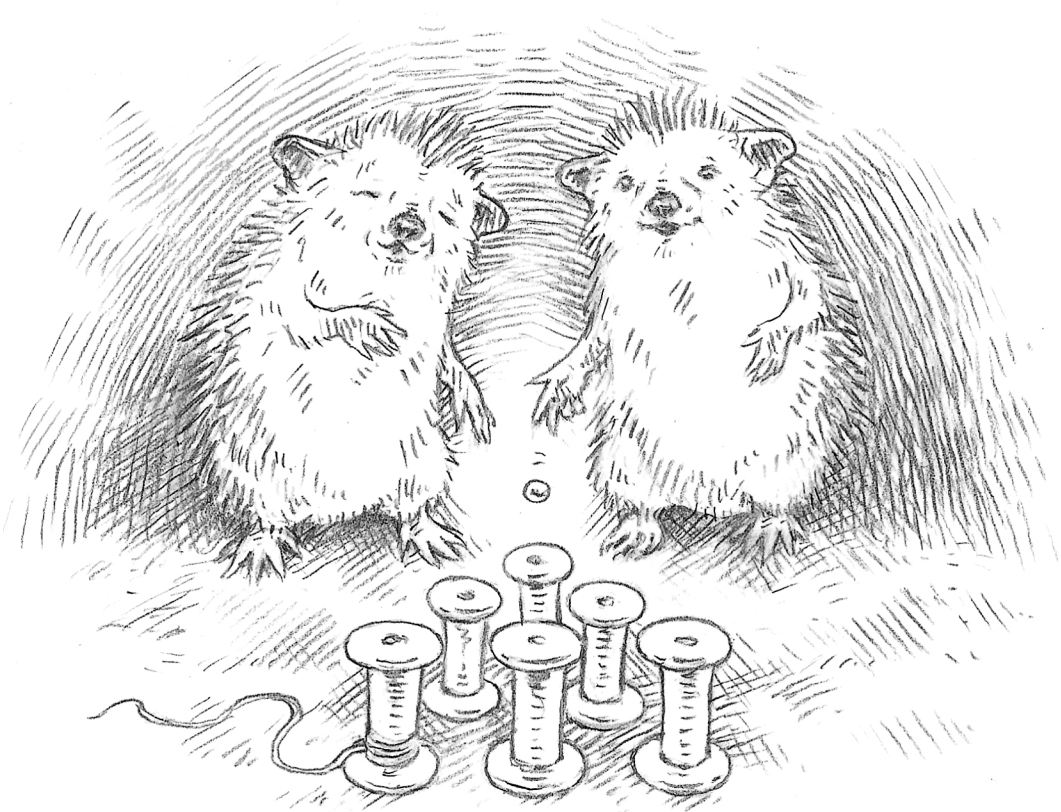


The
MISTMANTLE
CHRONICLES



The
MISTMANTLE
CHRONICLES
BOOK THREE

The Heir of Mistmantle

by
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Purple House Press
Cynthiana, Kentucky

*For Brenda Mearns,
and for all of you who helped me through the darkest time*

Published by
Purple House Press
PO Box 787
Cynthiana, Kentucky 41031

Classic Books for Kids and Young Adults
purplehousepress.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request

ISBN 9781948959254





THE CREATURES OF MISTMANTLE

In case you can't remember your molehogs from your squotters

THE SQUIRRELS

Urchin
Apple
King Crispin
Queen Cedar
Princess Catkin
Brother Fir
Brother Juniper
Sepia
Damson
Whittle
Gleaner
Crackle
Longpaw
Russett and Heath
Yarrow and Hammily
Siskin, Grain, and Pepper

THE OTTERS

Captain Padra
Captain Arran
Fingal
Tay
Tide and Swanfeather

THE HEDGEHOGS

Needle
Thripple
Hope
Mother Huggen
Docken
Scufflen
Mopple
Quill
Cringle

THE MOLES

Captain Lugg
Mistress Cott
Moth, Wren, and Wing
Jig and Fig
Tipp and Todd
Twigg
Hobb

PREFACE

What was I thinking of when I started to write this book? A missing child, a plague, and dangerous rumors spreading?

