Unraveller

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PROLOGUE

If you must travel to the country of Raddith, then be prepared. Bring a mosquito net for the lowlands, and a warm coat for the hills or mountains. If you mean to visit the misty marsh-woods known as the Wilds, you will need stout, waterproof boots. (You will also need wits, courage and luck, but some things cannot be packed.)

When your ship arrives at the great Mizzleport harbour, remember to trade your gold currency for Raddith's ugly steel coins. Don't be offended when the customs folk peer at you through lenses set in hollow stones, or sweep you with iron-fibred brushes. There are reasons for caution where the land meets the sea.

Ignore the hustlers on the docks who will try to sell you anti-curse amulets. You have of course heard that some people in Raddith are able to curse their enemies. It sounded so picturesque when you were reading about it at home, like a fairytale. As you listen to the pedlars' blood-curdling warnings, however, you may start to feel nervous. You shouldn't really waste money on a so-called protective amulet, but you probably will.

The hustlers may also try to sell you and the other tourists bundled parchments that they claim are maps of the Wilds. (The Wilds cannot truly be mapped. Buy one anyway, just in case.)

As you walk through Mizzleport, you will soon realize that none of the locals wear anti-curse amulets. Your landlord at the inn will gently mock you for buying one. If you ask him how you *should* protect yourself, however, he will shrug and offer no useful suggestions.

You can't defend yourself from a curse, he will tell you. *But don't worry – cursers are rare! Only those consumed by hatred are able to curse. Just make sure nobody hates you while you're here!*

The other locals at the inn will be happy to answer some of your questions. Do cursers really exist? (Yes.) Can curses really set someone on fire, steal their shadow or turn them into a swarm of bees? (Yes.) Is it true that the power to curse comes from spiders? (No, the Little Brothers are not spiders, however much they look like them.)

What are the Little Brothers, then? Your new friends will tell you, with a certain affection, of the many-legged creatures that live in the cobweb-laden treetops of the Wilds. They are friends to weavers and craftsmen, apparently. They also seek out those consumed by rage or hatred, and gift them with a curse. The curse then nestles in the host's soul like an unhatched egg, growing in power, until the curser is ready to unleash it upon an enemy.

Try not to ask the next questions that burn in your mind. *Shouldn't someone do something about this? Why don't you all exterminate these spider-things to stop people becoming cursers?* If you ask this, you will make everyone around you very uncomfortable. The Little Brothers cannot be swatted like ordinary spiders, they will tell you. Besides, attempting to harm them would anger the Wilds.

While you are still reeling from everyone's grim and serious tone, the conversation will move on to another subject. (The Wilds are slippery. It is hard to think of them or talk of them for long.)

You will only consider the matter again at the first stop on the route out of Mizzleport. From the raised road, you will at last have a view down to the famous Wilds that line the Raddith coast.

Prepare to be very, very disappointed.

Admit it, the Wilds were one of the reasons you came to Raddith in the first place. You had read stories of these sprawling, misty marsh-woods, veiled with cobweb and dripping with emerald moss. You had heard of the shape-shifting braags, the dagger-toothed marsh horses, the dancing glimmers that lure you into danger and the pale-handed ladies who offer secrets if you solve their riddles.

Yet here you are, staring down at a meagre band of damp, greyish woodland, only a few miles deep. Is that what all the fuss is about? So narrow and dull-looking! How could it possibly hide ancient ruins, secret castles or mysterious lakes? How could anyone wander lost in the Wilds for years?

If you are rash enough to venture down among the trees, you will discover your error quickly. The innocent appearance of the Wilds is a lie. The marsh-woods are every bit as strange, vast and perilous as the stories say.

However, it is much more likely that you will lose interest in visiting the Wilds, now that you have seen them. (You only think that you have seen them.) You will believe the evidence of your eyes and mind, which tell you there is nothing worth seeing here. (They are lying.)

Why is everyone so frightened of the Wilds? It is only natural that you should wonder this. *If that's where these curse-bearing spider-creatures come from, why doesn't everyone just get rid of the marsh-woods, once and for all? Surely it wouldn't be that hard?*

No guidebook will tell you this, but the people of Raddith once tried to do exactly that.

Raddith is ruled by Chancery, a government of master merchants who believe in honest dealing, level-headedness and

worth you can measure. A hundred years ago, Chancery looked at the Wilds and saw only wasted land. Great dykes were built to subdivide the marshes, so that they could be drained more easily. Trees were hacked down, the reeds harvested and smoke used to clear the spiders.

Then the Wilds struck back.

Huge clouds of mosquitoes surged inland, bringing diseases with them. Upland rivers flooded for no obvious reason. Little Brothers appeared in the highlands en masse, creating cursers and trammelling the streets with great webs. Other things wandered into Mizzleport, and left mayhem behind them.

Eventually, Chancery reached an agreement with the Wilds. Their representatives travelled into the very depths of the marsh-woods, where they talked with . . . something. Or somethings. Perhaps a lyre made of bones and stars, perhaps a Little Brother the size of a dinner plate, perhaps a faceless woman with a voice like the yowls of a hundred cats. Accounts vary, but in every version of the story the Pact was sealed on a boat made of moonlight and spider web.

