

Jinxed!

The Curious Curse
of Cora Bell



Rebecca McRitchie
illustrated by Sharon O'Connor

Angus&Robertson

An imprint of HarperCollins*Children'sBooks*, Australia

First published in Australia in 2019

by HarperCollins*Publishers* Australia Pty Limited

ABN 36 009 913 517

harpercollins.com.au

Text copyright © Rebecca McRitchie 2019

Illustrations copyright © Sharon O'Connor 2019

The rights of Rebecca McRitchie and Sharon O'Connor to be identified as the author and illustrator of this work have been asserted by them under the *Copyright Amendment (Moral Rights) Act 2000*.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced, copied, scanned, stored in a retrieval system, recorded, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

HarperCollinsPublishers

Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia

Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand

A 53, Sector 57, Noida, UP, India

1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF, United Kingdom

2 Bloor Street East, 20th floor, Toronto, Ontario M4W 1A8, Canada

195 Broadway, New York NY 10007, USA

A Catalogue record entry for this book is available
from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 4607 5764 2 (paperback)

ISBN 978 1 4607 1130 9 (ebook)

Cover design by Amy Daoud, HarperCollins Design Studio

Cover and internal illustrations by Sharon O'Connor

Typeset in Bembo Std by Kirby Jones

Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

The papers used by HarperCollins in the manufacture of this book are a natural, recyclable product made from wood grown in sustainable plantation forests. The fibre source and manufacturing processes meet recognised international environmental standards, and carry certification.



Prologue



The Princess in the Yellow Nightdress

In a crowded forest, not near anywhere, a woman in a yellow nightdress ran for her life. Her long, amber hair lashed behind her as she gasped heavy breaths and sprinted barefoot between the trees. Her back stung from where her wings once were. The remaining feathers fell away in tufts at her feet.

She stopped running when the ground ended. Panting, she looked out in front of her. Nothing but night filled the space as she peered over a high, rocky cliff.

There was a loud screech behind her and she whirled around to see a bolt of lightning ricochet against the trees. Then as quickly as it came, it disappeared, leaving only silence. She searched the dark forest and waited, her heart beating fast.



She looked for a glimmer, a ruffle. Something. Anything.

Then the sound of deep laughter filled the air.

‘All alone, princess?’ came a voice from the forest.

She felt her fear double in her chest. Without her wings, there wasn’t much chance of escape. She knew that now. She took a deep breath and squared her bloodstained shoulders. With shaking hands, she called up the air around her until it was a swirling, roaring wind in her ears.

‘Argh!’ she cried as she hurled the wall of wind into the forest. Leaves flew from their branches, trees bent and snapped, and the ground shook. Then, without pause, she hurled another and another and another until the trees in front of her were bare. And standing still, amongst the trunks, was the dark silhouette of a man with long silver hair, gleaming eerily in the light from the moon.

Suddenly, a great gold bird burst from the trees. It flew towards her and grabbed her by the shoulders with its talons. The bird carried her off the ground in a large swoop until they were flying over the cliff.

‘No, Artemis!’

There was another crack of lightning but this time it was followed by a sharp pain in her chest. The bird dipped in flight, injured. He struggled to hold her.

There wasn't much time. She looked up at her friend, tears in her eyes.

'Take it,' she breathed. She let go of what she had been holding onto for so long. Then she pulled the talons from her shoulders and fell, a flowing tangle of amber and yellow silently plummeting towards the ground.

Chapter One



In the city of Urt, there was a wall. It was tall and wide, like most walls. It was boring and plain, also like most walls. But unlike most walls, and unbeknownst to all, behind that wall in the city of Urt lived an elderly lady named Dot and a young girl named Cora.

Behind the wall, in the space where they lived, Cora awoke one morning to the sound of a lullaby floating into her room. The gentle music sounded like it was far away at first so the young girl turned over in her bed and tried to go back to sleep. When the music persisted, Cora woke with a jolt, and sat up, wide-awake.

‘No, no, no,’ she pleaded.

With a *whoosh*, Cora shoved her blanket away and jumped out of bed. She pushed aside clothes and hopped over the trinkets strewn by her feet on the floor. She threw on her favourite green dress.





Her mind still foggy with sleep, she tried to think. What else did she need? *Shoes!* She whirled around, searching for her boots. She found one on its side by the door and wrestled it on.

‘Scratch! Where’s my other shoe?!’

