

The Lost Seal



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About This Book

At a Glance

- **Reading level:** English level A2 (CEFR)
- **Age:** 8+
- **Length:** 12 chapters · ±16,500 words

The Series

Castle Brightstone is a friendly, lived-in castle on a green hill above the village of Appleton — no soldiers, no swords, just a busy household, a great Chronicle two hundred years old, and four young pages learning everything a castle can teach: Miles, Anne, Mabel and Hugh. Sir Edmund's old rule guides them all: be honest in small things, be kind before you are clever, serve first, sit last — and never be ashamed to say "I was wrong."

This Book

The king has chosen Castle Brightstone for the great midsummer gathering — the games, the feast, the whole shire climbing the green hill. But the castle's answer to the king must be sealed with its own great seal, and when Sir Edmund opens the cupboard, the little green cushion is empty. The seal is gone. With only five days before the king's rider returns, four young pages — steady Miles, clever Anne, sunny Mabel and sharp-eyed Hugh — follow a trail of small, shiny clues through kitchen, library and locked north tower. What kind of thief takes a copper thimble, a silver pin — and a heavy silver seal that should have been far too hard to carry away?

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Chapter One: The King's Letter

The sun came up over Castle Brightstone, and the castle woke.

Brightstone was not a grey stone fortress. It was a home. It stood on a green hill above the village of Appleton, with sheep on the slopes and smoke rising soft from the kitchen. Its walls were warm and golden in the morning light. Inside, the great hall stood ready for the day, its two hundred years of painted shields shining on the walls. Below the hill, the village bell rang for the start of the day.

In the castle lived Sir Edmund, the castellan. A castellan is the knight who keeps a castle for the king. Sir Edmund kept Brightstone — not with swords, for there were none here, but with hard work, good sense and a kind word. With him lived his wife, Lady Margaret, who ran the whole household and never forgot a thing — except, sometimes, her own silver pins.

And there were the four pages.

A page is a boy or girl who lives at a castle and learns its work: riding, reading, serving guests, caring for the animals, and a hundred small things more. Brightstone had four pages, and every one of them was already awake.

In the stables, Miles was awake first, as always.

Miles was thirteen, the son of the blacksmith of Appleton. He was tall and broad, with steady grey eyes and strong, quiet hands. He could mend almost anything. This morning he was mending a bucket while old Gib, the stableman, saw to the horses.

“Good work,” said Gib. Gib did not say much, and most of what he said was about horses.

Puck, the shaggy little pony, pushed his nose into Miles's pocket, looking for an apple.

“Later,” Miles laughed. “First I have an errand.”

An errand is a small job away from home — to carry a message, or fetch a thing that is needed. Miles ran errands all over the hill: down to the village,

up to the garden, across to the mill. Today Lady Margaret wanted fresh eggs from the yard before breakfast, and Miles was the one she trusted to bring them without breaking a single shell.

In the kitchen, the day began with the smell of new bread.

This was Bess's kingdom. Bess was the cook, round and strong, with a voice that carried across the whole courtyard. She was also Mabel's aunt.

Mabel was twelve, sunny and quick-handed, with dark curls that would not stay under her kerchief. She could stir a pot, roll a pastry, and feed every animal in the castle — all before most people had opened their eyes.

"Good morning, Bramble," she told the black-and-white cat on the flour shelf. "Good morning, Meg. Good morning, Moll." The two goats bleated back through the garden door. Mabel had named nearly every animal at Brightstone herself.

"Mabel!" called Bess. "The bread, not the goats!"

"Coming, Aunt Bess!" said Mabel — and promised, as she always did, to do three things at once.

High above the courtyard was the mews.

The mews is the place where a castle keeps its hawks. A hawk is a strong hunting bird, and Brightstone's hawks sat on their perches like small proud kings. The oldest and grandest was Duchess, Sir Edmund's own hawk, grey-backed and fierce-eyed.

Only two people could carry Duchess. One was Sir Edmund. The other was Hugh.

Hugh was eleven, the smallest of the four pages, a farmer's youngest son from the valley. He was quiet, and he noticed things. He could sit an hour without moving, just watching the birds. This morning he stood very still with the long glove on his arm, while Duchess turned her head and looked at him with one bright eye.

"There you are," Hugh whispered. Of all his posts at the castle, the mews was the one he loved best.

And down a cool stone passage was the library.

The library was the quietest room in Castle Brightstone, and the one Anne loved most. Its walls were lined with shelves — long wooden boards where the castle kept its maps, its ledgers and its books.

Anne was twelve, the granddaughter of Master Cole, the old chronicler. She read everything and remembered everything. Where the others ran and climbed, Anne liked to sit with a book and find out how the world worked.

On the great table in the middle of the room lay the largest book of all: the Chronicle of Brightstone. For two hundred years, every castellan had written the castle's story in it, year by year. Master Cole kept it now, his fingers always black with ink.

"Good morning, Grandfather," said Anne.

Master Cole looked up over his little round spectacles. "Is it morning already?" he said. He had quite forgotten breakfast again.

Then, out in the courtyard, a horn sounded.

It was not the village bell. It was a bright, clear call from the road below — a horn that Brightstone did not hear often.

Miles reached the courtyard first, with the eggs still safe in his hands. A rider was coming up the hill at a gallop. His horse was fine, his cloak was blue, and on his chest he wore the mark of the king.

By the time the rider stopped at the gate, half the castle had come running. Bess wiped her floury arms. Mabel came with a goat still following her. Hugh climbed down from the mews. Even Anne left her book on the table and came to the door to look.

Sir Edmund walked out to meet the rider, calm and unhurried, with Lady Margaret at his side.

"A letter," said the rider, out of breath, "from the king. For the castellan of Brightstone." He held out a folded paper, heavy with red wax.



Sir Edmund broke the wax and read. The courtyard went quiet. Then a slow smile spread across his grey beard.

“Well,” he said. “Here is news.”

He read it aloud. The king was sending word to every castle in the shire. This year the great midsummer gathering — the games, the feast, the meeting of the whole shire — would be held at one castle. And the king had chosen Brightstone.

For a moment nobody spoke. Then the courtyard burst into noise. Bess clapped her hands. Mabel gave a shout that made the goat jump. Miles grinned, and even quiet Hugh laughed out loud.

“Brightstone!” said Lady Margaret, her eyes shining. “The whole shire, here!”

But Sir Edmund lifted a hand for quiet. “There is more,” he said, and he read the last lines. “The king asks for our answer. We must write that we accept, and seal it with the great seal of Brightstone, so the king’s clerks

know the letter is truly ours. The rider will carry it back." He looked at the blue-cloaked man.

"Five days," said the rider. "I ride on now to the other castles, and I return this way in five days. The sealed answer must be ready then."

"Then ready it will be," said Sir Edmund. "Come. We have a letter to write."

There was work now for everyone, and it started at once. Lady Margaret was already making lists in her head. Bess was already planning the feast. But first came the answer to the king.

Sir Edmund went to the library, and the four pages followed, too curious to stay away. Master Cole found a clean sheet and his best quill. Sir Edmund himself would write the words. And then they would seal it.

For every castle has its own great seal — a heavy stamp that presses the castle's own mark into hot wax. The seal of Brightstone was old and fine, with a handle of silver. It lived in a small cupboard on the library wall, and inside that cupboard the seal rested always on a little cushion of green velvet — soft, deep-green cloth, worn smooth by many years.

Sir Edmund opened the cupboard door.

Everyone leaned in to see.

The little green velvet cushion lay there in the dark.

And the cushion was empty.

Chapter Two: The Empty Cushion

For a long moment, nobody in the library spoke.

Everyone stared at the little green cushion in the dark cupboard. The soft cloth still held the round shape of the seal, like a bed with no one in it. But the seal itself was gone.



Then everyone spoke at once.

“Gone!” said Bess.

“Gone where?” said Mabel.

“It can’t be gone,” said Anne. “It lives right there. It always lives right there.”

Only Sir Edmund said nothing. He closed the cupboard door, quietly, and turned to face them all. He did not shout. He did not look afraid. He looked the same as he always looked, and somehow that made the room grow calm again.

“Well,” he said. “A seal does not walk. So it is somewhere. And if it is somewhere, we can find it.”

Miles let out a slow breath. When Sir Edmund was calm, it was hard to stay in a fright.

Little Hugh was thinking hard. “Sir Edmund,” he said, “do we truly need it? Can’t we just write the letter to the king and send it?”

It was a fair question. Sir Edmund did not laugh at it.

“Master Cole,” he said. “Show them why.”

Master Cole shuffled to a low shelf and pulled out an old letter. Its paper was brown at the edges, and along the fold sat a small button of dark wax.

“Come and look,” he said, holding it under the window light.

The four pages leaned in. In the hard wax was pressed a picture: a little tower with a bird above it. The lines were sharp and clear.

“That is the mark of Brightstone,” said Master Cole. “Our mark. Nowhere else in the whole shire has that same mark. The great seal is a stamp, you see. You warm the wax, you press the seal down, and it leaves this — the tower and the bird — every time, the same.”

“So it’s like a name,” said Anne slowly. “A name you can’t copy.”

“Just so.” Master Cole smiled at her. “When a letter goes to the king, his clerks read it. A clerk is a man who writes and reads letters all day for the king. And the first thing a clerk looks for is the mark. If the mark is there, he knows the letter is truly ours. If it is not there—” the old man turned the letter over “—then it is only paper. Worth nothing. The clerk will set it aside, and the king will never read a word.”