Ever since that time the Pact has held, and nobody in Raddith is in a hurry to break it.

Knowing none of this, perhaps you will decide that all the stories of the Wilds and the Raddith cursers were invented to entertain tourists. At night, when you see a many-legged shape scuttle across the ceiling of your bedchamber, you will tell yourself that it is a spider, and only a spider.

(It is not.)

CHAPTER 1

BLAME

Five minutes into the conversation, Kellen was grinning so widely his face ached. He could see Nettle trying to catch his eye, and very slightly shaking her head. She knew what his grin meant, even if this idiot merchant didn't.

I'm going to lose my temper, Kellen thought. *Any minute now.* The inevitability of it was almost calming.

'I didn't hire you to lecture me!' the merchant was saying. 'I hired you to *fix the problem*!'

Kellen stood there in the stupid, over-decorated reception hall, letting the flood of words pour over him. The merchant had glossy, angry, frightened eyes. His hair was dyed, but that just made his pale, haggard face look older. Petty, weak, childish. The sort of man who needed chandeliers the size of dinner tables to feel powerful, and who made you stand while he sat and ranted at you, so that everyone knew who was in charge.

'Are you listening to me?' demanded the merchant.

Kellen's head snapped up, his mind airy and bright with anger.

'The blood's showing again,' he pointed out, a little spitefully.

The merchant immediately curled his hands into defensive fists. His gloves were so padded that they looked like clownish silken paws, but even this had not been enough. The blood always found its way through, mysteriously oozing from his palms and fingers until it could not be hidden.

Kellen wore gloves too, for a different reason. He was used to

the weight of the iron bands hidden within the cloth. Right now, he was wondering whether that weight would break someone's nose if he punched them in the face.

'They said you knew how to deal with curses!' snapped the merchant. 'But you've done nothing, and it's been two weeks!'

Kellen had taken the job against his better judgement. Or, rather, he had allowed his rational judgement to outweigh his better instincts. For once, there had been a reasonable prospect of a decent payment. Now, however, reasonableness was losing its appeal.

'That's because I was trying to find out who cursed you, and there were *too many suspects*!' Kellen exploded. He could almost feel his leash snap, his temper bounding forward like a big black dog. The aghast silence all around him made him want to laugh.

Oh well. Boring job anyway.

'All the marsh-silk pickers, the carders and dyers, the folks in your felting mills . . . they work themselves to the bone for you, and you pay them spit!' Kellen's voice echoed off the frescoes and ornamental arches. 'And the lodgings you rent to them are stinking hellholes, crammed to the eaves with too many families! What did you *think* would happen? I'm surprised they haven't *all* cursed you!'

'How dare you?' Powerful people never said anything original once you stopped showing them the deference they expected. In a state of outrage, they all used the same script.

'Anyway, I *did* work out who cursed you,' said Kellen, 'and they're already dead. So you don't need to know who they were.'

No, the merchant didn't need to know about the sad little note or the body in the river. The dead woman's family didn't need a ladleful of stigma added to their grief. Kellen would have felt

differently about the curser if she'd been alive and still dangerous, but she wasn't, so all he felt was pity.

'Dead?' The merchant looked alarmed. 'Is that a problem? Can you still lift the curse?'

'Talking to the curser often helps, but all I need to know is the reason for the curse,' Kellen said grimly. 'And there's no mystery here, is there? *You're* the reason! It doesn't even matter which of your victims cursed you. Because in this case the problem is *you*.

'*You* made somebody desperate enough to become a curser. You've got blood on your hands. And, thanks to the curse, now everyone can see it.'

'You're one of those rabble-rousers!' The merchant was recovering from his shock. 'Who do you work for? Who paid you to come here and say all of this to me?'

'You did, you idiot!' exploded Kellen. 'You hired me to get rid of your curse, and I'm *telling* you how to do it! What did you expect me to do, give you an ointment? You can't cure a curse; you have to unravel it. You have to find the reasons that wove it, and work out how to pull the threads loose. And the only way I can see for you to do that . . . is to be sorry.

'You need to understand what you've been doing all this time, and regret it, and change. So you need to spend a month gathering raw marsh silk in the Wilds, or washing the thorns and grit out of sticky fluff until your fingers bleed, so you understand other people's lives. Then you need to find ways of mending the harm you've done, and doing penance for anything that can't be fixed. If you do this for long enough, then maybe—'

'Maybe?' The merchant gave an appalled huff of laughter. 'You want me to do all this for a "maybe"? This is ridiculous!'

Kellen had let himself become earnest again. Yes, this whole conversation was ridiculous.

'Fine,' he said. 'Do what you like. If you pay someone else enough, I'm sure they'll tell you you're blameless, and sell you a curse-proof hat. It won't work, but at least they won't be rude.'

'Listen to me, you grubby little charlatan!' The merchant leaned forward. 'I want my money back, right now!'

'Not a chance!' yelled Kellen. 'I did what I was paid for! I've told you how to lift your curse! It's not my fault if you're too stupid to do it!'