Scratch, the cat, yawned and stretched unhelpfully from his place on the bed.

Diving to her knees, Cora pushed aside her pile of books and grabbed her pack from beneath her bed. The pack she kept just for these situations. Throwing it on, she raced to the door and opened it, only to come face to face with Dot.

Crud.

The old lady stood with one hand behind her back and the other holding a shiny pocket watch. Her soft face was wrinkled in disappointment.

‘Cora,’ she said.

‘I know,’ Cora replied, looking down at her one-booted foot.

‘Five whole minutes. Luckily this was only a drill. But what if it had been the real thing? The lullaby —’



‘— means trouble,’ Cora finished. ‘I know.’

‘Yes, it means trouble and *run*.’ Dot sighed. ‘How am I supposed to let you collect by yourself *out there*,’ she gestured to the wall that sat between them and the city outside, ‘when you take five whole minutes to run from fake trouble *in here*?’

Cora groaned. She knew Dot was right. Since they had started doing drills, Cora had failed every single one of them. When she heard the lullaby from Dot’s gramophone, Cora was supposed to drop what she was doing, grab her pack and shoes, and meet Dot at the top of the wall as quickly as she could. But each time, Cora either went back to sleep, was too slow, forgot to grab her pack, or, like today, was missing one boot.

‘Sorry,’ Cora mumbled.

‘Well,’ Dot said, ‘it doesn’t help when you have a cat that likes to steal boots and eat them.’

Cora looked up to see Dot smiling.

‘This was beneath the table,’ Dot said. Then the old lady pulled out Cora’s missing boot from behind her back. The purple laces were half-chewed.

‘Scratch!’ Cora cried. ‘You pesky cat!’

Scratch purred from his place on the bed.

‘C’mon,’ Dot said with a chuckle. ‘I made porridge.’

Cora hopped on one foot as she put on her missing boot and followed Dot into the main room.

The space behind the wall where they lived was small. In fact, it was even smaller than small because from ceiling to floor, much of the room was taken up by things. Vases, fishing rods, picture frames, lamps, books. Some were pieces and parts forgotten. Others were odds and ends purposefully left behind. Dot and Cora collected them all. Well, they scavenged them all. But Dot and Cora preferred to call it collecting and themselves collectors. They loved what they found. And every now and then they found something that others wanted too. Nobody suspected that the most successful scavengers in the city of Urt were an old lady and a young girl. But they were.

On the small, rickety, round table in the middle of the main room sat two bowls of porridge. Last week, Dot had traded one of her sewing kits for a jar of oats as a surprise. Cora didn't remember much before meeting Dot, but porridge had always been her favourite.

They sat and ate. The delicious, fluffy lumps warmed Cora up from her toes to her nose.

'There's a new job,' said Dot opposite her.

Cora looked up from her bowl.

‘A trader from Mill Town is looking for something small.’

‘When are we going?’ Cora asked, scoffing the remains of her porridge.

‘Not *we* this time, Cora,’ Dot said. ‘You.’

‘Me?’ Cora replied, almost choking on an oat. Her excitement evaporated.

Dot nodded.

Cora looked at the wall hesitantly. ‘But what about ...?’ she couldn’t bring herself to say it.

The old lady smiled warmly at her. ‘You’re not like others, Cora,’ Dot said gently. ‘But you’re stronger than you think.’

Cora wasn’t so sure about that.

‘I’m not going to be around forever,’ Dot added.

‘Please don’t,’ said Cora softly. She didn’t want to think about a time when Dot wouldn’t be around. Instinctively, she grabbed the bracelet that hung from her wrist. Cora remembered when the old lady had found her five years ago. The bracelet and the clothes she wore were the only things she had. She remembered the feeling of coldness, of rain, of fear at the loss of her eye and the red, bumpy scar that sat in its place. Then she remembered looking up at Dot’s kind face, and it all going away.



Dot reached over and placed a hand on Cora's. 'It's time,' she said.

Although butterflies had now entered her stomach, Cora found herself nodding.

Dot gave her a proud smile before standing up from the table. The old lady walked over to the bookshelf in the corner of the room crammed full with heavy, bound books and old newspapers. She shuffled through the pages of a newspaper, walked back and placed a page on the table in front of Cora.

'You are looking for this,' she said, pointing to a drawing. Cora looked down at it, memorising every line, every stroke and every letter with her eye.

'Toe Tippins Shoe Polish.'