Mabel’s eyes went wide. “So a letter with no mark is worth nothing at all?”

“To the king’s clerks, nothing,” said Sir Edmund. “We may write the finest answer in the shire. But without our mark in the wax, it is not truly from Brightstone. Now you see why the little cushion matters.”

Hugh nodded slowly. He saw.

Then Lady Margaret stepped forward, and her voice was brisk and warm.

“Right,” she said. “We do not stand about wringing our hands. We search. Carefully, from one end of this room to the other, and we do it well.”

To search is to look for a thing everywhere, in every corner, until you find it. And Lady Margaret ran a search the way she ran everything: with lists.

“Miles, the shelves — take down every book on the low ones and look behind. Anne, under the great table and along the floor. Mabel, the window seats. Hugh — you notice small things — the corners and the cracks.” She smiled. “And I shall take the cupboard itself. Slowly. A thing can hide in plain sight.”

So they searched.

Miles lifted down heavy ledgers and looked behind each one. Anne went along the cold stone floor on her hands and knees, past the legs of the old wooden chest that had stood beside the table for as long as anyone could remember. Mabel shook out the window cushions. Hugh crept along the wall, looking at every crack a small round thing might roll into.

Nobody rushed. Nobody snapped. Sir Edmund himself pulled the great table an inch from the wall and looked behind it, and if the castellan could search without a fuss, so could they.

But they found no seal.

They found a dry quill, three copper coins, and one of Lady Margaret’s silver pins, which made her laugh in spite of everything. “So that is where you went,” she said, and pinned it back at once.

They found dust and ink stains and an old bird’s feather. But the great seal of Brightstone, heavy and silver-handled, was nowhere in the room.

At last Lady Margaret stood up and brushed off her gown. “Enough for now,” she said. “Supper first. We think better when we are fed, and Bess’s pie will not wait for anybody.”

The great hall was warm with candlelight, and the long table was laid. The whole household came in from their work — Gib from the stables, Bess from her kitchen, the pages, and Sir Edmund and Lady Margaret at the head.

They stood behind the benches while Sir Edmund said grace, the way he did every evening. He did not make it long.

“For this food, and this house, and one another, we give thanks,” he said. “And help us to keep faith, and to do the day’s work well. Amen.”

“Amen,” said the household, and sat.

It was a small thing, that quiet moment before the meal. But it settled everyone. The pie was hot, the bread was fresh, and the trouble of the empty cushion felt a little smaller with a good supper in front of them.

Anne, though, could not stop thinking. She was the sort who liked to know how a thing had happened, step by step.

“Grandfather,” she said across the table, “when did we last use the seal? If we know when it was last here, we know how long it has been gone.”

Master Cole set down his spoon. “A good question. Let me think.” He looked up at the shields on the wall, the way he did when he searched his memory for a fact. “We have not sealed a letter in weeks. But I had it out only lately, for the Chronicle.”

Sir Edmund looked up. “For the Chronicle?”

“Yes.” Master Cole’s face brightened, glad to remember. “I was writing a page all about the castle’s seals — the old ones and the great seal too. A record, you understand, so that in a hundred years someone will know what our mark looked like.” He mimed pressing down with his hand. “I borrowed the great seal from the cupboard, warmed a little wax, and pressed our mark right onto the page, next to the ink. So the Chronicle would hold a true print of it forever.”

“When was this?” asked Anne. She had her small notebook out now, and her quill ready.

“Monday,” said Master Cole. “Monday morning. I remember, for the wax was slow to melt.”

“Monday,” Anne wrote it down. “So on Monday, the seal was here, in your hands. And to borrow a thing,” she added, half to herself, “means you must give it back.”

“Of course,” said Master Cole. “You borrow, and then you return. I would never leave the great seal lying about.” He picked up his spoon again. “I finished the page, I let the wax set, and then I put the seal back on its cushion, snug in the cupboard, exactly where it—”

He stopped.

His spoon hung in the air. The bright, glad look drained out of his old face, and left it pale.

“I put it back,” he said. But his voice had gone small and unsure. He looked at Anne, and then at Sir Edmund, and his ink-stained hand began, very slightly, to shake.

“I returned it,” said Master Cole. “I returned it... didn’t I?”

Chapter Three: Master Cole's Notes

Master Cole did not sleep well.

Anne knew it the moment she came into the library the next morning. Her grandfather was already at the great table, his head in his ink-stained hands. No candle was lit. The Chronicle lay closed. He only sat.

"Grandfather?" she said.

He lifted his head. His eyes were tired and red. "I have thought about it all night, child," he said. "Round and round. Perhaps I never put the seal back at all. Perhaps I set it down somewhere and forgot it. Old men forget." He shook his head. "Perhaps I lost the king's own seal, and cannot even remember doing it."

Anne did not like to hear him talk that way. She loved her grandfather. And she knew one thing about him that all his worry had made him forget.

"Grandfather," she said, "you forget your dinner. You forget your spectacles — they are up in your hair this very minute." He touched his white hair, and there they were. "But you never, ever forget to write a thing down."

He blinked at her.

"Where is your notebook?" said Anne.

A notebook is a small book you carry and write in yourself, to help you remember. Master Cole kept one always. Every time he took anything out of the library cupboard, he wrote it down — what he took, and the day, and the day he put it back again. He had taught Anne to keep one too. *A memory can play tricks on you*, he always said. *A written line cannot*.

Now his tired face changed. "The notebook," he said softly. "Of course. The notebook."

Anne was already up on the stool, reaching along the high shelf. She brought down a small worn book with a soft leather cover and set it on the table between them. She began to turn the pages.

To prove a thing means to show, past all doubt, that it is true. And Anne meant to prove her grandfather right.

"Monday," she read. "Borrowed the great seal to press our mark into the Chronicle, for the page on seals." She turned the leaf. "And here — Tuesday."

They both leaned close.

The entry was in Master Cole's small neat hand. An entry is one line written down in a book, one note among many. This one said: *Tuesday morning. Carried the great seal back to its cushion in the cupboard. Whole and clean. Pressed one print, to be sure.*

And beside the words, stuck fast to the page, was a little round button of dark wax. Pressed into it, sharp and clear, was a small tower with a bird above it.

"There," said Anne. "You did put it back, Grandfather. You even pressed a print to prove the seal was safe and whole — and stuck it right here, the way you always do. On Tuesday morning, the great seal was in your hand, and it went home to its cushion. Your own notebook says so."

Master Cole stared at the little wax mark. Then he let out a long breath, and some of the years seemed to lift off his shoulders.

"So it did," he said quietly. "So it did."



The library door opened, and Sir Edmund came in. He had heard the last of it from the doorway.

“Well found, Anne,” he said. “Master Cole, you gave yourself a bad night for nothing.”

“I truly thought I had lost it,” said the old man. “I said as much at supper. I could not be sure.”

“And you said so plainly, even against yourself. That is no small thing.” Sir Edmund rested a hand on his shoulder. “Be honest in small things, and the large ones look after themselves. You told us what you feared was true — and then this good girl showed us what really happened.”

Master Cole gave a small dry smile. “Ah,” he said. “What happened, and what people say happened. They are not always the same, are they? Even when the person doing the saying is myself.” He tapped the notebook. “This is what happened. The rest was only an old man’s fright in the dark.”

Anne wrote nothing down for a moment. She was thinking.

"But Sir Edmund," she said slowly, "this makes it stranger, not simpler." She put her finger on the Tuesday entry. "The seal was here, on its cushion, on Tuesday morning. We all know that now. And yesterday — Thursday — you opened the cupboard, and it was gone." She looked up. "So it left in between. Somewhere between Tuesday and Thursday. Two days."

The room went quiet.

"Two days," said Sir Edmund. "And a shut cupboard in a quiet library. Yes. That is stranger."

Anne took out her own small notebook and her quill. "I am going to make a list," she said. "The seal is missing. When a thing is missing, it is not where it should be, and nobody knows where it has gone." She wrote *SEAL* at the top of a fresh page. "If I write down everything — what, and where, and when — perhaps I will see..." She frowned, searching for the word. "...a pattern. When things happen the same way, over and over, that is a pattern. A shape you can spot, if you look."

She got no further, for the door flew open with a bang.

Bess stood there, floury to the elbows, her wooden spoon still in her hand. Her round face was pink, and not from the kitchen fire.

"Sir Edmund," she said. "I am sorry to burst in. But I have looked high and I have looked low, and I mean to know which of my kitchen boys has been at my windowsill."

A windowsill is the flat little shelf at the foot of a window, where you set a pot of herbs, or a cooling pie.

"What is missing, Bess?" asked Sir Edmund.

"My thimble." Bess held up her bare finger, as if they could see the loss on it. A thimble is a little metal cap you wear on your fingertip when you sew, so the needle does not prick you. "My copper thimble. My mother's thimble, that she sewed with all her life, and her mother before her. Good copper, worn smooth and shining. It has sat on that windowsill above the wash-bench for thirty years. And this morning it is gone."

Anne's quill stopped in the air.

Slowly, she bent over her list, and under *SEAL* she wrote a second line: *Copper thimble. Kitchen windowsill.*

Small. Shining. By a window.

