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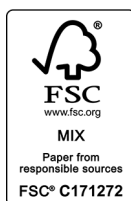
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*For Kate Shaw – who helped pin out the pattern  
for this story – with my love and thanks.*

Also by James Nicol

*The Apprentice Witch*

*A Witch Alone*

*A Witch Come True*



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## CHAPTER ONE

# SPELL-STITCHING

‘Stitching a spell is tricky,’ Nana said, laying out the jacket on the large pine workbench. The jacket was dark green velvet, like a midnight forest, with a high collar, wide sleeves, and three gleaming jet buttons to hold it closed just above the waist. ‘But it’s also the easiest thing in the world.’

Hen smoothed out the material. Velvet always made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end ... or maybe it was nerves. ‘Are you sure?’

Nana seemed entirely unbothered. ‘Of course. You know what you’re doing now, love. This’ll be your fourth garment, yes?’

He nodded and swallowed. ‘But this is just for practice, like before, right?’ Hen asked, peering closer.

‘It’s an order for Mrs Place. A gift for her daughter, I believe.’

Hen looked up at Nana and then back at the jacket. ‘But . . . a real order for an actual customer . . .’

‘And?’

‘Well, what if I . . .’

He paused.

‘What if you muck it up?’ Nana asked.

Hen nodded. He knew that if a spell stitch went wrong, unpicking it and starting over rarely helped. Hen had seen garments vanish, totally unravel themselves, and even burst into flames once – there was still a small scorch mark on the wall just behind him.

‘My boy, if you get it wrong, you get it wrong.’ Nana shrugged. ‘You’ll learn from your mistakes, hopefully. Besides, you’ll need to practise more if you want to enter a garment for the Guild Fair.’ Nana’s eyes twinkled.

‘How did you know about that?’

She chuckled. ‘I saw the flyer pinned up in your bedroom.’

‘Can I then, please?’

‘Well, your mum and dad will have to agree. You can write to them later. But now, tell me, what do we need to do first?’ Nana asked.

Hen took a deep breath, set aside the practice square he had been working on and glanced across the basement workroom. The floor was covered in large creamy flagstones, the wood-panelled walls painted a soft green. Light flooded in from the high windows that looked across the back garden. The deep window ledges were empty but for one that held a small clay figurine of Hestia, the goddess or patron saint of tailors and dressmakers. She held a skein of yarn in one clay hand and in the other a needle that pointed up at the sky. Many believed Hestia had been the one to stitch the universes into creation. She had sewn every star and leaf, every seashell and pebble, spun every soul. She watched over the workroom always.

The little clay statue had been in the Danelli family since they first travelled from the Scillian Islands, far to the east to Ingle, and established the shop here in Sparrow Down.

‘It’s always lucky to make an offering to Hestia before starting a new spell stitch,’ Hen said, glancing at Nana, who nodded and then bowed her head, her

thin lips fluttering in silent prayer. Hen copied, praying for good luck, for his threads not to break and his stitches to be strong and true.

‘And next?’ Nana asked. ‘Because praying will only get you so far. Hestia won’t do the work for you, love.’ She *always* said that.

‘Um, make sure you have everything you need?’ Hen offered.

‘Yes . . . but there is one more thing to do before you gather up your bits and pieces, remember?’ Nana smiled, her eyes twinkling with laughter. She inclined her head towards the corner of the workroom. A thick wooden beam stuck out of the walls and from it hung the family’s shleep, Marjorie. Of course! How had he forgotten?

‘Feed Marjorie!’ Hen called, reaching for a bunch of carrots from the special shleep treat basket they kept under the workbench.

Marjorie’s body was covered in soft, fast-growing, voluminous white fleece that looked like a high summer cloud and which provided the Danelli family with a continuous supply of strong yarn. She was a little larger than a dog and her dark, marble-like eyes blinked at Hen as he approached, her wide mouth – which always seemed to be smiling –

smiled even more. In the wild, shleep spent the majority of their time hanging from rocky outcroppings or old twisted trees on the rough, windswept moors. And whilst Marjorie had freedom to roam anywhere around the workroom or apartment, she was happiest on her beam where she slept (and snored!) for about twenty-three and a half hours a day!

