

BY ALEXANDRA BELL

The White Octopus Hotel

Frozen Charlotte

Frozen Charlotte Charlotte Says

Lex Trent

Lex Trent Versus the Gods Lex Trent: Fighting with Fire

The Polar Bear Explorers' Club series

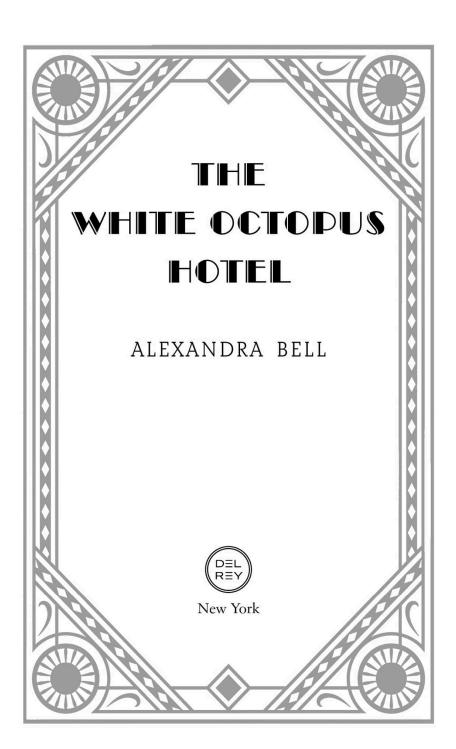
The Polar Bear Explorers' Club
Explorers on Witch Mountain
Explorers on Black Ice Bridge
The Ocean Squid Explorers' Club
Explorers at Pirate Island
Explorers at Stardust City

A Train of Dark Wonders adventures

The Train of Dark Wonders
The Hunt for the Cursed Unicorn
Escape from the Castle of Illusions

The Winter Garden
The Ninth Circle
Jasmyn
The Haunting

Music and Malice in Hurricane Town
A Most Peculiar Toy Factory
The Lighthouse
The Glorious Race of Magical Beasts



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<u>Acknowledgements</u>

About the Author

For my mum, Shirley Bell, for all the wisdom, friendship, loyalty, and love.

And for my husband, Neil Dayus, who always makes me feel like the best and truest version of myself.

Chapter 1

Eve—August 2015

ve didn't want to turn around because then she would see it. The monster. Of course, she'd laid eyes on it before, many times over the years, but there were some things you never got used to, some horrors you would do anything to avoid. It was a child's nightmare—yet here was Eve, twenty-seven years old today, and the monster was still chasing her. It didn't come every day, not anymore, but it never missed a birthday.

Eve kept her head down as she hurried towards the escalator that led to the Underground. She caught the train just as it pulled away from the platform, and for a moment she hoped she might have lost it in the crowds. But then she looked up and there it was on the seat opposite, the monster that was shaped like a rabbit. A rabbit, of course, had no business being there in the middle of the London Underground, especially not a rabbit like that. It was white and fluffy, with a splodge of black over one eye. It should have been terrified of all the noise and commotion. It should have been running around in circles, trying to hide, trying to find a way out. Yet it just sat there on the seat, perfectly calm, staring at Eve with warm, friendly eyes as she trembled.

The train jolted and rattled its way to her stop, and she tried not to look at the monster, or to dwell on the fact that no one else in the crowded carriage was aware of the creature at all. Finally, the train reached her platform and she got off, but the rabbit followed. It always followed. Every time she glanced back, there it was, hopping and bouncing happily in her wake, right onto the escalator.

Eve dug her nails into her palms. Eventually, she knew, the rabbit would go away. The trick was to keep her eyes locked ahead until it did, to stay busy, to continue as normal. She walked briskly along the pavement, trying not to look at the long-eared shadow nearby. Her hands were still shaking as she slipped her earphones in and began playing a piece of music by her favourite composer. Max Everly had lived and died many decades before she was born, but there was something about his music that Eve always found comforting, even on her most difficult days. She'd discovered Everly at nineteen, and on those occasions when despair and shame threatened to reach out their claws and drag her back down into the pit, Everly's music was a fierce flame that pushed away the shadows and the sorrows.