And then a quiet voice spoke from the doorway behind Bess. Lady Margaret had come up the stairs, and she was not smiling now.

"A copper thimble," she said, half to herself. "By an open window." She stepped into the library, and her clever eyes went from Bess's bare finger to Anne's list. "Anne. Write mine down too, while your quill is out."

Anne looked up. "Yours, Lady Margaret?"

"The little pin we turned up yesterday, here in the library — that was nothing. I am always losing those, and they always come back." Lady Margaret's voice was low and steady. "But this morning I went to my sewing chair by the window, and a pin is gone from my own pincushion. A good silver one. It was there two days ago. It is not there now." She looked slowly round at them all. "And that one," she said, "did not walk off by itself either."

Chapter Four: Small Shiny Things

The library was full now.

Bess stood by the door with her floury arms crossed. Lady Margaret waited by the window. Master Cole sat at the great table with his notebook open. And Sir Edmund stood with his hands behind his back, listening — as he always did.

Anne bent over her own small notebook.

“If we are to find a pattern,” she said, “we must set it out plain.” She drew two lines down the page, top to bottom, and made three tall columns. “What. Where. And when.”

She wrote as she spoke, her quill scratching softly.

Great seal — library cupboard — gone by Thursday. Copper thimble — kitchen windowsill — gone this morning. Silver pin — sewing chair by the window — gone two days back.

The door opened again. Mabel came in with a smear of cream on her cheek and a bucket still in her hand. Word had run round the castle like the wind, and she had heard it in the dairy.

“Is it true?” she said. “Bess’s thimble as well?” She looked at the list — and her mouth fell open. Then her whole sunny face went still, which was not like Mabel at all.

“What is it?” asked Anne.

“My bead,” said Mabel, in a small voice. She set the bucket down. “My little blue glass bead. You know the one. Blue as a summer sky, with a white heart in the middle. My mother gave it to me before I came to the castle. I kept it on the dairy ledge, up in the window, where the morning light shines right through it.” She swallowed. “It went missing three days ago. But I thought I had knocked it off myself. I hunted through the straw and never found it. I felt so silly that I said nothing.”

“Well,” said Bess gently, “you have said something now.”

Anne wrote a fourth line.

Blue glass bead — dairy window — gone three days back.

She looked at the four lines. So did everyone.

“There,” said Lady Margaret softly. “Do you see?”

Anne saw. Small. Shiny. By a window.

The thimble, the pin, the bead — every one a little thing that caught the light. *Shiny* was the word: bright the way a clean coin is bright, or a wet pebble, or a drop of water on a leaf. And every shiny thing had been sitting close to an open window.

“But not the seal,” said Anne slowly.

They all looked at her.

“The seal is on the list. It is the first thing on the list.” She tapped it with her quill. “But it does not fit the pattern.”

“How not?” asked Sir Edmund. He asked it the way he always asked things — as if he truly wanted to hear what she thought.

Anne frowned at her own writing. “The thimble is light,” she said. “The pin is light. The bead is light. You could hold all three in one hand and hardly feel them. But the seal —”

“The seal is heavy,” said Miles.

He had come in quietly behind Mabel and now stood filling the doorway. Of all of them, Miles knew weights best; he lifted heavy things all day.

“I have held it,” he went on. “It is silver and iron together, with a thick handle. It is heavier than it looks. You would not want it dropped on your foot. A thimble you could carry off in one finger — the seal needs a good grip and a strong arm.”

“And it did not live by a window,” Anne added. “It lived deep in the library, shut in its cupboard, in the dark — not out in the light like the others.” She shook her head. “Three small light things by open windows. And then one heavy thing, locked in a cupboard. It is the odd one out.”

The room went quiet. It was a puzzle inside a puzzle, and nobody had the answer.

All this while, Hugh had said nothing.

Hugh often said nothing. He was over at the great window, where the warm light came in, and he was not so much listening as looking. Hugh always looked. Where others saw a plain stone sill, Hugh saw the whole little world upon it — the dust, the dead fly, the ring left by every pot that had ever stood there.

“Sir Edmund,” he said. His quiet voice turned every head. “Come and see.”

They came.

On the wide stone sill lay a small grey feather.

A feather — one of the soft light things that cover a bird and help it fly. This one was no longer than Anne’s thumb, grey as ash, and curled a little at the tip.

“A bird’s feather,” said Bess. “Birds sit on sills. That is no great wonder.”

“No,” Hugh agreed. “But look here too.” He pointed to the edge of the table, close by the window. “You have to catch the light.”

They bent down. And there, in the old dark wood of the table’s edge, was a thin pale line — a scratch, bright against the dark, as if something small and hard had been dragged across it. A scratch is the mark you get when something sharp scrapes over a surface: a nail across paint, a claw across wood.

“That was not there yesterday,” said Master Cole. He knew his own table the way Anne knew the Chronicle. “That wood has been polished for forty years. I would have marked a scratch. It is new.”

Sir Edmund looked from the feather, to the fresh scratch, to the list with its four lines. For a long moment he said nothing at all.

“A feather on the sill,” he said at last. “A new scratch on the table. Three shiny things gone from three open windows — and one heavy seal that fits none of it.” He straightened. “These are clues. A clue is a small thing that

points to a bigger one, the way a footprint points to a foot. We have four of them now.” He almost smiled. “What we do not have yet is the hand — or the paw, or the claw — that draws them all together.”

“So what do we do?” asked Mabel.

“We do the thing the castle does best,” said Lady Margaret. “We watch, and we wait, and we tell each other the truth as we find it — no whispering in corners.” She looked round at the four pages. “You have done well to bring every scrap of it here, all together. A secret kept back is a clue lost.”

“Whatever is taking these things comes to open windows,” said Sir Edmund, “in daylight, while the castle is busy and no one is watching. So tomorrow, someone will be watching.” He looked at each of them in turn. “We will set a proper watch. And we will see what comes.”

The day wore on after that, warm and long. Anne kept her list folded in her pocket and looked at it a dozen times. But a list, she was learning, was not the same as an answer. You could write down every true thing you knew and still not know the one thing you most wanted to know.

Dusk came slow and gold over the hill.

Mabel went out to bring in Meg and Moll, as she did every evening, her lead-rope over one shoulder and a crust of bread for each greedy goat. The courtyard lay quiet. The evening birds had finished their turns above the well.

High over her head stood the north tower — the old one, half shut up, its top windows dark and empty. Mabel had never much liked the north tower at dusk. It leaned over the yard like something half asleep.

She was reaching for Meg’s collar when it happened.

A shadow moved.

Out of one black window near the top of the tower, something dropped — quick, silent, a dark shape against the last gold of the sky. It did not fall like a stone. It opened, and caught the air, and swooped — down, and along, and out over the wall. A swoop is the way a bird drops fast through the air and

then sweeps up again, all in one smooth curve. It was gone before Mabel could take a breath.



She stood very still, one hand warm on Meg's back.

"Did you see that?" she whispered. But only the goats were there to hear.

She looked up at the dark tower, and at the empty window where the shadow had come from, and a little shiver ran through her — half fright, half wonder.

Something lived up there. Something that came and went by the high windows. Something quick and dark and quiet.

And it had just flown out over the castle wall — the way a thing flies when it has somewhere to be.

Chapter Five: The Bird Watch

Mabel told them the very next morning. She did not wait until noon, and she did not keep the strange thing to herself — even though the dark tower at dusk had given her a cold little shiver the night before.

“I nearly called out last night,” she said, “but you were all in bed. So I am telling you now, first thing.” She stood in the middle of the warm kitchen with the whole household listening. “At dusk, when I went to fetch Meg and Moll, something dropped out of the top of the north tower. Out of a black window near the top. It opened its wings and swooped over the wall and was gone. Quick as that.”

“You did right to say so at once,” said Lady Margaret. “A thing seen and kept quiet helps no one.”

Sir Edmund set down his bread. “Yesterday we found a feather on the library sill,” he said, “and a fresh scratch on the table. And now Mabel has seen something fly out of the north tower.” He looked round at them all. “So today we watch. And we will watch the open windows — and the old tower too.”

Anne felt her stomach tighten. She liked a puzzle on paper far better than a puzzle out of doors. But she said nothing, and went to fetch her notebook.

Lady Margaret clapped her hands once, the way she did when a plan was about to happen.

“Now then. This is a household,” she said, “not a battlefield. We do not lay traps, and we do not go creeping about corners. We will keep a proper watch. A watch is when you pick your spot, fix your eyes on it, and wait — and do not wander off just because your feet have grown bored.” She smiled. “Think of it as a great spring cleaning. Everyone has a corner. Everyone stays at their corner. And nobody leaves it until the work is done.”

She set them in pairs.

“Hugh, you have the sharpest eyes among us, so you take the best corner — under the old oak by the well, where you can see the whole courtyard and the foot of the tower. Anne, sit with him and write down whatever he sees.” Hugh’s ears went pink with pleasure. “Miles, Mabel, take the far side, where

you can watch the kitchen window and the dairy window at once. Master Cole keeps the library window from inside. And I," she finished, "shall be everywhere, as I always am."

"And I," said Bess, "shall send out tarts. You cannot watch on an empty stomach."