Hen hung the carrots next to her and reached up to scratch behind the horns that curled around at the side of her head. Her large damp nostrils sniffed towards the treat and she made the soft *huh, huh, huh* sound that Nana always said was Marjorie laughing!

On his way back to the workbench, Hen gathered everything he would need for the task ahead.

‘Good strong thread,’ he called, hurrying to collect a reel of cotton from the sideboard at the far end of the workroom, near the stairs that led back up to the shop. Danelli stitches were usually sewn with white or black thread – this had been the way for ever. Sometimes, on very rare occasions, Hen knew golden thread had been used – but that was often too costly, even for the fanciest Danelli customer.

‘The needles,’ Hen said, reaching for a small set of

drawers that held all sorts of different shapes and sizes of needles. They were kept tucked in a small wallet of soft folded felt. Each needle pierced through the felt, held securely in place. There were brass, bronze and copper needles, alongside gold, pewter, silver, and even ones made from tin. Each needle helped to form a particular type of spell stitch. Hen opened the wallet and laid it beside the jacket. He knew these needles were many years old, a family treasure.

‘And scissors,’ he said, at last, reaching for a small pair of scissors to trim stray threads.

Hen took a deep breath as he sat down and looked at the workbench before him.

‘Very good,’ said Nana. ‘Now, there’s just one more thing.’

As Nana moved across the workroom, a metallic jingling filled the air, like dozens of small bells. The sound came from the collection of keys – for the shop, apartment and various cabinets and cupboards in both – that always hung at Nana’s waist, held tight to her belt with a large silver clip. The jingling was such a familiar sound to Hen, like her laughter or her voice singing along to the workroom radio.

At the far end of the room, Nana selected a large brass key and used it to open the storage cupboard.

Then, she pulled out the box.

It was unremarkable in design, plain except for a small 'D' for Danelli on the lid. But what the box held was quite possibly the most remarkable and magical thing in Hen's world. Nana brought the box over to the workbench and placed it carefully beside Hen and his assembled tools. Then, from the keys, she selected the smallest of all – as unassuming as the box it unlocked. Hen heard the click of the lock and then Nana was lifting the lid. She reached carefully inside and lifted out a book made entirely of fabric.

This was the greatest of their family heirlooms – more precious, even, than the statue of Hestia on the window ledge. More valuable than the golden thread or the silver needles.

Like any garment being stored in the workroom, it was wrapped in several layers of pristine white tissue paper, which Nana peeled away. Her wrinkled hands passed the floppy cloth book to Hen. It was wider than it was tall and thicker than a loaf of bread. The book had been handed down through the many generations of the Danelli family.

The stitches inside the cloth book were not like the sturdy, regular stitches that held a garment together. They were not even like the beautiful

embroidery resembling flowers or leaves or birds or whatever the fashion was at the time that sometimes adorned collars or cuffs.

These stitches held the remnants of ancient spells.  
*Spell stitches.*

Spell stitches could infuse a garment with strange properties, from a summer dress or shirt to keep you cool on a hot day, to a glow stitch that made a garment shimmer and shine like the moon or a starlit night. These wonders and more resided in the Danelli family spell stitches. These were the secrets they brought to their garments – secrets that had secured their business for nearly 400 years.

Hen opened the book, turning the cloth pages carefully. The stitches looked like ripples in water, circles within circles. Tilt your head just so and they looked a little like a spider's web. More stitches connected the circles, like the spokes of a wheel.

‘Why are these important?’ Nana pointed at the connecting stitches with a long knitting needle.

‘The spacing of those is what makes the spell stitches unique. They determine what sort of spell stitch it is and what magic will fill the garment.’

‘Where should your spell stitch be located on the garment?’

‘Um, well, that depends on what stitch you use and what type of garment it is. A cooling or warming spell stitch is generally added twice, to the front and back, one slightly smaller than the other but both should be large-ish.’

‘And how will you know when the spell is set?’