I'd had the title *The Heir of Mistmantle* for a while, before I knew who the heir would be. I gave the animals time to get their breath back after the adventure with the Heartstone, so by the time this book starts Juniper has learned a lot about being a priest and Crispin and Cedar are married. Now it was time for new challenges, new difficulties, and dangers for our heroes to face. Characters need to grow.

On Mistmantle much damage is done by the lies that spread fear and ill will around the island. One of the most poisonous things in any community is idle gossip—unhelpful comments are made, then they are repeated, and the more they travel, the more people believe them. But don't believe everything you hear!

When I was first working on the book, I was preparing to move from a place where I'd made great friends to somewhere new and strange. Like the animals, I was facing a situation that seemed impossible to cope with.

Poor Juniper has an experience that leaves him feeling he'll never be happy again, but you and I know that he will be. He finds that life really is good. So did I. I made even more friends in the place I moved to, very special friends for life. Cherish your friends!

Heart keep you, Margaret

2022





PROLOGUE



FROM THE HIGHEST TURRET of Mistmantle Tower, Urchin the pale-furred squirrel and old Brother Fir the priest leaned out to get the best view they could. They looked down on the sparkling sea, light golden sand, the treetops, the meadows, and the dark red fur of a squirrel leaping from branch to branch.

“There he is!” said Urchin.

Squirrels darted out of the way, moles jumped to a smart salute, hedgehogs hurried to open doors as King Crispin dashed through the bright summer woods to Mistmantle Tower, his paws outstretched, his tail streaming out behind him. Crispin bounded up the stairs and flew along corridors, but as he reached the doors of the royal chambers, he heard the high-pitched mewling of a newborn squirrel.

The guard mole opened the door to a room full of busy females. Mother Huggen the hedgehog beamed with satisfaction as she bent over the queen. Moth the mole was washing her paws while squirrel maids whispered excitedly in a huddle. But Crispin, unbuckling his sword and flinging it into a corner, only saw Cedar, the queen, gazing at the squeaking bundle in her arms.

“A daughter,” she said as Crispin came to sit beside her.

The baby squirrel’s eyes were tightly shut, and her paws curled against her mouth. As Crispin touched the tiny pink ears, she opened her eyes, blinked, and, as if she saw nothing worth staying awake for, went back to sleep. But Crispin, taking the baby in his arms, felt that nothing could ever made him turn away his eyes from that small, sleepy face.

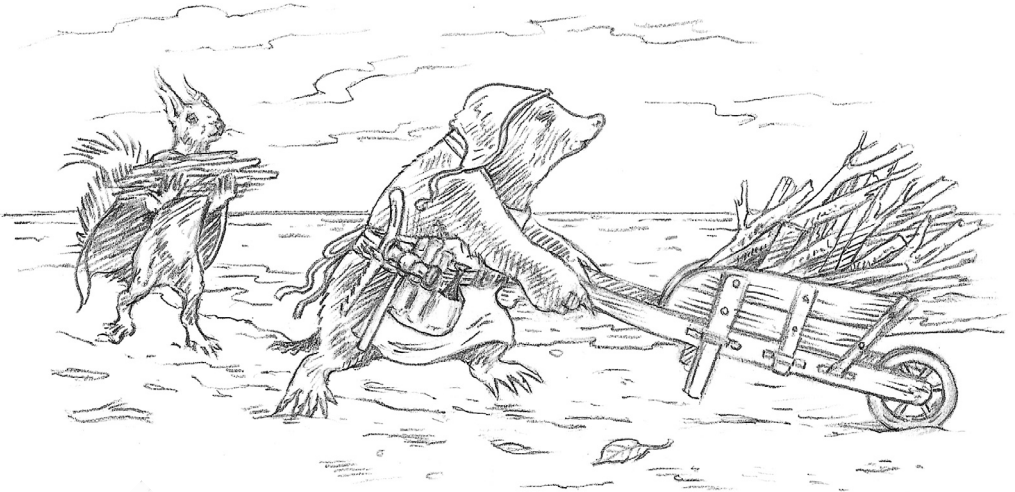
Once in his life before he had held a baby as new as this. He had been much younger then and had rescued a newly born orphan squirrel from the sea. That pale, wet little scrap, found on the shore and named after the sea urchins, had become an exceptional young animal who had resisted tyranny and faced dangers, but still liked to run up and down walls and splash in the sea with his friends. Looking down at this new infant squirrel, Crispin wondered what her future would be.