That morning Bess had set Miles and Mabel to polish the good spoons for the midsummer guests. To polish a thing is to rub it, and rub it, until it shines back at you like a small bright mirror. They had rinsed the spoons at the well and laid them in a neat row on the wash-bench to dry. Now the whole row lay there in the sun, shining like a line of little moons.

Then the watch began.

The afternoon was long, and warm, and very slow.

The castle went on with its Saturday work all around them — Gib mucking out the stable, a maid beating a rug, Bess's voice rolling out of the kitchen. But the four pages sat still and watched, and waited, and watched.

Waiting, Anne soon learned, was harder than it looked. Her legs itched. A fly walked across her knee. She wrote *nothing yet* in her notebook, and then, a while later, *still nothing yet*, which did not seem worth the ink.

Hugh, though, could sit still longer than anyone. In the mews he would watch Duchess the hawk for a whole hour without so much as scratching his nose. That was his gift. Patience is the art of waiting quietly, without giving up, until the thing you are waiting for finally comes. Miles fidgeted. Mabel hummed. But Hugh sat under the oak like part of the tree, his eyes going slowly round the courtyard, again and again.

A brown sparrow flitted down onto the kitchen sill.

"There!" whispered Mabel — but it was only a sparrow, small and dull, and it pecked at a crumb and flew off, and everyone breathed again.

A while later Bramble, the kitchen cat, came padding along the wash-bench, right past the shining spoons. Anne grabbed Hugh's arm. But Bramble only

sniffed at a spoon, found it dull to a cat, and curled up in a warm patch to sleep.

Bess brought out the tarts, still warm, and the watching felt a little less long. The sun moved. The shadows of the oak crept across the yard. Sir Edmund went off to see about the hay, and Lady Margaret was called away to the store-room, and still nothing came.

“Perhaps it will not come at all today,” Mabel whispered.

“Perhaps,” said Hugh. But he did not take his eyes off the courtyard.

Then, late in the afternoon, when even Hugh’s legs had gone stiff and the shadows had grown long across the stones, something came over the wall.

Not a sparrow this time.

It was a bird the size of a small crow, black all over — but not all black. Over the back of its head lay a soft grey hood, like a little cap pulled down, and when it turned, two pale eyes caught the light: light silver-grey, like small round coins.

“A jackdaw,” breathed Hugh.

A jackdaw is a bird of the crow kind, but smaller and neater, black with that grey hood and those strange pale eyes. Hugh had seen them wheeling round the north tower a hundred times and never thought a thing of it.

The jackdaw landed on the rim of the well. It hopped along the stone, bold as you please. It cocked its head at the row of spoons on the wash-bench — first with one silver eye, then the other.

Anne did not breathe. Miles did not move.

Then, quick and neat, the jackdaw took the brightest spoon in its beak. A beak is the hard, pointed mouth of a bird; this one closed round the spoon’s handle and held it fast. With two strong beats of its wings the bird was up off the bench and into the air.



It did not fly out over the wall.

It flew straight and sure across the courtyard — up, and up — to a black window near the very top of the north tower. And in.

For a moment the four of them just sat there, staring.

“That’s it,” said Hugh softly. “That is where everything has gone.”

Then they were all on their feet at once.

They ran — all four of them, across the yard, Anne’s notebook left forgotten in the grass. The old north tower had one door at its foot, low and heavy and grey with age, half hidden by a tangle of ivy.

Miles reached it first. He set his hand to it and pushed. Then he pushed harder, with his whole shoulder, the way he shifted stuck things at his father’s forge.

The door did not move.

Anne bent down and found the keyhole — a big old iron keyhole, dark with rust.

“It’s locked,” said Miles, stepping back. “Locked fast.”

The one door, to the one tower, to the one high room where the thief lived — and it would not open a crack.

Mabel looked up at the black window far above, where, she thought, a pale silver eye might just be looking back down at them.

“Then we need the key,” she said.

“Yes,” said Anne slowly. She looked round at the others, and her voice went quiet. “And there is only one key to the north tower in all the castle.”

“Only Sir Edmund keeps it,” said Hugh.

And Sir Edmund had gone off across the hill to see about the hay.

Chapter Six: The North Tower

The four of them sat down in the grass by the well to wait.

There was nothing else to do. The tower door was locked, and the only key in the whole castle hung on Sir Edmund's belt, and Sir Edmund was somewhere across the hill, seeing about the hay.

Miles looked at the door for a long moment. At his father's forge he had shifted rusted gates and swollen barn doors, leaning his whole weight against them until they gave way. He could almost feel how this one would go.

But it was not his door. It was not his key. Breaking into Sir Edmund's tower never once crossed his mind — nor anyone else's. That was simply not how things were done at Brightstone. You did not creep, and you did not force. You asked.

So they waited.

"He'll be hungry when he comes," said Mabel, who was hungry herself. "He always is, after the hay."

The sun dropped lower. The shadow of the tower grew long across the yard. And at last, when the light had turned to gold, they heard hooves on the track, and Sir Edmund came riding in over the hill on his grey cob, with straw on his sleeves and the evening behind him.

They were up and running before he was down from the saddle.

They all spoke at once, so that he could make nothing of it — a jackdaw, and a spoon, and the black window, and the locked door, all in a heap.

Sir Edmund held up one hand. "Slowly," he said. "One at a time. Hugh — you have the quietest voice. Tell me."

So Hugh told him, plainly and in order: the long watch, the jackdaw on the well, the bright spoon in its beak, the flight straight up to the black window near the top of the north tower.

"And the door is locked," Hugh finished, "and you have the key. So we waited for you."

Sir Edmund looked down at him for a moment. Something in his face was pleased, though he did not quite smile. "You waited," he said. "You did not go climbing in at windows, or take a bar to my old door."

"It's your tower," said Miles simply.

"So it is." Now Sir Edmund did smile. "Be honest in small things, and the big things look after themselves. Well. Let us go and meet this thief of yours."

He took a great ring of keys from his belt and picked out one — longer and darker than the rest.

The key turned with a groan, and the low door swung in.

Inside it was dim and cool and smelled of old stone. A staircase went up: a stone staircase that wound round and round on itself, like the inside of a snail's shell, up into the dark. Sir Edmund lit a stub of candle at the lantern by the door and went first.

Dust lay thick on every step. Dust is the soft grey powder that settles on things nobody touches for a long time. Here it lay so deep that their feet left dark prints, the way prints are left in snow.

"Mind the fourth step of each turn," said Sir Edmund over his shoulder. "It is worn hollow. I know, because I fell on it once, when I was no bigger than Hugh."

Anne blinked. "You climbed this tower? When you were a page?"

"I was a page at Brightstone before I was anything else," he said, climbing. "Long ago. My old master used to send me up here on errands I did not always understand — to count the jackdaws, once, if you will believe it." He chuckled. "I lost count at forty and had to start again. These birds have kept this tower far longer than any of us."

Round and round they went, the candle throwing their shadows huge and wobbling on the curved wall.

At the top, the stair opened into a small round room. It was full of the evening light, for the window they had seen black from below was not black at all now, but a square of gold, open to the sky. Feathers and old leaves lay

across the floor. And there, in a niche in the thick wall — a hollow where a stone had fallen out long ago — sat the nest.

A nest is the home a bird builds for itself, out of whatever it can find. This one was a great untidy bowl of twigs. A twig is a small dry stick, thinner than your finger; the jackdaw had carried up hundreds of them, one at a time, and woven them into a nest as wide as a cartwheel.

But it was not the twigs that made them all gasp.

It was what lay woven in among them.

Something caught the last of the light and threw it back. Then something else. The whole nest glittered.

“Oh,” breathed Mabel. “Oh, look.”



There, tucked in among the twigs like a little heap of treasure, lay every lost and shining thing in the castle. Bess’s copper thimble. Lady Margaret’s silver pin. A blue glass bead with a small white heart — Mabel’s own. The bright spoon, still bright, from that very afternoon. A button, a bit of chain, a curl of silver thread.

Hugh reached in very gently and lifted the spoon. "It's all here," he said. "Everything that went missing."

"Not everything," said Anne quietly.

They all looked.

The seal was not there.

They searched the whole nest — lifted every twig, felt right down to the bottom, turned over the leaves on the floor. A thimble, a pin, a bead, a spoon, a button, this bit and that bit. Shiny things, every one, and small. But no great silver seal of Brightstone, with its little tower and its bird above.

Mabel sat back on her heels. She had been so sure. They all had.

"So he took everything but the one thing we wanted," she said. Then, in spite of it all, she gave a small laugh and looked up at the empty gold window. "You bold, thieving thing. You... you Jack."

"Jack?" said Hugh.

"Well, he needs a name," said Mabel, "and he looks like a Jack to me. Bold as a Jack." And Jack he was, from that evening on.

But naming the thief did not bring back the seal, and for a moment nobody knew what to say. They had climbed the whole tower for nothing.

Then Hugh spoke. He was still holding the spoon, turning it over, looking at it the way he looked at Duchess on her perch — quietly, patiently, until it gave up its secret.

"Feel how light it is," he said, and put the spoon in Mabel's hand. "A spoon. A thimble. A pin, a bead, a button. Small things. Light things." He looked round at them. "Jack carried every one of these up here in his beak. But think of the seal. Think of the weight of it."

Miles nodded slowly. He knew the weight of that seal — silver and iron together, it took a good grip, heavy as a hammer-head. "A bird could never carry that up here," he said. "Not all this way. Not up all these stairs."

