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To the wicked, wonderful and much missed Kathleen McGrath,
and the happy hours we all spent behaving badly in castles.

This is not a historical novel. I have not recreated twelfth-century Europe – I have mugged it and stolen some of its lunch money. The laws of physics have also taken a bruising, but they should expect that from me by now.



Prologue

The Maiden in the Veil

On a simmering day after a lost and bloody battle, a young man who had dreamed of being king staggered through a wood. His men were dead, his horse was gone and his sword was broken. All he had left was a stubbornness that would not let him die.

By a spring, he collapsed from exhaustion. He could not be sure if what happened afterwards was real or a dream.

Somebody tied a blindfold round his eyes. A female voice told him that if he kept it on and obeyed every word he would be brought to food and shelter. He was not a trustful man, but he was very tired and hungry, so he agreed.

He was led for miles, then brought into the cool of a building. Food and drink were placed in his eager hands. When he asked to remove his blindfold, however, his mysterious hostess laughed.

'I will teach you a game,' she said. 'When you win against me, you can remove your blindfold.'

For a month he lived in that unknown place, recovering his strength. Every day, he and his hostess played a game on a board he could not see, with strange, complex rules that he struggled to remember. He was clever and determined, however, and eventually he managed to win.

The young man removed his blindfold, marvelling at the grandeur of the great, stone room. He had never seen tapestries so rich, let alone windows filled with coloured glass. To his disappointment, however, his hostess wore a veil that hid her face.

Through an open window, he saw a wide courtyard with other buildings beyond, and heard a tumult of voices and horses.

'What town is this?' he asked.

'This is no town,' she replied. 'Everything you see is part of my castle.'

He stared at her, for back in those days the buildings everyone called 'castles' were nothing but simple timber stockades perched on mounds of earth.

'This is a *real* castle,' the maiden continued, 'built to withstand centuries and a thousand spears. It is the key to lordship and rule. Understand this – if you can strike and nobody can strike back at you, then you are the master of all that you survey.'

'Show me this castle!' demanded the visitor.

'If I do, you will copy it.'

He sensed that a bargain was being offered. 'What is your price?'

'The castles you build in the image of mine will be yours,' she said, 'but they will also belong to me. You may use them as you please, but my kin and I must always be welcome there. In every castle it shall be written, *Remember those to whom you owe your power*. That rule must be obeyed.'

He agreed to the pact. So she showed him battlements like mighty square teeth, and narrow slits that would let many arrows out but few arrows in. She revealed to him the secrets of buttress, murder hole, drawbridge, portcullis and sally door.

As he memorized every ingenious detail, however, he felt sure that he could never build castles equal to that in which he stood.

'You shall indeed be welcome in every castle of mine,' he said. 'But why be a guest, when you could be a queen? Marry me, and we shall rule these castles together.' And he pulled aside her veil.

He saw her face.

It seemed to him that he was dragged up into the sky, like a tiny dust mote caught by the roaring wind. The vast curve of the world gazed at him with great silvery lake-eyes, a cloud shadow forming the dimple of a smile . . .

He woke by the woodland spring. There was a magpie feather in his hand, and he still remembered every trick of the mysterious castle.

The would-be king gathered followers again. Once he had found a mason, he built a castle of stone. The morning after it was finished, six magpies appeared on his battlements, hopping tamely after his men. Remembering the magpie feather he had found in his hand, he ordered his men to feed the birds and build them a small shelter.

The tide turned in his wars. His enemies' armies broke helplessly against the stone walls of his castles. At last, he controlled the whole country and became king, with a mighty palace called Amberlain, and the allegiance of lords who held great castles of their own. His kingdom stretched from sea to sea, and took the name of Thaletal. The king lived long and died old, and a black-and-white feather was found on his pillow next to his snow-white hair.

When oaths are kept and duties remembered, all is well. But one day the first king's grandson's grandson was walking along his battlements when a magpie flew too close to his face. Vexed, he drew his sword and cut the bird in two.

A splat of dark blood and darker feathers struck the battlements . . . and something invisible shattered.

The king's vision blurred, then cleared. Instead of his battlements and frightened retainers, he saw a vast, otherworldly hall where all the mighty nobles of the kingdom were crowded around a great playing board. He knew at once that this was a game played for power, and

that if he did not join in he would lose mastery of his kingdom.