“She’s a little beauty, Your Majesty,” said Mother Huggen. “A right little princess. Two of you young squirrels, go and fetch Brother Fir and ask him to come and give her a blessing.”

“And send for Longpaw the messenger to spread the news around the island,” said Crispin, still gazing at the baby. “Tell everyone!”

“And can he tell them what her name is?” asked Mother Huggen.

So, on a summer morning, Catkin was born to Queen Cedar and King Crispin. She was born on Mistmantle, the island fairly and wisely ruled by her parents and their captains and guarded by the enchanted mists folded about it. As she grew up, she would learn about her island, and how few ships reached it through the mist, and how nobody who belonged to the island could leave by water and return by water. It was dangerous to go through the mists. Few animals left the island, and fewer returned—but most animals wouldn’t dream of leaving Mistmantle, with its valiant otters, its bright-spirited squirrels, its loyal and hardworking moles and hedgehogs. There were woods and shores, burrows and tunnels, caves and waterfalls, hills and valleys, plenty to eat, good friends, and the king and queen in Mistmantle Tower high on the rocks. But for now, Catkin slept in her father’s arms, her paws curled tightly against her mouth, completely unaware that she was born the Heir of Mistmantle.



CHAPTER ONE



WHEN CATKIN WAS OLD ENOUGH to look about her and her fur was growing soft and red-gold, the island began to prepare for her naming ceremony. That summer had produced an excellent harvest, and there were grains, nuts, and berries to be gathered and stored, well into the beginning of a hot, dry autumn. Otters, being shore animals, were never far away from the sea with its fresh breeze and cool salt waves, but they worked as hard as anyone, carrying heavy loads up the rocks to the tower. All over *Mistmantle* the work was hard and dusty, and the animals talked with yearning of the celebrations and fun of the Naming Day to come. *Soon, very soon.*

On the night before Naming Day, two events took place. The first was seen, enjoyed, and wondered at by every animal on the island. The second was not noticed at all. It was a long time before anyone knew a thing about it, and by that time the harm had begun.



Riding stars! A night of riding stars! These nights happened from time to time when the stars leaped free from their orbits, whirling and swooping across the sky, dancing and spinning so low that you could almost touch them. Brother Fir always knew when there would be riding stars, and the islanders made a great party of these nights, with bonfires on shores and high hilltops and, of course, a good supper. A night of riding stars before Princess Catkin's Naming Day was even more exciting, for something important always happened after a night of riding stars, either for good or for harm. Of course, they must be for good this time, for the princess's naming.

The squirrel grandfathers said that the stars were better when they were young squirrels, but they always said that, just as they always said that almond shells were getting harder these days. Some dismal moles and hedgehogs who grumbled about everything said that the last few nights of riding stars had all brought something good, so this time it must bring harm. The rest only laughed and told them to go away and find something useful to do. How could the stars be a warning of harm, with Catkin's Naming Day ahead of them? Times were good since Crispin had become king.

It was going to be an exceptionally good night for bonfires on hilltops and beaches, partly because of the long, dry summer, but also because Twigg the carpenter mole, was moving his workshop. For many years, all the carpentry had been done from a cave near

the tower, behind Seathrift Meadow, but there was much more work needed at the tower now—new frames were being made for Threadings, chairs for visitors, more comfortable furnishings for the tower animals and, of course, a cot, a cradle, and a coatrack. Twigg, who was always covered with sawdust, had needed to take on more apprentices. He was also an excellent boatbuilder, and was so much in demand that he'd decided he may as well work as near to the sea as possible without falling in. He was moving into a new workshop in a cave not far from the tower jetty. Of course, as Twigg and his assistants trailed back and forth from the old workshop to the new, there were scraps of wood, bark, and old branches being dropped and wood shavings to sweep up. The cry of “Can we have this for the bonfire, Master Twigg?” followed him everywhere.