“No,” said Hugh. “He couldn’t.” His eyes had gone bright. “So the seal was never here at all. It never came up the tower — because Jack could not lift it.”

Anne felt the puzzle turn over in her mind, the way a key turns in a lock. “But the feather,” she said. “The feather on the library sill. The scratch on the table.”

“Yes,” said Hugh. “I think he tried. I think Jack landed on that table and saw the seal shining and wanted it more than anything.” He could see it, plainly, as if he were the bird himself. “He took hold of it. He pulled. And it was too heavy for him — so he let go. He dropped it.”

“He dropped it,” said Anne slowly.

“He dropped it,” said Hugh. “Off the table. Onto the floor.”

For a moment they all looked at one another in the golden room, with the nest glittering beside them and the spoon lying light as a leaf in Mabel’s hand.

Then Anne said the thing that turned the whole evening cold.

“But we searched the library floor. All of us. On our hands and knees, that first day — Lady Margaret had us feel over every inch of it.” She looked from face to face. “If Jack dropped the seal onto the floor... then why, in all our searching, did not one of us find it there?”

Nobody had an answer.

Far below, down all those winding stairs and across the darkening yard, the library windows waited — and somewhere under that table, something they had all walked straight past was waiting too.

Chapter Seven: Where Things Fall

It was Sunday, and the castle moved slowly. The bell had rung for the little chapel early, and after the morning prayers everyone went quietly about the smallest of tasks. The four pages had leave from the rest, and they spent it where all the trouble had begun — in the library.

They stood around the great table. Above them the window was open to the warm morning. Somewhere out beyond the wall, a jackdaw was calling.

Nobody had slept easily on last night's question. If Jack had dropped the seal onto the library floor, why had none of them found it there?

Miles had turned it over a hundred times. "We looked everywhere," he said. "Under the shelves. Along the wall. On our hands and knees, that first day."

"Then we looked wrong," said Mabel.

"Or the seal was never on the floor at all," said Hugh, frowning.

They had been round and round it since breakfast, and they were no closer than before.

Anne said nothing. She sat at the end of the table with her small notebook open in front of her, the way she always sat — half in the room, half inside her own quiet head. She had filled a whole page with careful words. *What happened. What people say happened. Where. When.* But words on a page were not bringing the seal back.

She looked at the notebook for a long moment. Then, slowly, she closed it.

"We keep asking what happened," she said. "We could ask all day."

The others turned to look at her.

"So let's stop asking," said Anne. "Let's *show* it."

"Show it how?" said Miles.

Anne stood up. It was not a thing she often did — stand up first, and speak first, and set everyone moving. But her heart was beating quickly, and for once she did not want to sit still and read about it in her own head.

"We do the whole thing over again," she said. "We put something on the table — something heavy, something that shines. We open the window wide, and we keep very still, and we wait for Jack. He'll come. He can't help himself. And when he tries to carry it off —" she spread her hands — "we watch. We watch exactly where it goes."

For a moment nobody spoke.

Then Hugh's eyes went bright, brighter than they had been in days. Watching was the thing he loved best in the world, and here was watching with a purpose. "We catch him in the act," he breathed.

"But we need the right thing," said Miles, practical as ever. "As heavy as the seal. And bright, to catch his eye."

Anne looked round the library, and her gaze stopped on the great inkstand in the middle of the table. It had a lid — the little cover that kept the ink from drying up — and the lid was made of brass. Brass is a hard yellow metal, and when it is polished it shines almost like gold. This one sat as heavy in the hand as the seal itself.

"That," she said.

Miles lifted the brass lid off the inkstand and weighed it in his broad palm. "Heavy enough," he said. "No bird's flying off with this."

"That's the whole idea," said Anne.

So they set the brass lid on the very edge of the table, right beside the open window, in the same place where the seal had once sat shining. Then they drew back — behind the shelves, into the corner, down low — and they kept still.

The library went quiet. Dust turned slowly in the beam of light from the window. Outside, a cart rolled across the yard and was gone. A long minute passed, and then another, and Mabel had just begun to fidget when a shadow crossed the window.

Light as a falling leaf, the jackdaw dropped onto the sill.

There he was. Black, with his grey hood and his pale silver eyes. Jack. He put his head on one side and looked at the brass lid, and the brass lid gleamed softly back at him.

“Steady,” whispered Hugh. “Nobody move.”

Jack hopped up onto the table. He walked once around the lid, the way a buyer walks round a pony, weighing it with his eye. Then he took the edge of it in his beak and pulled.

The lid did not move.

He set his feet, spread his wings a little, and pulled again — tugging with his whole small weight. He wanted it; anybody could see that he wanted it more than anything in the world.



But the brass lid was far too heavy for him. Just as the seal had been.

Jack gave one last cross, angry tug — and let go. The lid tipped. It slid to the very edge of the table, hung there a heartbeat — and fell.

It hit the floor with a bright *clang*, and then it did the thing that none of them had thought of.

It rolled.

The round brass lid did not lie where it landed. It ran along on its edge like a dropped coin, round and round, across the floorboards. Away from the table it went, wobbling and ringing, following the small slope of the old worn floor.

Four pairs of eyes followed it.

It rolled past the leg of the table. It rolled past the end of the shelf. And it rolled straight up against the side of the old wooden chest that stood in the corner beside the table — the chest that had always stood there, that nobody ever looked at twice — and there, with one last little ring, it lay still.

The chest's lid was not shut. It was open. Not wide — just a gap, a hand's width of dark between the lid and the box.

For a moment nobody breathed.

Up on the table, Jack gave a cross little croak, opened his wings, and was gone out of the window. Nobody watched him go. Nobody cared about Jack now.

Anne walked slowly to where the brass lid lay against the foot of the chest and crouched down beside it. Then she looked back at the table edge, and traced the whole path with her finger through the air — from the place where the lid had sat, down to the floor, across the boards, to the foot of the chest.

"That's where it went," she said softly. "Don't you see? Not straight down onto the floor to lie there. It fell off that corner, and it ran across the floor, and it went —" she pointed to the dark gap in the lid — "in."

"But the seal is heavier," said Miles. "Would it roll like that?"

"Maybe it rolled. Maybe it only slid." Anne shook her head slowly. "It doesn't matter which. A heavy thing, knocked off that corner of the table, comes down *here*. And the chest was standing open." She looked up at them all,

and something in her face was very still. “We crawled right past this chest, that first day. All of us. I felt along the floor beside it with my own hand, and I never once thought to look inside.”

Miles crossed the room in three steps and crouched by the chest. He set both his strong hands under the edge of the heavy lid.

“Ready?” he said.

Nobody answered. Nobody breathed.

He lifted.

The lid was stiff, and it came up slowly, with a long dry groan, throwing off a cloud of dust — forty years of soft grey dust, rising in the light from the window. Mabel coughed. Hugh leaned in. And Anne, who would always rather read about a thing than reach for it, was the first to look right down inside.

Beneath the dust, the chest was not empty.

At first she thought it was only paper. The chest was half full of paper — old, yellow, curling at the corners, sheet upon sheet of it, covered close in handwriting. Not the neat printed letters of a book. Handwriting: the long, looping marks a pen makes when a real hand moves across a page. And it was nobody’s hand that Anne knew — and Anne knew every hand in the whole Chronicle.

“What *is* all this?” whispered Mabel.

But Anne did not answer, because she had seen something else.

Down at the very bottom of the chest, beneath all those quiet yellow papers, in the last of the dust — something gleamed. A small, hard shine of silver, waiting there in the dark. Waiting exactly where a heavy thing would come to rest, if it fell from a table, and rolled across a floor, and slipped in through the gap of an open lid.

Anne reached in.

Chapter Eight: The Chest of Forty Years



Anne's fingers closed around something cold and hard.

She lifted it up out of the dust and the yellow papers, into the light, and held it in both hands.

It was the seal.

The great seal of Brightstone. Heavy, silver-handled, real. A little grey with dust, but whole. She could hardly breathe.

"It's here," she said. Her voice came out small. "It's really here."

Then, louder, so that it filled the whole quiet library: "It's *here!*"

Miles gave a shout. Mabel jumped up and down. Hugh laughed out loud — Hugh, who was always the quiet one.

Anne turned the seal over in her hands. The silver face of it, the part that pressed the mark into the wax, was thick with dust. She lifted it close and blew. A soft grey cloud rose and drifted away in the beam of light from the window.

And there it was. The mark. The little tower, with the small bird above it, cut deep and clean into the silver. Brightstone's mark, worn smooth by two hundred years of castellans — and not one line of it hurt.

"The tower," said Mabel, leaning in close. "And the bird. It's all still there."

"Of course it is," said Miles, grinning. "It's silver and iron. It would take more than forty years in a chest to spoil that."

They could not keep such a thing to themselves for even a minute.

Miles was already at the door. "I'll fetch Master Cole!" he called, and was gone down the passage. Hugh ran the other way, out into the courtyard, shouting the news across the yard so that it carried up to the kitchen windows and over to the garden and the mews.

And then the whole castle seemed to arrive at once.

Bess came first, her apron white with flour, her copper thimble bright on her finger — for she had it back now, safe out of Jack's nest since yesterday evening, and she would not take it off again. "Found?" she cried. "The seal? Show me, quick!" And when Anne held it up, Bess pressed both floury hands to her cheeks. "Oh, thank goodness. Thank goodness."

