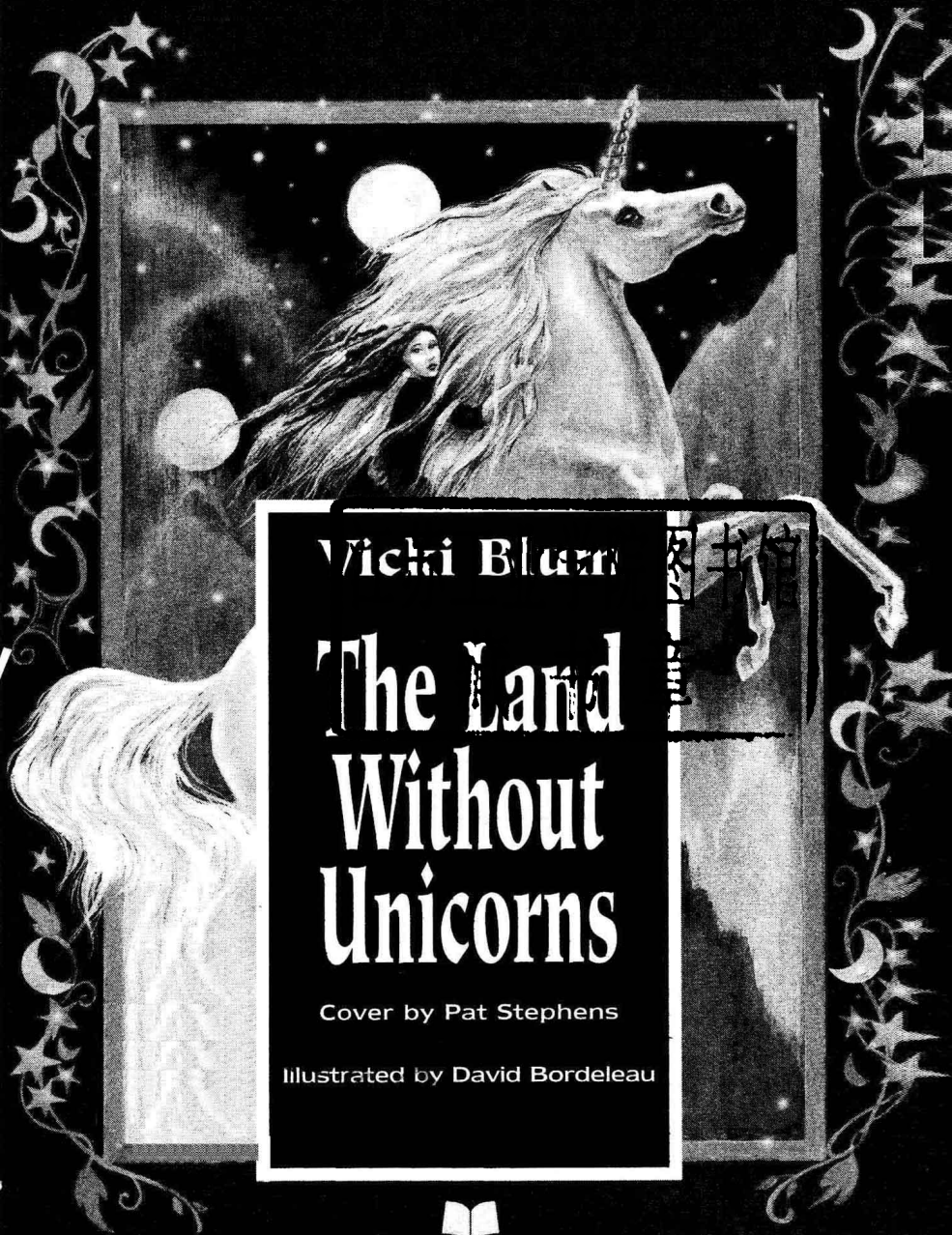


# The Land Without Unicorns



HOLASTIC

Vicki Blum



Wicki Blum

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Scholastic Canada Ltd.