Juniper the squirrel was helping Twigg. Juniper was training as a priest, but Brother Fir believed that novice priests should do some hard physical work from time to time. He also believed that it was cruel to keep a young animal in a priestly tower on such a day, so Juniper had been sent to Twigg.

In the old workshop, with its sharp, clean scent of freshly cut timber, Twigg was in a quiet conversation with his girlfriend, Moth. Juniper, not liking to interrupt, waited at the entrance. When Moth's two young nephews, Tipp and Todd, came racing to the door he put out his paw to stop them from running straight in. Todd slowed down, but the older one, Tipp, was in his usual wild rush and didn't notice.

“Tipp!” said Moth. “Oh, hello, Todd! And Juniper! Tipp, I hope you didn’t just push past Brother Juniper!”

Tipp turned and bowed so impressively that it looked as if he meant to throw himself at Juniper’s paws and beg for a blessing. Todd murmured “Morning, Brother Juniper,” then “What wants doing, Twigg?”

“Yes, what wants doing?” asked Juniper.

“You lads can load up the rest of the smaller tools into a wheelbarrow for Brother Juniper to wheel around to the new place,” said Twigg. “All the scrap bits of wood that might come in useful, they can go in another wheelbarrow.”

“At once!” cried Tipp. He hurled himself into the task, but as every piece of wood he picked up became a sword, a shield, or a bow, he progressed slowly. Todd worked steadily.

“If you must have a sword, I’ll make a couple of wooden ones,” said Twigg. “Blunt ones, mind, and I’ll take them off you if you do any damage with ’em. Suppose you want shields, too?”

“Yes, please!” said both moles.

“And a bit of firewood for your bonfire,” said Twigg. “I wonder how I knew you wanted that?”

“Do you want the floor swept?” asked Juniper.

“I’ll do that,” said Moth quickly, knowing that Brother Juniper’s lungs had been badly damaged in the past and fearing that clouds of sawdust would make him ill. After a few journeys wheeling wheelbarrows around the tower to the sandy new cave on the shore, with

Tipp trying to help and swerving the wheelbarrows so that half the timber landed on the beach, Juniper returned to the old workshop to find it swept and clean with only a few old tools and some long timbers stacked neatly against the walls.

“They can stay there,” said Twigg. He threw open a trapdoor in the floor at the back of the cave and disappeared into it. “I’ll get the last of the stuff out of the storeroom, then we’re all done.”

“I’ll go down there with you!” volunteered Tipp.

“You won’t,” Twigg’s voice echoed back up. “I’d never get you out again.”

“Are there tunnels?” asked Todd, his eyes brightening.

“Definitely not,” said Twigg firmly. “Look out, now!” Hammers began to fly out of the trapdoor as if they were juggling themselves. “Put those in a wheelbarrow, and mind yourselves, they’re heavy.”

Juniper leaned down so that Twigg could pass the tools to him.

“I reckon there probably were tunnels down here once,” muttered Twigg. “There’s a locked door down here and I’m sure there’s tunnels behind that, and at least one more blocked door. I can tell by the echoes and vibrations. But we won’t tell those two.”

“Absolutely not,” agreed Juniper, and turned his head to cough. “Come on, lads, we’ll get these tools loaded up.”

By evening the removal was complete, drinks had been brought down from the tower, and the young moles were armed with blunt swords and small wooden shields. Bonfires were lit. Everyone waited for sunset, watching for the first star to ride across the sky. Some of

the young animals were playing their old hide-and-seek game, which began with chants of “Find the king, find the queen, find the Heir of Mistmantle.” Now and again one of them would point to the tower and shout “She’s in there!” and they’d all shriek with laughter, finding it just as funny even after the first ten or twenty times. On the beach nearest to Mistmantle Tower, shore animals and those who worked in the tower gathered around a bonfire where fish was already cooking. Padra and Arran the otters, wearing their captains’ gold circlets and swords, broke off steaming pieces of fish for their twins, Tide and Swanfeather. Tide ate his slowly and carefully, while Swanfeather took a large bite and presently blew out her cheeks and widened her eyes with the heat.

“You shouldn’t try to eat so much at once,” said Arran. Her tufty fur stuck out around her circlet. “It’s not good manners. They’ll bring soup down from the tower soon, so leave some room for it.”