She did her best now to focus on the music as she walked to Stanley's auction house. It was sunny, just like it had been all those years ago. Eve always hoped for rain on her birthday, but the August date meant that rarely happened. For a moment, she could see the bounce and sway of balloons, and smell the sausage rolls and strawberry jelly. When she reached the auction house, she paused outside to take a deep breath and try to still the tremor in her hands. Perhaps she should have taken leave, like last year, but she also couldn't stand the idea of another day sitting in her flat by herself with her rabbits and ghosts....

When she put her earphones back in her bag, she noticed that the rabbit had gone—for now, at least. Once inside the auction house, she could throw herself into her role as a valuer—work that she enjoyed—and there would be some structure to her day. She was planning to spend the entire morning cataloguing a collection of paintings that had just come in and then writing up valuation reports for the client. They would be quiet, methodical tasks. Exactly what she needed.

She made a start as soon as she reached her office, glad of the air-conditioning. It was far too hot to be wearing a black turtleneck, but it was what she always wore. It was simpler that way. Less chance of a stray tentacle wandering onto her neck and causing any consternation or alarm to anyone who might see it. Less chance of any ink raising questions. Besides, it was irritating to be screamed at. Life was much easier when she wore black and kept people at a distance.

She worked diligently and without interruption until eleven o'clock. It was a relief to look up and see the time. A couple of hours down, and she'd hardly noticed them. Perhaps the day wouldn't be quite so bad as she feared. Perhaps she could get through it mostly unscathed....

But then her mobile rang, and her heart juddered painfully. This was the worst part of the day, and she briefly considered letting it go to answerphone. How she longed to do just that, to pretend she'd been busy in a meeting, or on the other line, but if her mother had the courage to make the call, then Eve must have the courage to answer it. She'd been crouched on the floor beside a painting, but now she stood up, swiped her thumb across the screen, and raised the phone to her ear. "Hello."

She couldn't make her voice sound normal, no matter how hard she tried. It came out as a dry croak, like she was hungover or half asleep.

"Eve. It's Mum."

"I know. Hi." She swallowed hard, tried to force some normality into her voice. "How are you?"

She regretted her words instantly. For a moment, there was utter silence on the other end of the line. Eve wondered if her mother might simply hang up, but instead she cleared her throat and said, "I just called to say happy birthday."

Eve slipped her free hand into her pocket, her fingers searching for the fumsup. She was reassured by the feel of its lumpy wooden head beneath her fingers and the way it helped ground her in the moment. She was right here, at work. She wasn't back there. At the party. Her eye fell on the window, and she saw a balloon go floating past—impossibly purple. Perhaps the most

purple thing she had ever laid eyes on. A child must have let go of it on the pavement outside, she told herself. That's all it was.

"Eve?" Her mum's voice came over the line. "Are you still there?"

"I'm here." The words made a hot flush of guilt prickle over her skin.

She was here. Her sister, Bella, was not. She desperately searched her mind for something, anything, to say to her mum but couldn't think of a single sentence that wouldn't make it all worse. The fact was that they hardly knew each other anymore. Eve spoke to her mother perhaps twice a year. It was impossible, at times like this, not to think of how things might have been different between them, how everything might have been different if it weren't for that single moment twenty-three years ago. One mistake that had changed everything and left their family in shreds.

"Well, I won't take up any more of your time," her mum said. "I'm sure you're very busy. Take care."

"Bye, Mum," Eve rasped.

But the call had already ended. She dropped the phone and the fumsup onto her desk. She was too hot again, and since there was no one else there, she took the risk of rolling her sleeves to her elbows and went to the window. The glass was cold as she rested her clammy forehead against it. Then she saw the black cab draw up to the curb.

The passenger door opened, and an elderly man struggled out, leaning heavily on his cane. He was smartly dressed, in a charcoal-coloured herringbone suit and fedora hat. The clothes were old-fashioned, but he looked as if he had taken pains to dress in his best. She wondered who he was going to meet and what for. A happy occasion, she hoped.

