

THE SPITCHWORT CURSE



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For Rowan, who read this first.

And for Jacob, who said he'd read it
'when it's a proper book'.







CHAPTER 1

ETTA PEERED THROUGH THE GAUZE VEIL, watching the hole in her bedroom ceiling growing wider.

'A little more please, nearly there,' she whispered gratefully to her tree.

She turned back to her nest-like bed and continued gathering pillows and cushions to add to the heap in the centre. Etta stood shakily on the pillow pile and reached up, fingertips stroking the intricate cobweb canopy draped across the ceiling of the tree hollow.

'I'm so sorry,' she whispered apologetically to the glowing spiders clustered in nooks and crannies all around the beech's hollow interior. They'd made an especially beautiful canopy for her this time; a pattern of snowflakes, each one unique and glimmering in the ghostly light from their soft bodies. Etta gently began to break through the curtain of webs until it fell loose and wafted down to her outstretched arms. Delicately she draped it across the twisted branches that circled her bed.

Looking up, Etta saw the hole she'd asked for in the ceiling was

likely big enough for her to fit through now. She adjusted the bag of tools slung across her back, then poked her head up through it.

It was pitch black, she couldn't see anything at all – unsurprising really, inside a tree trunk in the dead of night. Etta looked back down at her spiders.

'I could use some light for the climb to the top. Would you mind terribly coming with me?' she whispered politely.

After a heartbeat, they swarmed forwards, scuttling up the sides of her hollow tree bedroom and up into the darkness beyond. Etta waited patiently as they jostled each other a little, trying to get through – from tiny baby spiderlings to the fluffy adults, some of whom were bigger than her hands. She was able to tickle under their furry little chins and stroke their soft backs as they passed her.

Finally, enough had gone by for Etta to put her head and shoulders through the hole and look up. As the glowing spiders spiralled up the beech tree's interior, their light outlined the knots and whorls she could use as hand and footholds on the climb to the top.



With a relieved puff of breath, Etta sank gratefully down onto one of the large branches that burst through the roof of Stitchwort House, letting her clanking tool bag slip from her shoulder. A particularly fluffy spider dropped from the bough above to perch on her knee, preening and cleaning their adorable little face. They waved a leg at her in warning, so she hooked the bag's strap

over a smaller branch for safety. Imagining the clatter the heavy tools would make if they slid down the roof and past her parents' bedroom made her shudder. Even worse, if she fell off and died trying to catch them, she'd never hear the end of it.

The slates were covered with thick snow, bright and sparkling in the moonlight, as though strewn with diamond dust. Even if she fell and slid off, there was probably enough fresh powder below to soften her landing. Although it might be best not to test that theory. Not with her own bones anyway, but there were enough skeletons around the house and grounds that she could conduct a few experiments before next time. That could be quite an interesting investigation and one that needed doing soon, before the snow melted.

If it ever melts.

Etta groaned as she hauled her tool bag back across her shoulders, then lifted the spider to rest on the strap. The weather at Stitchwort had been getting more and more intense over the years. After three months of it, Etta was a little tired of snow.

A nearby branch pulled her up to her feet and Etta began the slippery, treacherous walk across to the bat tower, her clutter of spiders keeping pace. The snow made the roof of Stitchwort appear smooth and pristine when it was anything but. Beneath the soft down of the powder duvet grew thick balls of moss to trip on; lurked cracked and broken tiles, and poorly patched holes just waiting for Etta to put her boot through.

The branches of her tree helped her balance as far as they could reach. Etta's tree was a twisting, curling beech more than a century old. It was a giant, stretching towards the ocean to the east, limbs

curling away from the bat tower and the ruined west wing. All too soon, the last twig forlornly slipped from her grasp and Etta was alone, contemplating her choices beneath the bright moon.

That is the problem, Etta thought grimly as she gingerly prodded the smooth snow in front of her with the toe of her boot. *I don't have enough choices.*

She made it up the steep roof to the ridge tiles and began to balance along them, like a tightrope walker she'd seen in a book.

And they *went across Niagara Falls – all I'm doing is walking on the roof of my own house. And that's all I'll ever get to do if I can't find a way out of here.*

She gasped as her foot slid and she fell with her knees either side of the ridge. She caught the little spider as it tumbled from her shoulder and placed it on the snow as the rest of the clutter rippled with concern.