“I expect she gets her manners from me,” said Padra’s young brother Fingal airily. “I’m responsible for all her bad habits.”

“What about mine?” asked Tide.

“You don’t have any bad habits,” said Fingal; then, not wanting Tide to feel left out, added, “You’re really good at boats. As soon as I get my boat, I’ll take you out in it.”

Captain Padra, who had a pleasant face and always looked ready to laugh, did laugh. He looked around for Urchin, who wasn’t far away.

“Urchin, I won!” he called.

“Congratulations, sir,” said Urchin, coming to join them.

“Won what?” asked Fingal.

Urchin had expected to lose, and didn’t mind at all. “Captain Padra said you’d be talking about your boat before they brought the soup,” he said, “and I said not even you could do that.”

“Oh, Urchin!” said Fingal. “I’m deeply hurt!”

“And the loser has to polish both sword belts for tomorrow,” said Padra. “But I think I should do them. I’ve already been caught out once this evening,”

“Oh, good,” said Fingal. “Who by?”

“You,” said Padra. “You just said you were responsible, and I never thought I’d hear that.”

“I only said I was responsible for...”

“Swanfeather’s bad habits, I know,” said Padra. “Fortunately she doesn’t have many. And we have another big day to come after Naming Day, so we’ll all be feasted to exhaustion.”

“Oh,” said Fingal innocently. “Is something happening, then?”

Of course, he knew perfectly well what was happening. Urchin and his oldest friend, a very sharp-spined girl hedgehog called Needle, were soon to be admitted to the Circle, the group of senior animals closest to the king. Neither of them were very senior, but they were both Companions to the King and did much of the work of Circle animals already, and the king had decided to make it official. This meant that Needle’s mother polished Needle’s spines every third night to make them gleam, and Apple, Urchin’s foster mother, had given him a pot of deep red paste for the tips of his tail and ears,

which were the only truly squirrel-red parts of him. (He had thanked her very much, but he didn't use it.)

Urchin could see Twigg farther along the beach. Wanting to ask how work was progressing on the boat Twigg was building for Fingal he hopped toward him, but he hesitated when he saw his old friend Captain Lugg and his wife, Cott, coming to talk to him.

"Here's Urchin!" called Lugg. He was looking whiter than ever around the muzzle, walked a little stiffly, and carried a frothing mug of nettle beer in his paw.

"Twigg here says he wants to marry our Moth," said Lugg, beaming. "Mind, I've told him he'll never see her, she'll always be looking after Princess Catkin, like she is now." He nodded at Tipp and Todd, jumping waves on the shore. "There's our Wing's two little lads, and our Wren's just got wed, and now Moth and Twigg are sorted. One of these days I'll put my paws up and play with my grandchildren."

The sky grew darker, and the air cooled. They were glad of the bonfires with their fierce heat and smell of wood smoke, and the soup that made you unbearably hungry when you smelt it and warm all the way down inside when you drank it. Lanterns were lit.

"Star!" shouted Todd.

"Up there!" yelled Tipp, hoping it would sound as if he'd seen it first.

There were cries of "ooh!" from the crowd, and "Where, please?" from Hope, the shortsighted little hedgehog who greatly admired Urchin. Then there was an "ouch" from Urchin as Needle, who was

looking up at the stars and not watching where she was going, walked into him.

“Sorry,” she said. “I suppose I should stand still when I’m watching the stars.”

Hope’s mother, Thripple, came to take him up to Fir’s turret. They were always welcome there, and it gave the best view of riding stars. A little group of their friends gathered around Needle and Urchin as they gazed upward. Fingal joined them, suddenly quiet and awed as a large star spun from the sky, swooped, and rose again. Crackle, the squirrel who worked in the tower bakery, had taken off her blue-and-white pastry cook’s apron and joined her friends on the beach, enjoying their company as much as the stars. Sepia of the Songs, a squirrel who sang far more than she spoke and would rather watch beauty than talk about it, drank in every detail of the way the stars danced in and out and changed places, reflecting on the sea. The moon cast a rippling of light across the sea as if it invited her to walk across it.

