wheels. It seemed there was nothing more she could do until the morning.



Bess rose early the next day and quickly pulled on a pair of jeans and an old Loch Ness monster T-shirt. She scraped her frizzy brown hair back in a ponytail,