Toronto New York London Auckland Sydney  
Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

**Scholastic Canada Ltd.**

175 Hillmount Road, Markham, Ontario, Canada L6C 1Z7

**Scholastic Inc.**

555 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, USA

**Scholastic Australia Pty Limited**

PO Box 579, Gosford, NSW 2250, Australia

**Scholastic New Zealand Limited**

Private Bag 94407, Greenmount, Auckland, New Zealand

**Scholastic Ltd.**

Villiers House, Clarendon Avenue, Leamington Spa,  
Warwickshire CV32 5PR, UK

Map by Paul Heersink/Paperglyphs

Edited by Laura Peetoom

**National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Blum, Vicki, 1955-  
The land without unicorns

ISBN 0-439-98863-2

I. Bordeleau, David. II. Title.

PS8553.L86L36 2001      jC813'.54      C2001-930286-X  
PZ7.B48La 2001

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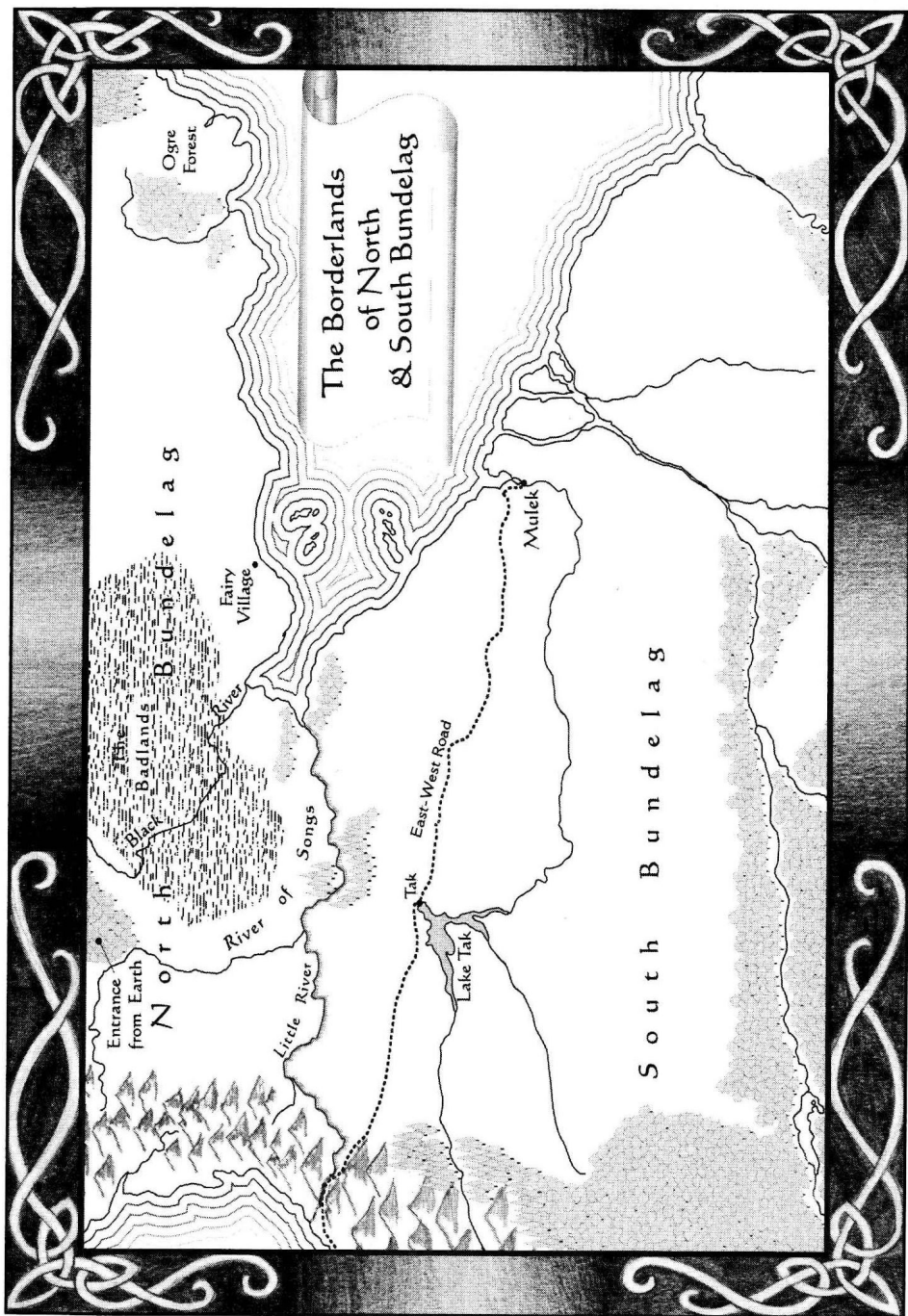
*To my brother Scott, who encouraged me to write*