Lady Margaret came behind her, quick and calm as always, but her eyes were shining. She took the seal from Anne and turned it over and looked at the mark for a long moment.

"Four days we looked," she said softly. "And here it was, three steps from the table, the whole time." She looked round at the four of them, and her smile was warm. "Well done. All four of you. Sir Edmund must hear of this within the hour."

Master Cole came last of all, hurrying as fast as his old legs would carry him, his spectacles pushed up into his white hair. When he saw the seal safe in Lady Margaret's hands, the old man had to sit down on the nearest stool. For a moment he said nothing. Then he took off his spectacles and wiped his eyes, and everyone kindly pretended not to see.

"I thought I had lost it," he said at last. "And for four long days it has been lost — only never the way I feared." He shook his head slowly. "And it was never lost at all. Only fallen."

There was joy in the library then — real joy, the kind that makes people laugh and talk all at once. Bess said there would be tarts, a whole tray of them, and nobody was to argue. Mabel spun Hugh round by both hands until he was dizzy. For a little while everyone forgot the dust and the chest, and thought only that the thing was found, and midsummer was safe, and all was well.

Everyone but Anne.

Anne had gone very quiet.

While the others talked, she had crouched down again beside the open chest. The seal was found; the trouble was over. But she could not take her eyes from the papers.

She lifted one sheet out, carefully, by the corner. The paper was old and soft and yellow, and it would not lie flat. It was covered close with handwriting — line after line of it, a long, sloping, careful hand.

Anne read the Chronicle nearly every day of her life. She knew her grandfather's writing, small and neat. She knew the round hand of the chronicler before him, and the spidery one before that. She knew every hand that had ever written in the great book.

She did not know this one.

And that was not the strangest thing. The strangest thing was the pages themselves. They were Chronicle pages — she could see that at once, from the way the lines were set out, from the year written at the top, from the little marks in the margin. But they were unfinished. The writing ran halfway down a page and simply stopped, in the middle of a word, as if the hand that held the pen had been called away and had never come back.

She turned the sheet over, looking for a name. At the very bottom, small and faded, was a single letter — a signature, the way a man signs his work when it is done.

Just one letter. *R*.

"Grandfather," said Anne slowly. "Come and look at this."

Something in her voice made the room go still.

Master Cole rose from his stool and came over, and Anne put the yellow sheet into his hands. He held it up to the light. For a long moment he did not speak at all. His eyes moved along the sloping lines, and his face changed as he read — first puzzled, then very quiet, then something Anne could not name.

"Whose hand is it?" she asked. "It isn't yours. It isn't anyone's in the book."

"No," said Master Cole. His voice had gone soft. "It is older than mine." He touched the faded letters with one ink-stained finger, gently, as if they might break. "I was a boy when I first saw this hand. I learned my own letters copying it, line by line." He looked down at that single *R*, and fell silent.

"Then you know who wrote it," said Anne. "You know whose it is."

The old man laid the sheet down as carefully as if it were the seal itself.

"I know," he said. "But it is not mine to tell." He turned toward the door, and the courtyard beyond it. "There is only one man in this castle who should hold these pages first." He looked at Miles. "Somebody fetch Sir Edmund."

They found him in the great hall, and he came without a word of complaint, though it was Sunday and his hour of rest. The four pages came behind him, and Bess and Lady Margaret and Master Cole, until the quiet library was full of people once more. But this time no one was laughing.

Anne held out the pages.

Sir Edmund took them. He did not read them at once. He only looked at the top sheet — at the sloping hand, and the year written at the top, and the place where the writing stopped in the middle of a word. And then he saw the small faded letter at the foot of the page.

R.

His face did not change much. But something behind his eyes did — the way the sky changes far off, before you feel the wind. He drew one slow breath. Then he sat down at the great table, in the chair where the castellans of Brightstone had sat for two hundred years, and he laid the pages out before him, and he held them.

He held them a long time.



Nobody spoke. The joy that had filled the room a moment before had gone very quiet now — not sad, but hushed, the way a room goes hushed in the little chapel. The dust turned slowly in the light. Outside the window a jackdaw called, and no one heard it. Into that silence Anne hardly dared to breathe.

At last Sir Edmund lifted his head. He looked at the four young pages standing before him — at Anne, and Miles, and Mabel, and Hugh — and there was something in his face that none of them had ever seen there before.

“You have found more than a seal,” he said.

He looked down again at the yellow pages beneath his hands.

“I made a promise once,” he said quietly. “And this chest has been waiting forty years for me to keep it.”

Chapter Nine: Sir Edmund's Promise

Anne woke early on Monday morning, before the sun was fully up.

She had not slept well. All night the yellow pages had turned over in her mind — the sloping hand, the year that stopped in the middle of a word, and the single letter at the foot of the page. *R*.

And there was something else. Today was the fifth day. Today the king's rider would come back for the castle's answer.

She dressed and went down into the courtyard. The morning was grey and cool, and the others were already there — Miles by the well, Hugh with his hands tucked into his sleeves, Mabel yawning behind her hand. None of them had slept much.

"Have you seen Sir Edmund?" Anne asked.

"Not in the hall," said Miles. "Not in the library either."

Hugh, who always noticed things, tipped his head toward the far side of the courtyard. "The chapel door is open," he said.

The little chapel stood in a quiet corner, older than almost anything else in the castle. The four of them crossed the yard and looked in.

Inside it was cool and still. One narrow window let in a bar of early light. And there, on the front bench, sat Sir Edmund. The yellow pages lay in his hands, and his head was bowed. For a moment none of them dared to move.

Then he looked up and saw them in the doorway.

"Come in," he said. "Don't stand in the cold."

They came in, quietly, and sat on the bench behind him. For a little while nobody spoke. It was the kind of quiet that did not need filling.



"I came here to be honest," Sir Edmund said at last. "I find it is easier to be honest with God first thing in the morning. After that, the rest is not so hard." He turned to look at them, and there was a small tired smile in his grey beard. "So. Now I will be honest with you."

He held up the yellow pages.

"You want to know whose hand this is," he said. "I will tell you. His name was Sir Roland. He was the castellan of Brightstone before me — and when I was a boy, no bigger than you, Hugh, he was my master."

"Your master?" said Hugh.

"My teacher. The man who taught me everything," Sir Edmund smiled. "I came here as a page, just as you did. I could not read three words. Sir Roland taught me my letters. He taught me the code you know so well — be honest in small things, be kind before you are clever, serve first and sit last." He looked down. "And he kept the Chronicle. This is his hand. *R*, for Roland. Master Cole learned his own letters copying it, line by line, when he was small."

Anne leaned forward. "But this year is not finished," she said. "The writing just stops."

"Yes." Sir Edmund ran one finger along the broken lines. "That was a great year for Appleton. The old mill down by the river had grown tired, and one spring its great wheel broke and would turn no more. So the whole village and the whole castle set to work together to rebuild it, and through one long summer they raised a new mill, stone by stone. It was a fine thing to see. Sir Roland began to write the story of it, here, on these pages."

"Why did he stop?" asked Mabel.

"Because he was growing old," said Sir Edmund gently. "His hands grew slow. And that autumn his daughter, who lived far away across the hills, asked him to come and live with her. It was the right thing. So he laid down his pen, and he packed this chest of notes, and he made ready to go."

Sir Edmund was quiet a moment.

"On the day he left, he gave me the chest. And I made him a promise. I said, 'Do not worry. I will finish that year for you. And the Chronicle will never fall behind again.'" He shook his head slowly. "He smiled at me, and he went to his daughter's house, and there he lived out his days in peace. And I meant to keep my word. I truly did."

"What happened?" said Miles.

"Life happened," said Sir Edmund. "Guests came. Harvests came. The king's business came. My own children came. There was always something more important than an old chest of notes — or so I told myself. 'I will finish it next winter,' I said. And then the winter after that. The chest stood beside the table, for later." He looked up at them. "For forty years, later never came."

He set the pages down on his knee.

"I taught you a rule," he said. "Never be ashamed to say: I was wrong. Well. I was wrong. For forty years I let a promise wait, three steps from where I sat every day. It is not an easy thing to admit, even to yourself. But it is true — and a man must admit what is true, however long it has been hiding."

Nobody said anything. But Anne thought she understood, then, why he had come to the quiet chapel first.

Just then a sound came in through the open door — far off, down the hill. A horn.

Sir Edmund rose at once. “The rider,” he said, and all the tiredness went out of his voice. “Come. We have a king to answer, and no more time to lose.”

They hurried to the library. Master Cole was already there, and the letter lay waiting on the table — the castle’s answer to the king, written out fair days ago in the old man’s neat hand. It said that Brightstone would be honoured to hold the shire’s midsummer gathering. Everything was ready but one thing.

Now, at last, they had it. It was time to seal the letter.

Lady Margaret lit a white candle. Sir Edmund folded the letter and held a stick of white sealing wax to the flame. They all watched the wax grow soft and shining, and then a single drop melted and fell onto the fold of the paper, white and warm.

And into that soft wax Sir Edmund pressed the great seal.

He held it there a moment, then lifted it clear. In the white wax stood the little tower, with the small bird above it, cut deep and clean.

“Now,” said Sir Edmund, “it is truly ours.”