He stood, wobbling slightly on the pavement, and the taxi drove away as he headed towards the auction house. There were only a few steps up to the front door, but Eve could see how difficult they were for him, and how he stopped to catch his breath after each one. She wished someone would offer to help, but people didn't really help people they didn't know, did they? Eve wouldn't have offered if she'd been down there—because, after all, perhaps the man could manage perfectly well, and such an offer would be patronizing

and offensive to him. Besides which, people like Eve didn't help old people up steps. Bella probably would have helped, Eve supposed. If she'd been alive.

Everyone loves Bella, she could hear nonexistent friends saying. She's so bubbly, so vivacious, so lovely.

All things that Eve was not. Soon enough, the old man had disappeared through the revolving doors, and Eve returned to her paintings.

A short while later, there was a knock and her secretary, James, looked into the office as Eve hastily yanked her sleeves back down to her wrists.

"Hi. Sorry to interrupt, I know you're busy, but there's a man here to see you."

Eve was surprised. "I don't have any appointments today."

"That's what I told him, but he's...well, he's really insistent. He's brought something in to be valued and he says he'll only speak to you."

Eve frowned. "What's his name?"

"Max Everly."

She felt a jolt of shock pass through her. "Like the composer?"

James shrugged. "I guess so."

James probably wouldn't have known who Max Everly was if it hadn't been for the suitcase. Old and battered, it had turned up at this very auction house, full of sheet music for never-before-heard songs written by Everly—whose existing body of work had all been composed before 1935. It was one of the reasons Eve had always wanted to work at Stanley's—in the hopes that another such suitcase might appear. The compositions were swiftly verified by experts and their discovery created a big stir in the music world. Eve had been glad because it meant more people got to hear the music she had always loved so fiercely.

She heard it ringing in her head again now—the songs that she had played so many times, the ones that acted as a lifeline, tethering her to the world when she was in danger of floating away. She knew her mystery visitor couldn't be the composer since he had been born in 1899 and would have been one hundred and sixteen by now.

"He's, um, he's quite frail," James said tentatively. "I think it was an effort for him to get here."

Eve recalled the elderly man she'd seen on the steps outside earlier. It could only be him, surely.

"He said it was important," James went on. "And he promised he wouldn't take up more than ten minutes of your time."

Her secretary didn't look at all hopeful that she would agree to see him. Eve had once overheard James refer to her as the Black Widow in the staff room, while chatting to their colleague Kate. She supposed this was a reference to the fact that she always dressed in black and didn't chat much, never going out for after-work drinks or attending Christmas parties. She knew the other staff thought her cold and unfriendly. Perhaps she *was* cold and unfriendly, although she didn't particularly mean to be. She was the kind of woman who was forever being asked whether she ever smiled.

Kate had laughed at the Black Widow remark. "Personally, she always makes me think of Miss Scarlett. You know, from Cluedo?"

"Miss Scarlett is a blonde," Eve had remarked from her chair, which was hidden behind the door. Eve's hair was jet-black and cut short in a sharp bob. Her eyes were different colours too—one blue and one green.

James and Kate had both looked appalled to see her there, but just because her colleagues had cast her in the role of femme fatale, that didn't mean it was who she was deep down. It cost her nothing to see this old man for a few moments, and she had liked his hat, so she said, "Show him in."

She tried not to notice or mind James's look of surprise. He left the room and soon returned with the unexpected visitor, ushering him over the threshold before giving Eve a nod and closing the door. It was, indeed, the same person she'd seen on the street. He looked to be in his late seventies and had removed his hat to reveal thin wisps of silvery hair combed neatly back from his forehead. His shoulders were rounded, and he hunched forwards over his stick, his gaze directed towards the floor as he shuffled in with slow, careful steps. Eve came around her desk to greet him. Even with his stoop, he was quite a bit taller than her.