So he abandoned his earthly body, and took his place at the game board. Grasping a castle-shaped playing piece, he swapped it with another, for instinct told him that was how the game was played. Back in the human world, two castles leapt a hundred leagues in a second, to the terror of those within. The king was deaf to their screams, forgetting all but the game.

That was the start of the Great Game, and the day the castles began to move.

At least, so the story says. If you ask anyone who matters – anyone high, wise or learned – they will tell you that the tale is not true. There was no magpie maiden. The first king's stone castles did turn the tide in his wars, but he devised them himself. As for the Great Game, it began when the lords mastered the mysteries of power, and became a higher form of being. Magpies are vermin, and worse than vermin, and all right-thinking people should stone them on sight.

The lowly do not argue with their betters, but a few retell the story anyway, after cider under the stars. Not loudly, but often enough to keep it alive.

It is a mischievous tale of hedgerow and furrow, and a slander on the mighty. But one thing is undeniably true.

The castles move.

Chapter 1
The Red Castle

When trouble came to the valley, Burr was one of the few who saw it happen.

It was a damp, early morning that felt more like spring than summer, and Burr was driving the family pigs along the path to the pasture so that they could forage. His cheeks were chilled by the fall of downy rain, his stick cold and slick in his hand, and half a dozen scrawny, bristly pig backs were bobbing and trotting ahead of him.

To his left, beyond a patchwork of fields, lay the brown, crouching shape of the castle.

Burr seldom really thought about the castle. It would have been like thinking of the sky, or the fact that things fell when dropped. Some things were too fundamental for you to really consider them. Besides, it seemed insolent to stare at something so vast, important and solemn, or even to think about it too hard. He should keep his eyes and his mind lowered, the way he would if knights or fine folk passed on the road.

But there the castle was beyond the fields, a long brown wall with its turreted gate, and behind it the rounded tower of the keep, its windows chips of darkness, its banners flighty ribbons of weathered blue. It was the same outline that he had seen every day of his life, and even in his dreams.

And the very next instant it wasn't.

Burr dropped the stick, and the pigs ran squealing to hide in the

hedge. The air was filled with shrieking, bewildered birds.

The brown castle was gone.

In its place stood a tall castle of dark red stone with square towers at the corners.

As he watched, several large, wooden spider-like legs, jointed with metal, extended jerkily from different parts of the curtain wall. Some braced their feet against the ground like buttresses, while others found empty air above the moat and waggled helplessly as if vainly seeking purchase.

After a breathless moment, one side of the main gatehouse gracefully toppled forward and fell with a crash into the dry moat. Burr could hear the distant sound of bellowing and the terrified whinnying of horses from within the castle walls.

He gathered the pigs and ran home to tell his father, who listened with a deepening frown, then hastily took him to report to the bailiff. By the time they reached the bailiff's house, however, it was clear that the news was no longer news. The whole village seemed to be massed there, ashen-faced and shocked, calling out questions. Freemen and villeins, labourers and smallholders. Burr had only ever seen so large a crowd during feast days or harvest time, and in all his fifteen years he had never seen his neighbours looking so wild-eyed and frightened.

'Stop fluttering like sparrows!' Osbright the bailiff stood before the crowd, holding up one hand to halt the questions, the other on his horse's bridle. 'The sky hasn't fallen on you! It's just a change of castle – that's all!'

Castles traded places sometimes. Everyone knew that. It was always something that *might* happen, except that it never had in that valley, and nobody had really expected that it would. It was one of those unlikelihoods, like finding treasure, or being eaten by a wolf, or having

a handsome, powerful stranger turn up to right all your wrongs. It could happen, except it didn't.

Until all of a sudden it did.

Ever since he was little, Burr had been rather afraid of the brisk, sharp-tongued Osbright. The bailiff lived outside the castle, but for those in the fields he was its face and voice. He was always in a hurry, running from one duty to another, organizing work parties, gathering tithes, giving orders. Osbright was one of the few people on the estate who could read, and Burr always had the uncomfortable feeling that Osbright's hard, bright gaze might read him as well.

Now Burr noticed Osbright's shaking hands, and realized that the bailiff was frightened too.

'What if the new lord's one of those robber barons?' somebody called out.