Juniper, limping as usual, came to Urchin’s side. His dark fur still had a pleasant smell of freshly cut wood and sawdust about it. Beside him was Whittle, the squirrel pupil of Brother Fir, and Tay, the otter lawyer. Whittle was learning the history and law of the island, and worked at it intensely. As he joined them, he was muttering his latest lesson under his breath, “...a bird for freedom, a cockle shell for a priest, an archway for a home...”

“Never mind your lessons now, Whittle,” said Juniper. “Enjoy the stars while they’re here.”

“Oh, er, yes, sorry, yes, good!” said Whittle and directed his face earnestly to the sky.

The last to join them was Scatter the squirrel, gazing upward with her eyes bright and her mouth open. “Ooh!” she breathed slowly. Fingal laughed and put his arm around her.

Scatter hadn’t always lived on Mistmantle. She had arrived as part of a plot against the island, but when she’d discovered what Mistmantle and its animals were like, she had wanted to stay forever. The way she had been forgiven, loved and accepted still amazed and delighted her even more than the riding stars did. She had become particularly friendly with the otters, and was making herself a cozy new home in a cave near the shore where she could be near them.

“Ooh!” This time they all said it at once. A storm of stars hurled themselves tumbling across the sky and whirled upward. They turned to watch them circle the tower like a flock of birds and sweep away into the night.

“Doesn’t it mean something when the stars do that?” said Crackle. “Do you know, Whittle?”

“Um, sorry, what?” said Whittle. “Sorry, I wasn’t listening. I was going over the Threadings Code again. Sorry.”

“What’s the Threadings Code?” asked Scatter.

“You know about the Threadings,” said Needle, who worked on those Threadings, the painted, woven and stitched pictures of the island’s stories. “Well, the details in the Threadings all mean something. Flowers and things, they all stand for something.”

“‘Angelica for holiness, wormwood for bitterness,’” said Whittle. “I’m up to that bit.”

“Don’t worry, Scatter,” said Fingal. “Ordinary animals like us don’t have to know it all. So, does anybody know what it does mean when the stars do that thing—that once-around-the-tower thing that they did just now?”

“My granny used to say that you have to look at them and think of all your hopes and dreams and ambitions,” said Needle. “You sort of keep looking at the stars and looking at your dreams as if the two go together. It’s because, when the stars go around the tower, they go out of sight and come back again, and that’s the way it can be with your hopes and dreams.”

“Look at the riding stars, look at your dreams,” said Sepia, stretching her paws to the fire. “I remember now.”

“All I dream of is having my own boat,” said Fingal. “Get looking and get dreaming, everyone!”

They smiled, but their hearts were with the stars. Urchin and Needle thought of the new life before them as full members of the Circle with all its responsibilities and demands. Urchin thought, too, of the parents he had never known. He folded his paw over the squirrel hair bracelet that was all he had of them.

Juniper gazed up steadily. There were two hopes and dreams for him. One was to serve the Heart and the island as the best priest he could be. The other was to find out who he really was.

Like Urchin, he was a foundling. Damson the squirrel had found

him as a baby and brought him up in secrecy in the days when any animal with a twisted paw, like his, was put to death. He was sure that Damson knew more about him and who he really was than she had ever told him.

Brother Fir had called him “Juniper of the Journeyings,” and he knew it wasn’t just because of his journey to the Isle of Whitewings. On Whitewings, Urchin had discovered who his parents were. That was what Juniper wanted for himself, too.

A star twirled down, so fast and bright that the flash of it made Juniper turn and squeeze his eyes shut. Suddenly, he shuddered, swallowed hard, and pressed a paw against his stomach to keep himself from feeling sick.

“Are you all right?” asked Urchin.

“I don’t know,” he whispered.

Behind his closed eyes, with the imprint of the star still before him, he had seen with intense clarity. For a split second he had seen claws: very white, outstretched claws. There had been something blue, something that he felt he should have recognized—then the silver flash of a knife.

“I’m fine,” he said to Urchin. There was no claw anymore, no flash of blue, no knife. But he had seen them.

Nobody noticed the gull that flew over the island that night with a fish in its beak. It meant to land and gobble it down; but the fish was diseased and foul-tasting, so the gull dropped it and flew on, beyond the mists, without anyone seeing it at all.