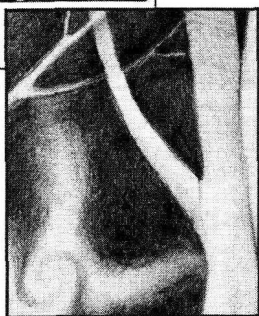


“Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee . . . ?”

Job 39:9







## Chapter 1

Arica had only been in Bundelag a few moments when she realized Connor had followed her through the crack between the worlds.

Her cousin was not supposed to be here. But then, when was Connor ever where he was supposed to be? Or *not* where he was *not* supposed to be? Right now, the place he was clearly not supposed to be was here in North Bundelag, where humans had not been allowed to come for over four hundred years.

Grandmother had asked Arica to take care of her house while she was away. Unfortunately, Connor was in from the ranch for a visit and when she mentioned she had to water the plants and feed the

lizards, he begged to come along. At first she did very well at keeping him out of the kitchen and away from the crack. But when she felt something calling to her from the cellar she had to just push him out the door.

Now here he was behind her, already through the tunnel and into the woods. He stood in her tracks, while the doorway from Earth blinked out behind them, and stared back with goggle eyes at the place where it had been.

She wondered briefly if she could get away with dragging him rapidly back the way they had come and telling him that it had all been a bad dream. But the idea was quashed the next moment when Wish bounded gleefully out from behind a tree and into the small clearing where they stood. The unicorn stopped, stared at the boy, flicked her tail and snorted. Connor stared back, his mouth gaping. Wish did a little dance through the foliage, tossed her head at a passing bumblebee and landed on four feet at Arica's side.

*\*A boy followed you through the crack,\** she said, and nipped playfully at Arica's sleeve.

"You're kidding," Arica teased, stroking a nose as soft as rose petals.

*\*No, True Arica, I am not kidding,\** Wish replied seriously. *\*The boy is standing right behind you.\** Then she spotted a little orange butterfly and bounced away.

“I know, Wish!” Arica called out after her. “I was being sarcastic. Do you know what that means? Oh, never mind. I’m in deep trouble, you know. I’ve been careless, and Connor is here, and the Fairy Queen will never forgive me!”

Connor, who had been standing stone-still and speechless since his arrival in Bundelag, finally regained his voice — or at least some of it. The highest part, anyway.

“Why are you talking to the filly like that?” he shrilled at her. “Everyone knows animals can’t talk back! And why does she have a horn? Is this some kind of joke? You should know better than try to fool me! I’ve been around horses all of my life!”

Then he took off after Wish — for a better look at the horn, Arica presumed. It was beyond her how Connor figured she would go to all the work of sticking a horn on a horse, just to fool him. He neared the animal, his skinny arms flying, as usual showing twice as much gusto as was needed.

When Wish saw Connor flouncing and flapping toward her, she snorted in alarm. Her next action was purely instinctive. A spurt of blue light — barely a flicker, really — burst from the tip of her horn and bounced off the boy’s chest. The jolt likely surprised him more than it hurt. He cried out and leaped backward, tripped over a fallen tree branch, tumbled head-over-heels, and landed bottom-down



in a nearby patch of prickly bush.