‘The stitches will all but disappear. You might see a slight shimmer if you know where to look and what to look for,’ Hen said proudly.

Nana beamed at him. ‘Today, you are going to stitch a protection spell into the green jacket. It’s for travelling.’

Hen knew there were several different types of protection spell stitches in the book. Occasionally new stitches were created or changed as old magic faded or shifted. Every generation or so, a Danelli would devise a new spell stitch. Nana loved to experiment, but she had yet to add her own stitch to the book. ‘I’d like to do it before my thread runs out!’ she would laugh. But she was secretive and would never reveal what it was she was working on.

Hen needed to pick just the right protective spell stitch for a travelling garment. He flipped past the love spell that had been stitched into the wedding dress for the Queen of the Giants and past a flying

spell that now only really worked in shoes – you wouldn't fly, but it helped the wearer appear much more elegant on the dance floor. There were fire spells used for toasty warm pyjamas or nightdresses, cooling spells for summer clothes and light spells that helped repel dirt and kept a garment cleaner for longer.

Then he came to the protection spells. The first was one he was fairly certain Nana only used in clothes for expectant mothers or newborn babies. The second had a small black cross stitched into the corner to show it no longer worked. No one really knew why the spell stitches would just stop working, sometimes, after hundreds of years.

Hen was sure that the third protection spell stitch was the correct one for travelling clothes. The stitch kept the wearer a perfect temperature, no matter the climate, repelled dirt and would even act as a life jacket if you fell overboard at sea or into a river. Danelli ancestors had once stitched this spell into the jackets of a whole Scillian battalion.

Hen lifted the spell stitch book to show Nana, just to double-check.

She smiled and said, 'Good. Now, crack on and I'll go make us some tea. Lottie bought scones today I do believe!'

Nana turned and hurried out of the workroom, humming to herself as she went, leaving Hen quite alone, staring hard at the green velvet jacket.

He took a deep breath, lifted the garment in one hand, the threaded needle in the other, and started to sew the outer circle of the spell stitch.

Hen's tea and scone sat untouched on the workbench as he finished off the spell stitch. Nana had gone to sit near the fireplace, had pulled out her ever-present ball of red wool and needles and was busy knitting yet another one of her scarves. She knitted at least two every week and always gave them away to customers, friends or family. Hen had a collection of six.

She glanced up, caught Hen looking and asked, 'How are you getting along?'

Hen blushed. 'Oh, finished . . . I think!'

'Let's have a look.' Nana walked over to the workbench, huffed on her silver glasses, buffed them with the hem of her jacket and plonked them back on her nose before leaning over Hen and peering closely at his work.

Her lips pursed, her forehead creased. Hen had no idea what she was thinking.

He counted in his head.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

‘Not bad, my boy, not bad at all.’ Nana beamed.

‘Really?’

There was a commotion at the top of the workroom stairs, the sound of the door banging against the wall and something falling, followed by several words Nana had told Hen never to use.

Lottie – Nana’s faithful, if rather scatty, assistant – came rushing down the stairs, all arms and legs and flapping apron. She was a few years older than Hen, skinny, tall and rather fidgety. She helped out in the shop and with sewing tasks, as well as helping Nana around the house sometimes. She spectacularly missed the last two steps, landing in the workroom with a flurry of more bad words.

‘*Lottie!*’ Nana said gently but warningly. ‘Steady on or you’ll break your neck.’

‘Sorry, Mrs D,’ she said, a little breathless. ‘But you’d best come up to the shop at once.’

Nana smiled. ‘Have you jammed the till again? You just need to give it a whack with the hammer under the desk.’

Lottie shook her head and blushed.

‘No! It’s . . . it’s Mr Bertrand.’

‘On the telephone?’

Lottie pointed up at the ceiling and pulled a face.

‘Upstairs?’ Nana asked, clearly even more puzzled.

Lottie nodded mutely and puffed her straggly fringe out of her eyes.

Uncle Bertie rarely visited the shop these days unless it was for what Nana liked to call a ‘meddling visit’, and he wasn’t due for one of those for about six months at least.

So what on earth was he doing here today?