'Enough!' Osbright mounted his little horse, who snorted and stamped, unhappy with the press of bodies. 'If we all do our duty to the castle, as we always have, there'll be no trouble. Now get back to your work and stop wasting daylight!'

The bailiff was back later in the day.

'All's well,' he said curtly. 'It's a Lord Stephen we serve now. There'll be some changes, but nothing to worry about.' As he spoke, however, he kept fiddling with his collar as if it were tight, or as if he wanted to make sure that his head was still attached.

Burr spent the rest of the day feeling shocked and light-headed. His valley seemed to shiver in the freshening breeze. The ground felt unsteady under his feet.

Sometimes the pillars of your life fall away without warning. Burr had learned as much when he was just ten years old.

His mother had cut her ankle on a sharp stone and, in spite of the salve she put on it, the wound wept and did not close. It poisoned her blood and a fever took hold. Within three days, she was dead. A group of the family's neighbours brought blankets in which to wrap her, and lavender to scatter on her hair, then carried her to the burial ground among the willows.

Burr's father, Joett, was not usually the sort who hugged, but for the long night afterwards he had sat up and held his four children, so that they could sleep, comforted by his warmth.

But thistle and crow do not respect grief or loss, and the field wouldn't till itself. Burr still remembered blinking puffy-eyed in the grey morning light the next day, goading two borrowed oxen along the family's narrow strip of land while his father guided the plough and his sisters followed, breaking clods.

'She'll be opening her eyes just about now,' Joett had said after a while. 'My parents will be there, waking her up with a hot bowl of soup – they'll be so happy to see her! I reckon they'll have a little feast to celebrate.'

'What's her new home like?' Burr had asked, needing a picture in his head, something to replace the hollowed-looking, blue-lipped figure that had lain in his mother's bed.

'Oh, it's a lot like ours.' Joett had glanced across at the family's little timber-and-daub hut, with its thatch roof and smoke holes in the gables. 'But . . . it's bigger, to house all the folks who have lived there before. The beds always smell of fresh-cut grass. The chickens are twice the size of ours, and lay six eggs each and every day.'

'Six eggs *each*!' That idea was guaranteed to seize Pirin's attention. She liked her food, and her fierce little fingers were quick to steal others' shares.

'That's right.' Joett had smiled quietly. 'And she'll say, "Oh, the sun's up! I should be at work already!" And they'll tell her, "No, that's not the way here. We don't start work for another hour. You rest good and long."

All four children had known what Joett meant. Those who lived good lives, kept their oaths and worked hard, woke up after death in the Happy Fields. There they still served on a castle estate and tilled the land, but all the work was light, easy and pleasant. The soil had no stones or tough roots, and the ploughs glided as easily as fish through water. Everyone's tasks were finished by noon, leaving the afternoon free for fishing, dancing and telling stories. In the Happy Fields, nobody was ever ill or tired. Blackberries grew as large as apples, and apples as big as pumpkins.

'She won't forget about us, will she?' Sorrel was the second-oldest, but always the most worried. Haymake, the youngest, had goggled wide-eyed at the thought.

'No, no,' Joett reassured her. 'The folks in the Happy Fields, they're our neighbours. The house she lives in now – it's still *our* house, but better. She knows we're near, just as we know she is. We can't see her . . . but maybe sometimes we'll catch sight of her shadow on the ground, or hear her voice.'

Burr and his sisters never doubted a word of this. Joett knew everything. He could squint at the sky and see that a storm was coming, or frown at a dint in the mud and know foxes had been near the family's half-yardland. His children quietly added the afterlife to the list of invisible things their father knew all about.

'What's she doing now?' they asked Joett repeatedly from that day on. He never became impatient with the question, and always had an answer.

Because of this, Burr never felt motherless. His memory of his mother's face was fading, but it was replaced by a sense of her unseen presence. On quiet evenings, he almost thought he heard the click of her spindle.

Burr started to notice that his father occasionally took solitary walks by the willows, from which he returned red-eyed and pensive. He also gradually realized how much of the daily labour Joett had been quietly shouldering, now that there were fewer hands to the grindstone. Burr began to do the same, blistering his small hands raw on spade and hoe. If he could do more, be more, *grow faster*, perhaps he could help his father bear the weight. Perhaps he could even become like his father, strong and calm as an oak.