Arica was extremely proud of herself for not laughing right out loud. As it was, the effort to choke down her mirth brought tears to her eyes and robbed her of her breath. She turned her head the other way and pretended to watch the antics of Wish's orange butterfly. A few moments went by before she could trust herself to look up or to speak. By that time Connor had managed to dig himself out of the bush and was standing in front of her, glaring angrily through his bottle-bottom glasses.

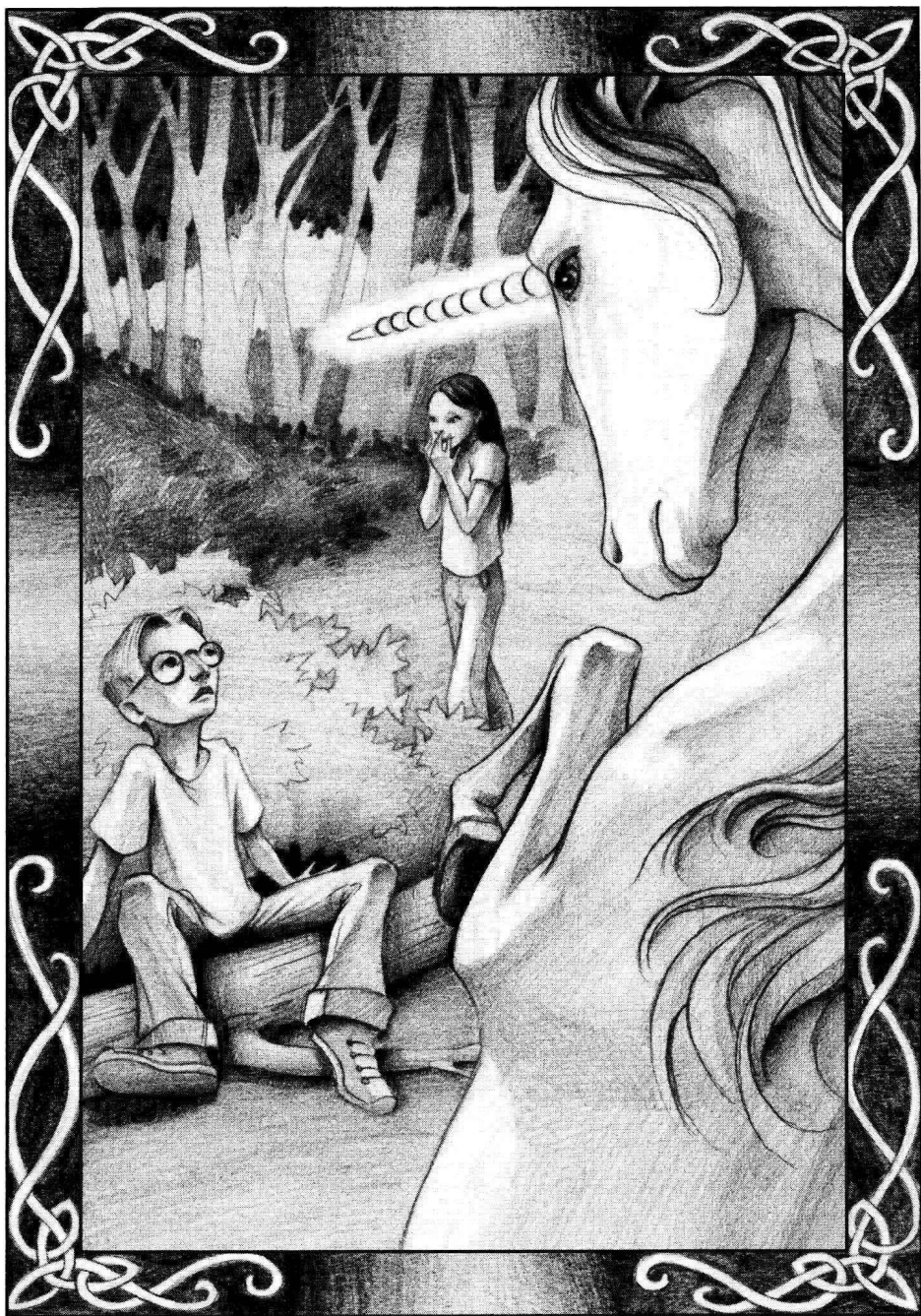
"Why didn't you tell me about this place?" he demanded. His face was getting redder with every word, and his voice louder. "You have a lot of explaining to do! I thought we were friends. I thought I was your favourite cousin. You know — no secrets, and all of that stuff!"