The merchant tightened one hand into a fist. There was a *tick-tick-tick* noise as he did so, and the seam across the knuckles of the glove burst open, white eiderdown bulging out through the gap. As more blood seeped scarlet through the exposed feathers, the merchant gave a whimper of panic, and clutched his hand to his chest.

'Fetch me more gloves! A cloth! Something!'

Kellen gave an involuntary snort of mirth, and apparently that was the final straw.

'Guards!' shouted the merchant. 'Take this fraud into custody!'

Nettle managed to get arrested by the guards as well, by asking politely. She could probably have walked away in the confusion, but instead here she was in Kellen's cell in the local gaol, her unspoken opinions filling half the room. Apparently, she didn't even trust him to languish in captivity by himself.

Part of him wished that she would just grab him by the collar and yell, *What's wrong with you? Why couldn't you just tell that rich idiot what he wanted to hear? Or maybe just shut up and let him yell at us?*

'You think we should give him back his money, don't you?' he said accusingly. 'Well, I'm not doing that! We earned that money!'

'Actually,' said Nettle levelly, 'we can't. We don't have enough money. They want you to pay for the glove. The one that split.'

'*What?*' Kellen stopped pacing to stare at her. 'But . . . that was his fault! You saw him! He clenched his hand and stretched the seams . . .'

'And they're saying one of the tapestries in that room is frayed around the edges,' continued Nettle carefully. 'They want you to pay for that too.'

'I can't believe they're trying to blame that on me!' Kellen was aghast and furious. 'That's . . . criminal! That's fraud!'

He looked to Nettle for agreement, but didn't get it. Instead, she looked impassive, and raised her eyebrows slightly.

Nettle seemed meek and inoffensive if you didn't know her. Her expression was usually rather blank, in an attentive, slightly worried sort of way. She appeared diluted, colourless, as if she were waiting for somebody else to give her an opinion to hold. After more than a year of travelling with her, however, Kellen had learned to read stillness and listen to silence. He had become very good at hearing the things Nettle didn't say.

You lost control again, she wasn't saying. *I told you you needed to rein yourself in. When you unravel, so does everything else.*

Kellen's ability to pull apart the threads of a curse came with a mild but annoying side-effect. Woven cloth in his vicinity loosened over time and began to unravel. This phenomenon was particularly noticeable when Kellen lost control of his emotions.

'That wasn't me!' he protested. 'I didn't unravel anything!'

'You were *very* angry,' Nettle said in a mild, careful tone that Kellen found infuriating. There was something about her 'one-

of-us-has-to-be-reasonable' air that made him want to be wildly unreasonable. 'You've been in a bad mood all day.'

This was true enough. He'd had a night of broken sleep and uneasy, half-remembered dreams, and it had left him feeling sour and strung-out.

'So what?' Kellen held up his hands in their iron-studded gloves. 'I was wearing these!'

Iron damped his unravelling side-effect, so there were strands of it in Kellen's boots, hat and coat lining. The iron-studded gloves muffling his clever, calloused weaver's hands made the biggest difference.

The merchant had demanded to know the reason for these gloves, so Kellen had told him about the side-effect. Now it sounded as if the man was using this as an excuse to blame every loose thread and pulled seam on Kellen.

'And even if I hadn't been wearing them it wouldn't happen that quickly, would it?' Kellen pointed out. 'I can't just make somebody's clothes fall apart by being angry with them. More's the pity.' The truth is, he *had* been thinking that it would serve the merchant right if his stupid gloves fell off his stupid bloody hands. Thoughts didn't unpick cloth, however.

'Well, we're going to have trouble proving that, aren't we?' Nettle stared calmly at the opposite wall, refusing to meet Kellen's angry gaze.

Nettle was like a belt that rubbed. Familiar, irritating, every little chafe adding to a thousand others. Comforting, necessary. Unavoidable, every twinge of irritation mixed with guilt and a sense of obligation. She might as well have been family.

Her strangeness was something you only noticed when you paid attention to her, and most people didn't. She always held her

face and body too still. All her motions were careful and deliberate, as if she were getting used to steering her body, which was, in fact, the case. Kellen knew that she was fifteen like him, but strangers found it difficult to guess her age. There was something young-old about her face, a weathered smoothness that spoke of storms survived. He wondered if she would always have that ageless oddness. A young woman with an old woman's careful gravity, and then an old woman with a quiet, fey blaze like a winter sky.

She had Kellen to thank and blame for that. Nettle was his responsibility, and she never let him forget it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frances Hardinge spent her childhood in a huge old house that inspired her to write strange stories from an early age. She read English at Oxford University, then got a job at a software company. A few years later, a persistent friend finally managed to bully Frances into sending a few chapters of *Fly By Night*, her first children's novel, to a publisher. Macmillan made her an immediate offer. The book went on to publish to huge critical acclaim and won the Branford Boase First Novel Award. Known for her beautiful use of language, she has since written many celebrated novels, including *A Skinful of Shadows*, *Verdigris Deep*, *Cuckoo Song*, *Deeplight* and the Costa Award-winning *The Lie Tree*.