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KAREN WALLACE
QUIRKY TIMES AT
QUAGMIRE
CASTLE

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CHAPTER ONE

Gordon Grabbit wrinkled his nose as if there was a bad smell in the air and stared at Quagmire Castle. He didn't see wonderful turrets that needed a bit of patching here and there or a few stone windows whose leaded panes were broken. He didn't notice that the front door was made out of carved oak with metal fastenings that were over four hundred years old. All Gordon Grabbit saw was a falling-down ruin that could do with a good bulldozing and a few direct hits with a wrecking ball. And Gordon Grabbit knew he was right. Because Gordon Grabbit was a bank manager and bank managers are always right. Especially where lending money is concerned.

Too much money had already been lent to Tabitha Nightshade to look after Quagmire Castle and that was a state of affairs Gordon Grabbit didn't approve of at all. Particularly because he hated anything old that took up space. You could fit fifty bungalows, each with a tiny garden and room for a two-car garage, if

you knocked down the castle, filled in the lake and pulled out the maze and gardens. Gordon Grabbit's palms began to sweat just thinking about it. He took a deep breath and walked up the gravel drive towards the huge carved-oak door.

* * *

Aunt Tabitha Nightshade climbed up the specially-made stepladder and eased herself on to the seat in front of her giant sewing machine. She bent her silver-haired head forwards as she pulled the purple thread from a huge spool in and out of the various loops and eyes and finally through the giant needle, and out the other side.

Aunt Tabitha could only think straight when she was sewing so she had built an enormous machine that she could sit at for hours, sewing miles and miles of material together. Recently, she had so much thinking to do that every day echoed with the pounding of her sewing machine. And when Aunt Tabitha sewed all day, everyone at Quagmire Castle knew there was trouble afoot. She was just about to line up an extra-long piece of cloth when the front door knocker banged hard, twice.

With a sigh, Aunt Tabitha climbed back down the stepladder, shut the door of her sewing room and walked into the front hall.

* * *

'Face it,' said Gordon Grabbit, ten minutes later. 'You've got no choice.' He stuffed a piece of shortbread into his mouth and slurped a cup of tea at the same time. 'You've got to sell.'

Aunt Tabitha put her delicate porcelain teacup back on its saucer. 'But, Mr Grabbit,' she protested, 'you don't understand, Quagmire Castle has been in my family for five hundred years.'

Gordon Grabbit wiped some crumbs off his trousers on to the floor. 'Times change,' he said nastily. 'Some people get left behind.'



He bit into another biscuit. 'Anyway, bungalows are very attractive,' he blurted, spraying more crumbs on the floor.

Aunt Tabitha stared at the fat-faced bank manager whose eating habits were truly disgusting. 'Are you suggesting I move to a bungalow?'

'Of course not,' said Gordon Grabbit, quickly. He had not expected the old lady to be so difficult. He opened his briefcase and put a piece of thick white paper on the table between them. SALE OF QUAGMIRE CASTLE was written on the top. 'Unless you raise the money to pay back your loan by next week, the bank will sell Quagmire Castle and that's final.'

Aunt Tabitha looked down at the paper.

'Would you like a pen?' asked Gordon Grabbit eagerly.

'Certainly not,' replied Aunt Tabitha. She stood up and opened the door of her sitting room. 'If you will excuse me, I have some sewing to do.'

Gordon Grabbit fought back the irritation that prickled his greasy brush-cut hair. He decided to try the 'softly-softly' approach. 'I do understand how difficult it must be for you.'

'Do you indeed?' said Aunt Tabitha crisply. 'Then in that case, you can save me some time and show yourself out.'

Gordon Grabbit stood up and narrowed his pale piggy eyes. 'I'll leave you my pen. You're going to need it.' Then he turned on his heel and strode out of the room.

Five minutes later, the sound of the great sewing machine hammered through the house. But try as she might, Aunt Tabitha couldn't think of any way she could save Quagmire Castle and the more she sewed the more unhappy she became.

* * *

'Something's on Aunt Tabitha's mind,' said Jack as he and his sister, Emily, sat in a rowing boat on Toadspawn Lake. It was a still summer day and the sound of the sewing machine clattered over the air. 'She's been sewing for two days now.'

Emily looked down at a water lily. An enormous green frog was watching her with unblinking golden eyes. The extraordinary thing was that no matter how closely she stared at it, the frog showed no sign of being frightened. Indeed, it was almost as if it was listening to what Jack was saying.

'Do you think we should ask?' said Emily. 'Last time this happened, it turned out she was sewing a cover for the roof.' She grinned. 'Maybe she's found a way to sew new windows for the tower.'