"Well, I — "

"I will never trust you again!" he howled, and stomped away.

Arica watched him go, feeling a little ashamed. It was true that she was his best friend. In fact, she had come to realize lately that it was possible she was his only friend.

Connor didn't seem to fit in well with other children. He was small and thin, like a person made of sticks and string, and when he got excited, which was about half of the time, he squeaked like a baby



... landed bottom-down in a nearby patch of prickly bush.

bird. He couldn't ski down a hill and he couldn't skate. He was too short for basketball and too slight for football. In water, he sank like a stone. Even at soccer, he was nearly hopeless. The two months she spent last spring playing the game with him had revealed to her just how many ways one boy could trip, tumble or slide down a soccer field without ever getting the ball anywhere near the net.

But he could ride, and when he climbed on a fast horse, you might as well wave goodbye. She had always been proud of him for that. He was, after all, the only cousin she had living nearby.

"Wait!" she called. "Don't leave!"

The only thing worse than bringing Connor to Bundelag would be losing Connor in Bundelag. How would she ever explain something like that to her aunt and uncle? For that matter, would they even believe her? Once let loose, there was no telling how much damage Connor could do to this place, or it to him.

Where was Connor now? He had disappeared altogether. Arica scrambled toward the spot where she had last seen him. "Wait!" she cried again.

The next moment he burst back out of the bushes right in front of her, white-faced and wild-eyed, his hands flapping at his sides like paddles. She dived out of the way just in time to avoid hitting him head-on. He tore on past like he didn't even noticed she was there.

She whirled around and shouted his name. After a few more metres he skidded to a halt, seeming to realize for the first time that he had no idea where to go.

He stood poised, trembling and looking very confused, like he was caught between the desire to flee and the realization that he was nearly lost already. He compromised by dashing to the nearest tree trunk and ducking behind it.

Now Arica heard hooves beating on earth and the crackle of tortured underbrush. She whirled back again just in time to see two enormous dapple-grey stallions prance out into the clearing. They snorted when they saw her and flung back their fine, proud heads. Silken manes lapped like waves against their arching necks.

On top of the first stallion sat Nue the elf, someone she knew well. The second stallion carried on its back none other than her own dear grandmother, the Fairy Queen of North Bundelag. Arica tried to imagine what this colourful apparition must have looked like to Connor. First there were the two enormous stallions, as big as the draft horses of home, without saddle or bridle, guided only by the touch of their riders' knees. Then there was Nue, a frightening sight even when he was on the ground, with his huge head, big pointed ears and saucer-wide eyes. But mounted and suddenly bursting out from

the forest right on top of you? He would rattle the teeth of anyone, brave or not. And poor Connor had never seen any elf until this moment, much less one so lacking in the delicate beauty most elves possessed.

Then there was Grandmother.

For some reason the Fairy Queen had arrived in full fairy costume. A long purple robe flowed from her shoulders and down over her ankles. A silver wand rested in her right hand. A sword dangled at her side. But this was the first time Arica had ever seen her wearing a crown.

It was a tiny golden thing that glittered with jewels of every colour imaginable. It was nestled in Grandmother's hair like a tiny halo of light that sent sparkles of fire dancing through the treetops overhead.