'I'm fine, I wasn't concentrating,' Etta murmured crossly as she got up, brushing the snow from her mittens. 'We're here now anyway.'

Laid out below Etta were the decaying remains of the west wing, ruined by a fire in Stitchwort's past. Family legend said the fire was set by angry faeries, Etta's father said possibly from a candle or maybe even lightning. Either way, Etta wasn't allowed in the west wing as it was 'structurally unsound', according to her family. It was one of the few places on earth Etta didn't really want to go. Everything in there was damp and mouldy and, despite being open to the elements, the west wing never manifested anything interesting to draw or study, like a nest of baby birds or a swarm of bees. It was thoroughly dead and dull.



But just at the corner of the main house, before you turned into the west wing, stood a partially ruined tower. Known to her family as the bat tower, for the bat roost it housed, it was one of Etta's favourite places to escape to. The crumbling walls were good for climbing as high as she could to see out of Stitchwort and away to the sea. Sometimes she might see a ship out there.

Etta knew all about life on a ship, she had read so many adventures in her ancestors' journals in the library. If she could ever manage to leave Stitchwort, Etta would fill her own journal and add her own story to the family archive.

I can't leave until I find a way around the curse though.

And that was why she was on the roof, in the wee small hours, with a bag of spanners.

Etta stepped down from the roof to the partially collapsed floor of the tower. She'd patched it up with pilfered floorboards until she could cross via safe walkways between the holes. The remains of the circular walls curled around her, the grey stone giving her secret workshop a little shelter from the elements as she walked to her workbench; she'd made it herself by butchering a wardrobe no one was going to miss from the servants' quarters.

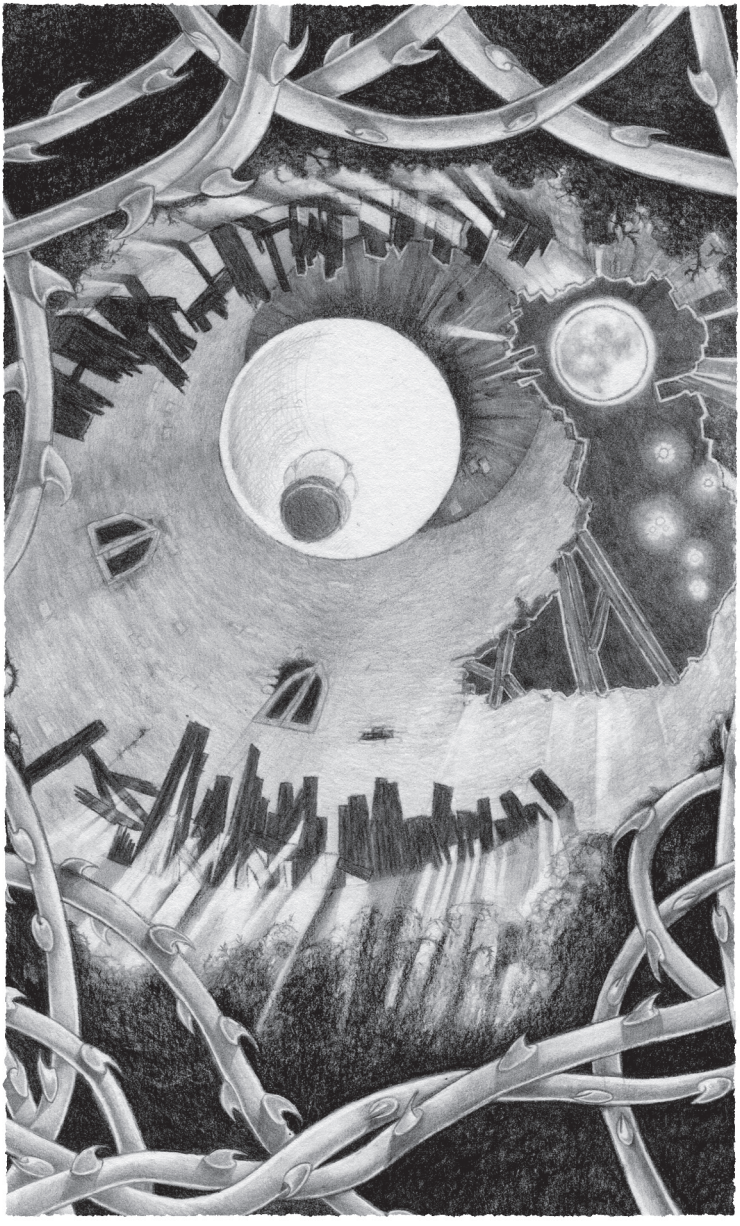
Etta walked up the wooden steps she'd constructed out of old apple crates to the raised platform she'd made and checked inside the basket, just in case any wildlife had decided to move in. It was all clear, and she allowed herself a moment to admire her handiwork. She'd found the large wicker laundry hamper collapsing in an upper floor corner almost a year ago and had delightedly made it her secret den. It made an ideal spot to hide in when Grandmother was looking for help cleaning out the goats.