Down in the courtyard the blue-cloaked rider had already dismounted. Sir Edmund put the sealed letter into his hands himself.

“For the king,” he said, “with the greeting of Castle Brightstone.”

The rider bowed, tucked the letter safe inside his cloak, and swung back up into the saddle. In another moment he was clattering out under the gate and away down the green hill, the way he had come.

They had done it. The seal was found, the letter was sealed, the king was answered — in time, on the fifth day, with an hour to spare.

Miles let out a long breath. Mabel actually cheered.

But Anne was watching Sir Edmund. He stood at the top of the steps, looking after the rider until the road was empty. Then he turned back into the castle, and she saw that his eyes went, not to the gate, but to the library window — where, on the great table, the yellow pages of Sir Roland still lay.

The letter was gone. The danger was over.

But the promise was only half kept.

“Sir Edmund,” Anne said slowly. “The Chronicle is read aloud at midsummer, isn’t it? In front of the whole shire.”

“It is,” he said. “Every year.”

“And midsummer is...”

“Three days away.”

They looked at each other, and the same thought was in both their minds. The seal was found — but the empty year was still empty. Could the missing story be finished, and written into the great book at last, before it was read aloud in three days’ time?

Chapter Ten: The Missing Year

By Tuesday morning the great library table was covered with paper.

Sir Roland's yellow pages lay in the middle. Around them Master Cole had set out folder after folder — old bundles of notes, each tied with a faded ribbon. There were lists, and letters, and long rows of numbers, all in the sloping hand Anne now knew so well.

"One year," said Sir Edmund, looking down at it all. "And two days to write it."

"We cannot simply make it up," said Master Cole. He tapped the blank part of the page, the gap where the writing stopped. "A chronicle must be true. Remember what I always tell you: there is what happened, and there is what people say happened. Our work is to find the first."

"But how?" asked Mabel. "It was forty years ago. Nobody wrote it down."

"Somebody remembers it," said Sir Edmund. "The whole valley helped build that mill. Old hands hold old memories. So — we ask."

He looked round at the four of them, and Anne saw that he had already made a plan.

"Anne, you stay here with your grandfather. You two read the notes and piece the year together, day by day."

He turned. "Miles — go down to the forge in Appleton. Your grandfather hauled the great beams for the new mill. He was there. Ask him what he remembers."

"Mabel, Bess is sending the baskets round the village this morning. Go with her. Every old man and old woman in Appleton will have a story. Gather their memories."

"And Hugh." Sir Edmund smiled. "You have the sharpest eyes among us. Take the great Chronicle. Sir Roland left tiny notes in the margins — the narrow space down the side of each page. Match those dates to his folders, so we know what happened when."

So they went, each to a corner of the day.

The forge in Appleton was hot and loud and smelled of iron and smoke, and Miles loved it. His grandfather, old Tom Smith, stood at the anvil, grey and broad, with arms like Miles's father's.

"The mill?" said the old man, when Miles asked. "Aye, I remember the mill." He set down his hammer. "I was a young man then. We hauled the new beams up from the woods — great oak beams, longer than this whole forge. The biggest one..." He frowned. "It took twelve men and two oxen to move it. I pulled on the rope myself."

Miles wrote it down. *Twelve men, two oxen.*

But at the next house old Ned laughed. "Twelve men? It was eight men and never an ox in sight. Tom Smith always did make a tale bigger than it was."

Miles looked at his two notes. Twelve men and two oxen. Eight men and no oxen. He did not know which was true — so he wrote them both, just as they were, and let Master Cole sort them later.

Mabel went round the village with Bess and the bread baskets, and everywhere she stopped, she asked.

The old people loved to talk. The trouble was, no two of them told the same story.

Old Widow Perry said the mill wheel broke on a wild night of storm, with thunder rolling over the hills. But her sister, two doors down, shook her head. "Storm? It was a bright, quiet morning. That wheel just stopped, like a tired old thing, and cracked clean across."

"They can't both be right," said Mabel.

"No," said Bess, handing over a warm loaf. "But you write down both, and let Master Cole sort it. That's his gift, not ours."

One thing every voice agreed on, though. The new mill was finished just in time to grind the harvest that autumn, and the whole village came to watch the first sack of grain go in.

Mabel filled two pages with memories and skipped home well pleased.

Hugh sat very still at the end of the long table, the great Chronicle open before him, and worked.

He did not read fast, the way Anne did. But he noticed things. In the margins of the old pages Sir Roland had left tiny notes — a date here, a single word there. Hugh matched them, one by one, to the loose folders. A margin note said *the wheel broke, first week of May*. A folder held a list of wood bought that same May. Little by little, the pieces fitted together.

By the time the light turned golden, the missing year was almost whole.

At dusk they spread it all out on the table and read it through together — Anne reading aloud in her clear voice, Master Cole nodding at each line.

The story was coming back to life. The spring the old wheel broke. The summer the whole valley worked as one, castle and village side by side, hauling beams and setting stone. It was, as Sir Edmund had said, a fine thing to see, even now, even on paper.

“There,” said Master Cole softly. “Nearly all of it. We have the beginning, and the middle.” He reached for the last folder, the one at the bottom of the pile. “And here, if I am not mistaken, is how it ended.”

He untied the ribbon and opened the folder.

And stopped.

The last page inside was ruined. One whole corner was gone — not torn, not burned. *Chewed*. The paper was bitten away in soft ragged edges, eaten to lace, and the words were eaten with it.

Master Cole stared. “What in the world...”

But Mabel had gone very quiet. She was looking at the ragged edge, and her face had turned pale under her curls. She knew those marks. She would know them anywhere. Small, neat, greedy little bites.

“Meg,” she said in a small voice. “And Moll.”

Everyone looked at her.

“It was years ago,” Mabel said. “I was little. There was a basket of old papers in the back passage, waiting to be sorted. I left the dairy gate open, only for a moment — and the goats got out. By the time I caught them, they’d been at the basket.” She swallowed. “One folder was chewed. I was so frightened. I tidied it away, and I put it back, and I never told anyone.” She looked at Master Cole. “I never told you. I’m sorry. I’ve been sorry for years.”

For a moment nobody spoke.

Then Master Cole did a surprising thing. He laughed — a soft, kind laugh — and laid his ink-stained hand over hers.



“My dear child,” he said. “Goats will be goats. You were small, and no one in the whole world could have guessed that one chewed folder would matter forty years on. You have carried this for nothing. Thank you for telling me now.”

Mabel’s eyes were wet, but she smiled. It felt, she thought, like setting down a heavy basket she had carried much too far.

Then Anne said the thing they were all beginning to think.

“But — Grandfather.” She pointed at the ruined page. “That was the ending. How it all finished. The last of the story.” She looked up. “And it’s gone. The goats ate it.”

Hugh leaned close over the chewed page, hunting for a word, any word at all. There was almost nothing left.

They had the spring, and the summer, and the raising of the mill. They had everything — except how it ended. And there was no other copy anywhere in the world.

Master Cole took off his spectacles and rubbed his tired eyes.

“Two days to midsummer,” he said quietly, “and the last page eaten by goats. Now — how are we to finish a story when the end of it is gone?”

Chapter Eleven: Gib Remembers

Wednesday came, and with it one day to midsummer.

The great year lay almost finished on the library table. Spring, and the broken wheel. Summer, and the whole valley building the new mill, stone by stone and beam by beam. It was all there — every part but the last.

“We need the ending,” said Master Cole. He had not slept much. “The day the new mill first turned and ground the first grain. Somebody stood there and saw it. We must find that somebody.”

“But we’ve asked everyone,” said Anne.

That was the trouble. They counted them off again. Old Tom Smith had hauled the beams, but he went off to work in the next valley before harvest, and never saw the mill finished. Widow Perry remembered the building, not the ending. Old Ned had been a small boy that year, and small boys, he said cheerfully, remember nothing but their dinners.

Sir Edmund stood at the window, looking down the hill at the village and the river.

“I remember the day myself,” he said quietly. “I was a page, no older than you, Miles. Sir Roland took me down to watch. Half the valley stood on the dam that morning — the long wall of earth and stone that holds the pond back, so the water can pour down and turn the wheel. Everyone came. Even the stable boys ran down from the castle to see.”

He smiled at the memory and turned back to the table. “It was a fine morning.”

Nobody spoke. It seemed the memory ended there.

But Hugh had gone very still.

“Sir,” he said. “The stable boys. Who were the stable boys, forty years ago?”

Sir Edmund stopped.

For a moment he did not answer. Then a slow look of surprise came over his face — the look of a man who has walked past the same door a thousand times and only now sees it.

“Gib,” he said softly. “Gib was a stable boy then. A quiet lad, even so. He would have been ten, or eleven.” He shook his head. “Gib was there. On the dam. All that morning. And in forty years I never once thought to ask him.”

“Because he never talks,” said Mabel.

“Because he never talks,” Sir Edmund agreed. “A man of few words. So we forgot he had any.”

They found Gib that evening, in the stable, by lantern light.

He was rubbing down Puck for the night, slow and steady, the way he did everything. A single lantern hung from a hook and made a warm ring of light on the straw. Beyond it the horses shifted and breathed in the dark.

Gib heard them come, but he did not stop his work.

“Gib,” said Sir Edmund. “We need to ask you something. About the old mill. About the day it first turned.”

Gib’s hand went still on Puck’s side.