Jack dipped the oars in the soupy green water and shook his head. 'I think it's more than that. Yesterday I went down to the kitchen and Mrs Gristle said Aunt Tabitha is only eating sardine paste sandwiches.'



'Ugh!' Emily pulled a face. 'What on earth for?'

'She said it was good for her brain and she needed all the help she could get.' Jack shook his head. 'There's something wrong, I'm sure there is.'

There was a loud *plop!* Emily looked down. The enormous green frog had disappeared.

* * *

Up in the West Tower, where nobody had been for almost five hundred years, Delicia Nightshade stared at her silvery fingers and tried to remember the days when she could see her reflection in the mirror.

It was a long time ago, too long to count, really. And Delicia wasn't terribly keen on remembering her age. Anyway, judging from her beautiful hands and her finely-turned ankles, she was sure she was still as beautiful as she had been in those far-off days when she travelled by coach and her servants were dressed in velvet breeches and silk waistcoats in the Nightshade colours of black and red.

Not that Delicia wanted to go back in time. She liked living in the West Tower of Quagmire Castle. Nobody knew they were there so nobody bothered them. Besides, she had Dudley for company and somehow, time seemed to fly if you could fly yourself. Delicia sighed and floated over to the window. Thinking about flying reminded her that Dudley hadn't yet returned from one of his little excursions.

After alchemy, he had taken up spellcraft and taught himself to change into anything he

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wanted. Right now, he was obsessed with frogs. And since it had been his idea originally to dig a lake for the castle, he had decided to take a closer look at how the water lilies were getting on and whether the bright yellow kingcups were still growing in the far corner. Also, it had to be admitted that from time to time Dudley reminded Delicia of a frog. He had an irritating habit of jumping up behind her when she was doing her tapestry. There had been many occasions when she would have stabbed her finger with her needle if her fingers hadn't been transparent ...

At that moment, Dudley suddenly appeared by her side. Water dripped from his glossy black hair and a piece of pondweed hung from his ear. Delicia pulled a face. This was the second time he had flown off in his best clothes.

'They'll shrink, you know,' she said, trying not to sound cross.

'No, they won't,' cried Dudley, peering out the window. 'They'll grow. They're only little because we see them from up here.'

Delicia stared at her husband as if he were mad. 'Have you been drinking that green stuff again?' she asked suspiciously.

'Certainly not,' replied Dudley. 'Anyway, how was I to know it wasn't peppermint cordial?' It was an episode neither of them wanted to

remember. Dudley had changed himself into a bee and had nearly drowned in a glass of green stuff at some outdoor festivity. 'Where the bee slipped, there sipped I,' he added sulkily.

'Humph,' said Delicia. 'And remember where it got us.' It was only by sheer good fortune that Delicia had turned herself into a blackbird that day and had been able to rescue him.

'Let's not talk about it,' muttered Dudley, his lower lip sticking out like a church doorstep.

'As you wish, my darling,' cried Delicia gaily. That was one of the great things about being a ghost. Bad moods never lasted more than a split second. 'Perhaps I misunderstood you.'

Dudley's face lit up with a smile. 'That's the answer, my sweet,' he said, kissing her lightly on her silver cheek. He pointed down at Jack and Emily who were crossing the lawn. 'I was talking of the little ones who live in the house.' He flicked the pondweed off his ear. 'You see, I was sitting on a water lily, listening—'

At that moment, a monkey with glossy grey fur jumped down from the chandelier, spun three times in the air and landed upside-down on the floor.

Dudley and Delicia stared, wide-eyed and trembling at each other. They were both thinking the same thing. When Powderball spun

three times and landed upside down it was a sure sign that something was wrong.

And it was something to do with Quagmire Castle.

CHAPTER TWO

Jack and Emily stood in the middle of Aunt Tabitha's sitting room and stared in dismay at the plates of curling sardine paste sandwiches that lay stacked up on the tables. It was clear to both of them that if Aunt Tabitha had been hoping to improve her brainpower, it hadn't worked.

Aunt Tabitha looked up from her desk. 'Sit down, dears,' she said in a tired voice. 'I'm afraid I have some rather bad news to tell you.'

Jack and Emily looked at each other and quickly sat down on the sofa.

'Gordon Grabbit, the bank manager, came to see me,' said Aunt Tabitha slowly. 'He is refusing to lend me any more money to look after Quagmire Castle. He wants me to sell.'

'Oh, no!' cried Jack.

Emily went white as a sheet and fought back the tears that welled up in her eyes.

'I've tried and tried to think of a way to solve the problem,' said Aunt Tabitha, pointing out the plates of sandwiches. 'But I haven't come up