Then one day, while idly browsing for something new to read in the library, Etta had found a journal by Jacob Starling, who was visiting Paris when the first passenger balloon had taken flight. Jacob had carefully drawn the passengers: a sheep, a cockerel and a duck, all tucked up safely in the little basket. Etta had been rooted to the floor in the library; her eyes were fixed on the drawing of the balloon hovering above the crowd, but her mind hadn't stopped racing.

Every Starling outside Stitchwort had perished in the claws of the family curse, but what if she were able to live her life in the sky? Could the curse find her if she were amongst the clouds? Could Etta live her dream life as an explorer, a plant collector or a cartographer, like her ancestors? Eating and sleeping in the basket of the balloon, would she be safe as long as her feet never touched the ground?

For several months afterwards, Etta and her spiders had covertly worked to repair the basket, then moved it to her new secret workshop. The bat tower had the remnants of a floor still clinging on. With some quiet dismantling in long unused areas of Stitchwort, Etta had filled in the gaps with a mismatched assortment of old floorboards, borrowed wardrobe doors, drawer bottoms and even the seats of chairs. The spiders had helped with a rope bridge across to her working area, and, after a near miss, she'd added safety railings made of broken furniture and extra-strong spider silk. Then the hours and hours of spinning, weaving and sewing began.

Reaching the platform Etta gazed up at her balloon, a perfect white sphere, like a second moon, glowing pearl-like in the



radiance of the *actual* snow moon shining above. Etta quietly crossed to the storage trunk where she kept her notes. Below her platform slumbered the bat roost, hanging upside down all huddled together. They weren't due to wake from their hibernation for a few more weeks yet.

Inside the lid of the trunk, Etta had pinned posters of Sophie Blanchard, a pioneering female balloonist who Grandmother definitely wouldn't approve of. She'd also made a scrapbook of newspaper articles, pamphlets and prints about balloon flights and aeronauts, all collected by Jacob Starling. It appeared 'balloonmania' had swept across Europe and Jacob had been caught up in the excitement.

Lucky for me! Etta thought. *Although not so lucky for him.*[1]

Etta stroked the cover of her balloonist manual, made by painstakingly copying every scrap of information she could find in the Stitchwort library. It had taken a long time and she felt deservedly proud of it. Tonight was the next step of the operation.

Crouching to dig to the bottom of the trunk, Etta pulled out her research journal.

Finally, we can fly!

Opening her tool bag, Etta pulled out the length of rubber tube. It was old, and a little cracked, but it was exactly what she'd hoped to find while she'd been secretly scouring every dusty room in the house in her free moments.

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1 Jacob Starling attended a balloon pyrotechnic display in Paris. Unfortunately, the balloon caught fire and descended rapidly upon the crowd, who were all able to flee except for Jacob, who was cornered by a stray rocket, preventing his escape.



'We're lucky to have had so many inventors and scientists in the family. Now we can start making the hydrogen!' she told the spiders, pulling on her goggles as they swarmed all over the balloon, checking their silk for even the tiniest of tears.

It was a freezing cold night, but a clear one. This was perfect weather for her first practice flight; she didn't want to be flying in poor visibility or high wind.

'But how long will it take to fill it up?' Etta wondered aloud. *I need to complete the tethered flight before anyone else wakes up.*

Etta huffed with frustration and glared down at the distant village. Who knew what wonders existed out there in the world by now, that could help her dreams of freedom become reality. All her research material was over a century old.

