

THE
SECRETS of
HEXBRIDGE
CASTLE



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Hexbridge
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SCHOLASTIC PRESS | NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-0-545-86929-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First American edition, November 2016

Book design by Carol Ly

FOR Satisf,
for yESTERday and tomORROW.

PROLOGUE

MRS. Emmett's Visitor

There were many things Nora Emmett disapproved of. These included whistling, tropical fruit, sandals, children who didn't hold doors open for her, children who assumed she *needed* doors opening for her—in fact she pretty much disapproved of children altogether. However, at this moment as she sat up in bed listening to the darkness, the thing she disapproved of most of all was whatever had woken her at three o'clock in the morning.

She didn't have long to wait before the sheep started bleating again. Reaching out into the darkness, she struck a match and lit the oil lamp on the nightstand with an uncanny accuracy that came from years of practice. Mrs. Emmett didn't quite trust electricity yet.

The brass bedstead creaked as she got up, wriggled into her tartan slippers, and shuffled downstairs to investigate.

Setting the oil lamp down next to the stove, she pulled the kitchen nets aside and peered out into the night. The bleating had died down to an occasional terrified *baa*. Whatever had frightened the sheep was still out there. It was probably the same rustlers who had taken two cows from the Merryweather farm last month. Well, they weren't going to get any of *her* flock. She pulled on her overcoat and rain boots, grabbed her shotgun from the pantry, and filled her pockets with cartridges from the biscuit tin next to the tea bags.

The kitchen door clicked shut behind her as she stepped outside. Tucking the shotgun under her arm, she hitched up her nightie and crept through the orchard, silently weaving between the twisted plum trees toward the sheep pen. The new moon cast only a little light onto the farm, which was shrouded in the kind of darkness that makes it impossible to see your own feet. The dark didn't bother her. She didn't approve of the kind of skies where the glow of streetlights was always present and you couldn't see the stars. This was night as it should be.

The bleating had stopped and the sheep were eerily silent now. Nearing the pen, she could make out wet crunching noises punctuated with deep grunts.

Something was in with the sheep and it wasn't human. Could it be wolves? She hadn't heard of wolves in Hexbridge, not for many years.

Her eyes adjusted to the blackness, and she could just about make out a mass of sheep huddled together in one corner of the pen. The whole flock was constantly in motion as each animal clambered over the others, trying to get as far as possible from whatever was in there with them. Mrs. Emmett crept forward to investigate.

The crunching stopped and the frantic bleating started again as a huge, dark shape reared up between her and the pen. She had never heard sheep make noises like that before, not even in the slaughterhouse. Instinctively she raised the shotgun and fired two shots directly into the shadowy mass.

The recoil threw her to the ground and she was nearly deafened by a loud bellow, like an elephant and lion roaring at the same time. Tearing her nightie from the grip of the brambles, she clambered to her feet, only to reel back from the hot, stinking breath of the thing that towered above her.

She looked up.

Two pairs of yellow eyes as large as saucers glared down at her. The stench of sulfur filled her nostrils as the

creatures began to hiss softly. As the noise became louder, she took a long deep breath. With amazing speed she reloaded, snapped the barrel shut, jammed the butt to her shoulder, and aimed right between the eyes of the closest creature. Squeezing the trigger, she shouted louder than she ever had in all her eighty-two years,

“SHOOOOO!”

The hammer clicked feebly as the gun failed to fire. The eyes seemed to half close into a smile as her mighty roar dwindled into silence. The hiss was now like a pressure cooker at full steam. A scorching gust of wind hit her, blowing off her nightcap and sending her hair and nightie billowing. With eyes closed tight, Mrs. Emmett shielded her face from the searing wind as a white-hot flash ended her worries about sheep forever. As the gun dropped from her hands, she just had time for one final entry on the list of things she disapproved of.