"Good morning, sir. I'm Eve Shaw." She'd expected there to be a painting, as these were her specialty, but there was no sign of any wrapped package under his arm. In fact, he didn't appear to be carrying anything at all. She held out her hand and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Max Everly paused for a moment before reaching out to take her hand. He had a surprisingly strong grip, and the warmth of his palm sent a little spark of something through Eve. She felt, for the strangest moment, like she'd been here before, meeting this man before, holding his hand before. He was staring down at her fingers, clasped in his, and she felt a tremor pass through his palm.

"The pleasure," he said quietly, "is all mine."

He raised his head, meeting her gaze for the first time, and Eve found herself looking into brown eyes, dark and rich and deep, and the strangest thing was that even though she knew this man couldn't possibly be the musician from the 1930s, in that moment his eyes seemed startlingly like the ones she'd seen in the black-and-white photographs of the composer from all those years ago. Not only that, but she was sure she saw a flash of recognition in this elderly man's gaze too. She had the sudden conviction not only that he recognised her, but that he knew her, and that she must, therefore, in turn know him. A gasp caught in the back of his throat and his hand tightened around hers.

"Hello, Eve," he breathed.

Suddenly, her feeling of knowing him evaporated, and it was a stranger who stood before her. He seemed reluctant to let go of her hand, and when he stepped closer, Eve sensed that he meant to embrace her. She automatically took a step back. She wasn't a hugger and was relieved when Max let go of her hand.

"Forgive me," he said, a little breathlessly. "You...you remind me of someone I used to know, that's all. My name is Max Everly. Thank you for meeting with me. I appreciate your time."

"Not at all," she said briskly. "Please take a seat." She waved towards the comfortable armchairs facing her desk. "Can I get you something to drink?

Tea? Coffee?"

"Coffee, thank you. Black. One sugar."

She walked over to the coffee pod machine on a table in the corner and made their drinks. She set one down in front of her guest and then took her seat opposite him behind the desk.

"So, what can I help you with, Mr. Everly? James said you had something for me to value?"

"Please," he replied. "Call me Max."

He reached for the coffee cup, and Eve noticed the liver spots on the backs of his hands, and the boniness of his knees where they pressed against the fabric of his trousers. Yet there was a glint of something warm and almost mischievous in his eyes, an echo of the younger man he'd once been. Eve had the sense that, unlike herself, this was someone who had smiled and laughed often.

"That's a curious little fellow," he said, nodding at the fumsup charm on Eve's desk.

"Curious" was one word for it. Eve had always thought the fumsup had a bit of a creepy look, with its jointed metal body, overlarge wooden head, and white glass eyes, but she liked it no less for that.

"It's a good-luck charm," she said. "They were sent out to soldiers during the First World War."

"And how did you come by yours?" Max asked.

"I..." Eve trailed off, recalling the childhood dream she'd once had that a magician had given it to her, but the truth was that she didn't know where it had come from. "I can't remember. I've just always had it. I suppose I found it somewhere."

"I suppose you did." He leaned forwards a little. "You know, sometimes the end is also the beginning."

"Pardon?"

"Never mind."

"Have you travelled a long way?" she asked carefully. She was starting to wonder whether he was quite all there.

A smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. "Well, yes," he said slowly. "Yes, you could say that. But it was worth the wait."

"How did you happen to come across my name?" Eve asked. "It's just that I normally specialise in valuing paintings, you see, so—"

"Do you not think," Max interrupted, looking at her closely, "that it's high time you stopped valuing paintings and started producing some masterpieces of your own?"

Was he trying to make a joke? If so, Eve couldn't bring herself to laugh. But beneath the fabric of her black jeans, the octopus tattoo on her thigh began to burn upon her skin.

"I'm not sure that I follow," she said. "Are you looking to have something commissioned? This is an auction house; we don't create new work here."

"That's a pity." Max set his coffee cup down. "But no matter. The reason I came here was to give you this."

He reached into his trousers pocket and gently set an object on the desk between them. It was a small, ornamental octopus.