For a long moment he said nothing at all. Then, “Long time ago.”

“Forty years,” said Sir Edmund. “You were there. On the dam.”

“Aye.” Gib went back to his brushing. “I was there.”

Anne opened her notebook, very quietly, and waited.

“Will you tell us?” she said. “How it ended? The day the mill first turned?”

Gib was silent so long that Anne thought he would not answer. The lantern hissed. Puck leaned into the old man’s hand.

Then Gib began. He spoke in short, plain words, with long gaps between them, the way another man might set down stones one at a time.



“Bright morning,” he said. “Whole village on the dam. Castle folk too. Everyone waiting.” He drew the brush down Puck’s flank. “Sir Roland lifted the gate. The water came down. Slow at first. Then fast.” A pause. “The wheel turned. First time ever. Everyone cheered.”

He stopped.

“And then?” said Hugh, hardly breathing.

“Then they ground the first grain,” said Gib. “Poured it in. Out came the flour, white as snow. They filled a sack.” He set the brush down. “First sack of the new mill. And everyone wanted to know whose it would be.”

The lantern light flickered on the straw.

“Some said the castle’s, by right,” said Gib. “Some said the biggest farm. They argued a little. Then Sir Roland held up his hand.”

Gib was quiet a moment, as if he could still see it all.

“He said, ‘The first bread is for those who need it first.’”

Nobody in the stable moved.

“And he sent it,” Gib went on, “the first sack of all, down to the Combe house at the poor end of the lane. Seven children there, and a hard year behind them. That was Sir Roland’s choice. And when the village heard it, they stopped their arguing. They all thought it was right.” He picked up the brush again. “That’s how it ended. That’s what I saw.”

For a while no one spoke. Then Master Cole let out a long breath, like a man who has come to the end of a long road.

“That is it,” he said softly. “The ending. Whole and true.” He looked at Gib with shining eyes. “Forty years that waited in your head, and you never knew it was wanted.”

Gib only shrugged. “Nobody asked,” he said, and turned back to the horse.

That night, by the last of the candles, they wrote it down.

Master Cole shaped the words, and Anne wrote them in her clearest hand — not in her own way of speaking, but in Sir Roland’s, plain and warm, the way the rest of the year was written. How the wheel turned. How the whole valley cheered. How the first sack of new flour went down to the poorest house in Appleton, because the old master said the first bread was for those who needed it first.

When it was done, one line was still missing — the very last.

Master Cole held the quill out to Sir Edmund.

“You should write it,” he said. “You made the promise. You should close the year.”

Sir Edmund took the quill. He stood over the great Chronicle a long moment. Then, slowly, in his own hand, he wrote the last line:

So the mill was built, and the promise kept — forty years late, by four young hands.

He set down the quill and looked at the four of them, and did not say a word. He did not need to.

The year was whole. The Chronicle was complete, right up to this very day.

Master Cole closed the great book with both hands, gently, the way you close something precious.

“There is one thing left,” he said. “The gathering is tomorrow. The whole shire will be here — the castle, the village, folk from every farm in the county.” He looked at his granddaughter. “This year was lost, and now it is found. It should be read aloud, so everyone can hear it. And it should be read by the one who worked hardest to bring it back.”

Anne felt her stomach turn over.

“Aloud?” she said. “In front of everyone?”

“In front of everyone,” said Master Cole gently.

Anne loved words on a page. She loved them quiet, and still, and hers. Standing up before the whole county, with every eye upon her, and reading aloud — that was a different thing entirely. Her mouth went dry just at the thought of it.

She looked down at the finished year: at all the work, at Sir Roland’s kindness caught at last on the page. She thought of Gib, who had carried the ending for forty years and given it up so plainly. She thought of the code. *Serve first, sit last.*

It would be an honour. She knew that. It would also be the most frightening thing she had ever done.

Her heart was already beating fast and nervous — but she swallowed hard and lifted her chin.

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll read it.”

And to her own surprise, she found that she meant it.

Chapter Twelve: The Midsummer Chronicle

Midsummer came warm and bright and blue.

By the middle of the morning the whole shire was climbing the hill. They came from every farm in the county, on foot and on carts and on shaggy ponies, until the green below the castle was full of people. This was the gathering the king had asked for, and Brightstone was ready for it.

“Look at them all,” said Mabel. She stood on the courtyard wall with her hand over her eyes. “The longest day of the whole year, and every single person I know is down there.”

Down on the green they had set up the games. There were races for the little ones, and a tug-of-war that Miles’s father won three times, and best of all the ring-tilt.

A tall pole stood at one end of the grass. From a wooden arm near the top hung a small iron ring, no wider than an apple. The game was easy to say and hard to do. You rode past at a trot, held out a long light pole, and tried to lift the ring clean off its hook without slowing down.

Miles rode Puck.

Now, Puck was a good pony, but he was shaggy and round and greedy as a goat, and he loved the long green grass more than any game. Halfway down the run he stopped to eat. The whole green laughed.

“Come on, Puck,” said Miles, not cross at all. He turned the pony round and tried again. This time Puck trotted straight and true, and Miles leaned out, steady as his father at the anvil, and lifted the little ring right off its hook.

The green cheered. Miles held the ring up high, and for once, being watched by everyone did not feel like the worst thing in the world. It felt rather good.

Sir Edmund watched from the wall and smiled into his beard. “That boy has a fine hand,” he said. “One year the shire’s riding games will come here to Brightstone. I should like to see him ride in them.”

But nobody could beat Bess.

While the games went on, she and her kitchen had been working since before dawn. Now the long tables were carried out under the great oak, and the food came out with them — brown loaves and yellow cheese, roast chicken and new peas, honey cakes and berry tarts, and a great bowl of cream in the middle of it all. Folk who had climbed the hill hungry stood and stared.

“Thirty years I’ve cooked in this castle,” said Bess, red-faced and proud, “and this is the best table I ever set.”

Before anyone ate, the whole gathering stood together to sing.

It was the old midsummer hymn, the one everyone in the shire had known since they were small. Nobody needed the words. The castle folk sang it, and the village folk sang it, and the children sang it, and the very old people who could not stand sang it sitting down. Some sang high and some sang low, and not all of them sang in tune. But all of them sang together, hundreds of voices rising over the green hill into the wide summer sky, thankful for the long light and the food and one another. When it ended, the quiet afterward felt warm, like the quiet after rain.

Then Master Cole stood up, with the great Chronicle open in his arms.

“Good people of the shire,” he said. “This year a lost thing came home to Brightstone. Not only the great seal — a lost year, that waited forty years to be written. It is written now. And it should be read aloud, so that all of you can hear it. It will be read by my granddaughter, Anne.”

Anne stood up.

Her legs did not feel like her own. There were more faces before her than she had ever seen in one place, all turned her way, all waiting. She looked down at the page. She opened her mouth. What came out was very small.

“In the year the mill was rebuilt,” she began, and her voice shook.

She read on. She read about the broken wheel, and the long summer, and the whole valley carrying stone and beam up from the river. And slowly, without noticing, she stopped hearing the crowd. She was in the story now, the way she was always in a story, and the story was carrying her.

She came to the morning the new mill first turned. She read how the water came down and the wheel went round and everyone cheered. She read how they ground the first grain, white as snow, and filled the first sack, and argued over whose it should be. Then she read Sir Roland's answer.

"The first bread is for those who need it first," Anne read — and her voice did not shake at all. It was clear and steady, and it carried right across the green. "And he sent it to the poorest house in Appleton, where seven children lived, because that was where it was needed most."

She read the last line, the one Sir Edmund had written. Then she looked up.



For a moment the green was completely silent.

Then it cheered. It cheered the way a whole shire cheers, loud enough to send the jackdaws up off the tower. Anne stood in the middle of it, holding the great book, and she was not frightened any more. She was glad.

At the far edge of the crowd, old Gib nodded once. Just once. From Gib, that was the same as standing on a table and shouting.

When the cheering died down, Sir Edmund himself stood up. He did not make a long speech. He never did.

“Most of you know me,” he said. “You know I am not a man for fine words. So I will say it plainly. I made a promise once, long ago, to a good master, and then I let it wait. I let it wait forty years.” He looked at the four pages. “These four kept it for me. A castle is only as good as its promises. Remember their names.”

And their names went into the Chronicle that day, in Master Cole’s neat black hand, on the page below the finished year: Miles, Anne, Mabel and Hugh, who found the lost year and brought it home.

The feast went on into the long golden evening. And it was somewhere in the middle of it, while everyone was full and happy and talking, that a black shape dropped out of the oak, snatched the bright silver tart-spoon off the pudding table, and shot up into the tower with it.

“JACK!” shouted Mabel.

The whole table roared. Bess shook her wooden spoon at the sky. Somewhere up in the north tower, Jack was no doubt adding one more shining thing to his nest, as pleased with himself as ever.

“Leave him the spoon,” laughed Sir Edmund, wiping his eyes. “He has earned it. Without him, we should never have opened that chest at all.”

At last, as the sun went down, the carts began to roll home down the hill, full of tired, happy people. The four pages stood at the gate and waved until the last one was gone.

Gib was there too, holding Puck’s rope. He was not looking at the carts. He was looking away to the west, at the horizon, where the sky had turned a strange, heavy grey.

“That sky,” he said slowly, “has a storm in it.”

And Gib was never wrong about skies.