Over the last few years, Burr had indeed grown, and was now tall and lanky enough to feel self-conscious about it. He had also earned a reputation for being sensible, hard-working and reliable.

'Why can't you be more like Burr?' an annoyed father had once snapped at his son. This earned Burr some teasing. It also left him feeling embarrassed and resentful. He didn't *want* to be the boring one, the 'good example'. But he did feel a warm glow whenever his father trusted and relied on him. Besides, every chore fulfilled felt like a brick in a wall protecting the family. Since his mother's death, Burr had known deep in his gut that everything he loved was fragile.

In the days that followed the arrival of the red castle, everyone returned to their duties and the fields, but there was a nervous thunder-tension in the air. The carpenter was called into the castle to start making a new drawbridge for the moat, and was mobbed by questions on his return. After that, rumour took wing and flew all over the estate.

'Lord Stephen and the other castle folks are from the northern

moors!' Pirin reported. She was a shameless eavesdropper, and always eager to share her new discoveries.

Burr and Sorrel exchanged uncertain looks. Like most people in the village, they had never been outside their own valley. A few of their neighbours had made the trek to the nearest little market town, and had returned muttering about the inhabitants having unfamiliar customs and slang. These castle newcomers hailed from a different *county*, so they might as well have come from the moon.

'What about the lord?' asked Burr.

'The carpenter saw him from a distance,' said Pirin. 'He has red hair and a beard, and he's long and stringy—'

'Don't talk about the lord like that!' Burr interrupted. 'You'll get into trouble!'

Pirin glared up at him. At eleven years old, she was already tired of being treated like a child. She was impatient with rules, with routines, with everyone and everything. She was always flinging and banging about like a sparrow in a net, breaking things.

'I'm just saying what I heard!' she protested. 'Do you want to know or not?' Neither of her older siblings answered, because of course they *did* want to know. 'Well, they say he takes a little nanny goat in a red leather collar everywhere with him. He has a sickly-looking wife and children, but he only cares about the goat. He doesn't like loud noises, or the sound of sweeping or hair being combed. And he gets sick if his wine isn't watered . . .'

Burr couldn't help but listen, as hungry for rumour as his neighbours. Lord Stephen held all the tenants' wellbeing in the palm of his hand, so everyone wanted to understand him. You could prepare for trouble if you knew what might be coming.

*

The first bad news arrived a week later. The old quarry by the woods was to be cleared of weeds and manned again. Stone had to be cut and transported to the castle, so that Lord Stephen's mason could repair the damaged gatehouse.

All tenants owed the castle service. Some of it was paid by labouring in the lord's fields, but he could also ask for 'boon work', extra tasks when needed. Now it looked like most of the village men would be called in for 'boon work' digging at the quarry, lugging stone, dragging in timber for scaffolding and helping with the repairs.

'But we've no skill in that!' protested one of Burr's neighbours. 'And it'll take us away from the haymaking! What do *you* say, Joett?'

There were jokes about Long Joett the woodward. People said he wasn't called 'long' because he was tall, but because of the time it took for him to gather his thoughts and speak. It was said that everyone looked up to him, but only because he was always up a tree, or on his neighbours' roofs fixing their thatch. Joett always laughed at these jokes as much as anyone.

None of the jokes had bite. Joett was slow to speak because he thought deeply and carefully, and everyone knew it, so they listened to him closely. And, despite all the jests, everyone did look up to him.

Many important roles were handed down from the castle, but the post of woodward was voted on by the villagers themselves. The woodward was in charge of tending and guarding the lord's woods, and making sure nobody took anything from it unless they had the right. Joett was the only person the other tenants would trust with the job.

'Well, the lord needs to mend his gate, doesn't he?' Joett remarked phlegmatically after his usual pause for thought. 'So we get the work done quick without complaining. Then it'll be out of the way before harvest time.'

Somehow Joett's view became the general opinion. Better to be short-handed during the haymaking than the harvest, when everyone would be needed in the fields. There was grumbling, but at least no brigand bands were riding out of the castle gate to raid and pillage. No armed men were marching out to punish the populace for serving their last lord.

It could be worse, they told themselves, as they took on the backbreaking extra work. *It could be much worse.*

As Burr discovered later, 'worse' did not always fall like a thunderbolt. Sometimes it crept in slowly, like winter, or a midnight wolf slipping from the forest to the fold.