Nothing new ever happened at Stitchwort. Did the villagers ever look up at the wood on the hill and wonder about it? Probably not, the curse had wrapped the house in an invisible shroud, and the faerie woods had a fearful reputation. No one ever came up here. Stitchwort was lost and forgotten.

Nothing ever happens here, Etta thought gloomily.

All the spiders suddenly stilled. The skin on Etta's arms tightened into goosebumps and the back of her neck prickled.

Something isn't right . . . she thought, slowly standing as she let the rubber hose drop into the open trunk. Etta heard a low rumble in the distance. She looked up at the clear sky, frowning. It isn't thunder.

She held her breath and felt it again, a deep grumbling that travelled through her feet and into her belly. Pulling the goggles off, she squinted through the swallowing blackness beneath the

trees surrounding Stitchwort. The noise was louder now – a low growl, punctured with uneven coughs.

Whatever it was, it was getting closer.

Etta half-turned towards her rope bridge, debating if it was foolish to wake her parents just to tell them she'd heard something strange, when there came a loud metallic clanging. The gates of Stitchwort were some distance away but the sound of them screeching as they were forced apart carried easily through the silent, snow-smothered night.

Etta gasped as the noise echoed around the tower. She clenched her fists, digging her fingernails into her palms as her blood pounded in her ears.

'There's no time . . .' she breathed. Etta ran back across the rope bridge, calling for the spiders to start spinning their fastest. She launched herself onto the steeply angled roof, skidded down in a flurry of snow and leapt off the edge.



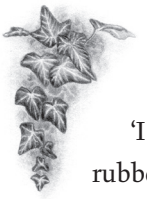
CHAPTER 2

ETTA THREW OUT HER ARMS ACROBATICALLY and grabbed the tree branch that whipped out from the eaves to catch her. The spiders were already spinning their fastest, a gleaming silver rope appearing before Etta's eyes even as her tree began lowering her. Etta caught the rope, secured it around the branch and quickly abseiled down to her parents' window, aware that the coughing and banging of whatever was coming their way was drawing closer.

Her heart pounded, and her sweating hands slipped on the silk as she scrambled down to the window that seemed further away than ever.

I think I'm panicking, she told her worried spiders. *Mother and Father will know what to do though.* Reaching the top of their window, Etta banged on the glass.

'Mother! Father!' she cried as she carried on down past it. A moment later, the window was flung open and her father, James Starling, looked up and all around before peering down at her.





'I just know you have a reasonable explan—' he began, as he rubbed his eyes.

'Listen!' Etta interrupted. She pointed away, up the long carriage path to the gate. 'Something's coming. Something . . . got in, somehow!'

Father leaned out of the window, frowning as he peered into the frozen night. The rumbling growls shook the still air, louder and closer than ever.

Etta's mother, Mary, came to his side, already pulling on the old woollen military pelisse she used as a housecoat.

'It's not possible. Nothing and no one can get in,' she announced crisply, glaring out of the window as she tugged the fur-lined sleeves down.

Father reached out for Etta's rope.

'Quickest way to find out,' he remarked. He hooked the silk around his foot and offered Mother his arm, as though they were merely going for a stroll. The beech branch lowered them all swiftly, but gently, to the portico below.



'Etta, send the biggest spiders you can,' Father called, as he ran down the steps after Mother.

'I've already called them,' Etta replied irritably, following closely behind him.

Spiders were pouring from under the ivy that covered Stitchwort, and out of the cracks in the window frames. The larger ones would have to find another way through . . .







She winced as she heard a crack of glass breaking.

Father turned around and grasped Etta by the shoulders.

'What are you doing? Get back inside! This could be dangerous, love.'

'I'm not a baby, I want to help! Where's Mother?' Etta cried as she tried to push past her father.

Her thumping heart felt like it was trying to escape her ribs, and her throat felt unusually tight. More loud rumbles came from the woods, almost immediately drowned out by the fracturing sound of tree roots tearing the frozen ground apart. Snow flurried and fell as the tree trunks began to move.

'Mary!' gasped Father. He spun Etta around and thrust her back towards the house, then ran away from her. He was swallowed by the shadowy gloom beneath the trees just before the thick trunks twisted together and closed across the path behind him.

Etta followed. She bypassed the wall of trunks by scrambling up the first tree she came to. While these trees weren't magical, like her beech, they were full of her spiders, who wove a glittering path for her across the boughs and pulled awkward branches out of her way as she sped past, following the sounds.