To Connor, Arica's grandmother was just Mrs. Warman, someone he met on birthdays or at other family gatherings. Connor and Arica were related because their mothers were sisters, so this grandmother — her father's mother — had no blood tie with him. But she had always treated him with friendliness and respect — at home, at least. Arica wasn't sure how long that friendliness would last when the Fairy Queen discovered Connor here in North Bundelag. She wondered how long she could count on Connor staying hidden behind his maple tree.

Nue peered down at her from his perch on the horse.

“Dear Arica!” he exclaimed, wagging one pudgy, dirt-stained hand in greeting. “It’s so good to see you, companion of my last great adventure!” His gaze settled on Wish. “And you, too, little unicorn, friend to the courageous Arica! It seems like only yesterday we defeated the mighty one-eyed ogres, outran the great dark wolf of the forest, traversed the terrible Badlands to confront the wicked fairy Raden and his friend, the shadow unicorn . . .”

“It’s good to see you, too,” Arica interrupted. She did not usually break into the middle of someone’s sentence, but once Nue got going, there was no telling when he would finally wind down. With him, everything seemed to have grown to excess, including his way of remembering an event: grander and greater with every retelling. They hadn’t exactly defeated the ogres, though they had eventually befriended them, and they certainly hadn’t outrun the wolf. She feared that if he told this tale too many more times, he might abandon the facts altogether.

Then Arica looked past Nue again to the woman seated so majestically upon the other horse.

“Hello, Grandmother,” she said, trying not to think about Connor. It was impossible to keep a secret from Grandmother for more than ten seconds. Every once in a while it seemed the old woman



could read her thoughts, just like the unicorns did. Fortunately, as Fairy Queen of North Bundelag, Grandmother frequently had too much on her mind to really focus on Arica's. Arica saw that this was one of those times. Worry lines ran deep across her brow, and her attention seemed fixed on some distant place rather than on what was going on around her.

"Dear child," she said, "I asked Wish to call you back to Bundelag to do a very important task. The sooner you go, the better. I can trust this only to a fairy, and Doron, the Keeper of the village, is too old and frail."

The way she said it made Arica's heart flip up to her throat. There must be great danger involved. It was obvious the Fairy Queen hadn't made this decision lightly.

"What is it?" she managed to force out, her voice barely above a whisper, all thoughts of Connor having flown from her mind.

Grandmother slid from the stallion's back in one quick, graceful movement, as befitted the fairy queen she was. Nue, on the other hand, caught his jacket button in the stallion's mane, dangled against its neck yelping and struggling while the horse pranced wildly, tore free, then belly-flopped into the prickly bush.

Grandmother was too preoccupied to even glance

in Nue's direction. "A long time ago," she explained, "a very special book was made. It was called the *Book of Fairies*. It was written by the greatest and wisest of our people, and much love and magic went into its creation. It contained our learning and our laws. But even more important, a spell was woven into the book so that every time one with fairy blood was born, his or her name appeared inside."

"A fairy genealogy?" Arica asked.

Grandmother shook her head. "No, there were other books for listing family trees and recording history. This book only kept a record of living fairies. Once a fairy died, his or her name faded from the page. As you have probably guessed, this book was unique. Obeying the laws written there brought us great happiness and increased our abilities to use magic for good. It contained most of our recipes and spells, many of which are now forgotten."

An uneasy feeling was beginning to creep through Arica's bones. "Was the book destroyed?"

Grandmother shook her head. "No, something even more terrible happened. It was lost during the Great War. The good news is the book was recently found. The bad news is this: it is in South Bundelag, in the hands of a wealthy human merchant who will not be eager to give it up.

"I need someone to travel to South Bundelag and bring it back. If the book's magic is still at work —

and I have no reason to think it is not — then it should give us the names of the fairies lost on Earth. I believe this will help us to find them.

“Will you do this for me, and for your own people, dear Granddaughter?”

Just as she opened her mouth to say “of course,” a shrill cry of “I will!” came from behind the tree.