Etta nearly tumbled to the ground in disbelief when she caught up with her parents. Mother stood in the centre of the road; her splayed hands raised in the air. Behind her, a semicircle of trees were bowed down, branches woven together, making a barrier that had forced the intruder to a halt.

Father stood at her side, holding a heavy branch like a cudgel. In spite of his slippers and too-short pyjamas he looked formidable, but not as scary as Mother. Her face gleamed as white and cold as



marble in the moonlight. Mother was glaring at the beast she'd trapped, flexing her fingers as she willed ivy to crawl down from the trees and oil across the forest floor to encircle the invader.

Easing herself down to a crouch, Etta silently studied the prisoner from above.

Surround it, she commanded the spiders, as more and more of them reached her. They moved out, silently filling every tree.

The trespassing thing was large, squat and shiny. At first, she thought it some kind of hard carapaced creature, but it had wheels like a carriage. Where she expected the beast's eyes was a rectangular window that reflected the starry sky above.



Its rumbles grew quieter, then it let out a final loud cough with a burst of noxious smoke from its nether parts.

Etta's ears rang in the sudden silence. The only sounds were her father's heavy breathing and the rustle of ivy tendrils as they wound themselves around the wheels of the beast, binding it to the floor. She tasted metal and dirt as the sting of the creature's alien smell reached her frozen nose.

With a squealing groan, a wing case stiffly opened out from the beast's body. No, not a wing case, Etta realised. A door.

It is *a carriage!*

She saw slim legs in trousers tentatively touch down upon the ivy-covered ground, the vines immediately wrapping around their ankles. They gasped and gripped the door with delicate, dark-skinned fingers as they gingerly stood. Mother swiftly sent ivy spiralling up to bind that hand tightly in place as well. A wide-eyed face peered fearfully around the door. Etta stared at this unfamiliar, new person.

She's very pretty, and riding in a strange carriage . . . is she one of the fae? Is this a new attack?

Father moved forwards slowly, lowering his weapon. He too stared openly at the first new face he'd seen in decades. The woman held up her other hand to stop him approaching and demanded,

'Blijf staan, alstublieft! Wie bent u?'

Definitely fae! Etta tensed, readying her spiders.

'English?' asked Father gently.

The woman moved to step out from behind the door, but Mother clenched her fists and the stranger cried out, falling to her knees as the ivy winding around her legs bound her tighter.

Etta scrambled to her feet in disbelief. Mother used her magic to grow food or to send weeds marching off the flowerbeds to a more suitable part of the garden. Etta hadn't ever considered that she could defend Stitchwort, bending trees to form barricades and binding intruders to the ground.

We must help! Etta told her spiders.

She crouched and stroked one of her biggest tarantulas, their legs spreading across two tree limbs. Concentrating, Etta felt in her mind for the connection to the rest of them.

Go, surround that woman, and her carriage!

In the darkness, Etta felt motion. Around her, branches creaked and shifted, soft flumps of snow quietly thudding to the ground as they unbowed from under the weight of the biggest and heaviest spiders at Stitchwort. Pumpkin-sized, they silently crawled down the trunks of the trees and joined her wolf spiders, surrounding the carriage while remaining in the shadows.

Etta could tell that the stranger knew something was there, her eyes darted about constantly, trying to keep track of the soft, furtive movements she could sense at the edge of the light. Her one free hand began to pull and tear frantically at her ivy bindings.

No, thought Etta, and in the shadows the spiders hissed a warning.

A cry came from inside the vehicle.

'Mama!'

A boy of maybe Etta's age scrambled out to tug helplessly at the strangling vines with his shaking hands. His sudden appearance alarmed Etta and several of her goliaths jerked forwards defensively, rearing up and chittering their enormous

fangs threateningly. The woman's eyes widened, and she let out a small cry as she tried to shield the boy behind her.

Etta felt a tickle in her mind as a tremor ran through all of her spiders. Something about the boy . . .

Wait . . .

Father held up his hands.

'Everyone, calm down. Mary, wait. Stop.'

All around the clearing, spiders began to drop down from their branches like rain, creating a glowing dome over them all as they hung from a gossamer shower of silver silk strands. Before Etta's eyes, they hurriedly spun a single word that shone in the moonlight:

