

Chapter 1

Starr

The first time we met he bit me. I held out my hand, straight and flat, just like Aunt Margaret said, but Starr snapped at it so excitedly with his big yellow teeth that he nipped my skin and made it bleed. It hurt like the dickens and I yelled blue murder, scaring the wits out of him. Then he turned tail and galloped across the meadow, disappearing into the woods on the other side.

The next time was just as bad. I was lying in the hammock feeling sorry for myself and missing the city noises. I wasn't used to the quiet of the country, where all you ever heard were bees and bugs and the odd cow mooing. My home in Toronto was on Jones Avenue right near Gerrard Street, where the air practically vibrated with the clanging of trolley cars, the squealing of sirens and the racket of a hundred screaming kids.

So at first I spent a lot of my time on the farm lying around pining for home. I did this in the hammock that Uncle Herb had slung between two poles in the front yard

especially for me. There were lots of trees he could have slung it from but Aunt Marg said I wouldn't get enough sunshine under them. "Of all God's miracles," she said, and she could name them off by the peck, "sunshine is far and away the best. It cures nearly anything that ails you." Anything except loneliness, I thought dejectedly.

That day, as I was lazing in the sun talking to my imaginary friend, Emily (I had invented Emily so I wouldn't go crazy), I suddenly had this creepy feeling come over me that somebody was watching me. I swivelled my eyes around nervously, and there was Starr with his big brown head lolling over the fence staring straight at me.

We eyed each other curiously. I don't know what he thought of me, but I thought he was beautiful. He was chestnut brown with a white star the length of his nose, a thick tawny mane and the most peculiar long white eyelashes I'd ever seen on a horse. He batted them at me now, sweeping them down over his shiny dark eyes, which just happened to be the same colour as my own.

I got out of the hammock the quickest way I knew how, by rolling over and landing *kerplunk* on the ground. Startled, he flung up his head, gave a piercing whinny and went tearing across the field as if the devil himself were after him.

"What did you do to him?" called Aunt Marg from the porch. She set down the two pails of milk she was carrying and threw her floppy straw hat up on a nail.

"Nothing!" I pouted, close to tears. "He just doesn't like me, I guess."

"Well, never you mind," she laughed, holding the door open with her backside and lifting the pails into the

kitchen. "I like you!" The door clacked shut behind her.

I already knew that! But I wanted Starr to like me. So the next time he hung his head over the fence I was ready for him. Instead of being in the hammock, I was sitting stock-still on the little bench that I had dragged down from the porch — the one Aunt Marg set her bread tins out on. Rising slowly to my feet, I tiptoed towards him, carefully balancing two sugar cubes on the end of a long, flat stick. But as soon as I got close to him he bolted.

"Dang!" I swore, throwing the stick at the fence. "Not even a *horse* will come near me!"

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Boy, I was lonely those first weeks on Uncle Herb's farm. Every night I'd say to Aunt Margaret, "I want to go home." And she'd say, "But Margaret" — I was named after her — "if you go home the doctor will send you to the TB sanitarium. You don't want that, now do you?" And I'd say, "No, but at least at the sanitarium there might be other sick kids to play with."

That's why I had been sent to the farm. Because the doctor said I had TB, which is short for tuberculosis, and I had to be isolated. "It's either the san or the farm," he said, "take your pick." So my mother picked the farm.

In that summer of 1925, sunshine, home cooking and good nursing care were all that could be done for TB. My mother said I was bound to get plenty of all three on the farm. "My sister Margaret is the best practical nurse in Ontario. Maybe in the whole country," she declared proudly. "Why, she's nursed hundreds of sick folk back to health after the doctors had given them up for lost. And she's only buried half a dozen so far."

“How long will I be gone, Ma?” I was beginning to get suspicious. What if I was dying and they weren’t telling me?

“Oh, just a few weeks at the most, Peg.” That’s what I got called at home — Peg or Peggy. I didn’t like either one. “Don’t worry your head. Margaret will have you fit as a fiddle in no time at all.”

Next came the problem of how to get me there. The farm was sixty-odd miles from Toronto, and my father didn’t own a car. And I was too weak to travel by train. So the doctor volunteered to deliver me himself. He said his folks lived in Shelburne, which was the nearest town to Uncle Herb’s farm, and he owed them a visit.

So Ma packed my grip and slipped a snapshot of our whole family into the side pocket. “Just so you don’t forget us,” she said.

Then the doctor bundled me in a woollen rug and laid me out on the back seat of his Pierce Arrow. It had a lovely new-car smell and I would have enjoyed the trip if I’d been feeling better. On the other hand, if I’d been feeling better I wouldn’t have got to go. So it was six of one and half a dozen of the other.

Curled up on the velvety seat, I soon fell fast asleep. The next thing I knew the doctor was calling, “Wake up, missy. We’re here!”

I jumped up, rubbing my eyes, and stared out the front window as he steered the Arrow up the long lane leading to the green farmhouse. At least it used to be green, but now the paint was flaking off, letting the parched grey wood show through. A weather-beaten sign nailed to the fencepost read, in faded letters, *Green Meadows*.

My aunt and uncle were both on the porch to greet us.

Uncle Herb was a solid looking man, with wiry red hair, a friendly grin that showed the space between his teeth, and a farmer's burnt complexion. He had on grey overalls and a blue-checked shirt. Aunt Marg was a stockily-built woman in a housedress that looked as if it had been cut from the same cloth as Uncle Herb's shirt. She had red hair coiled up in a bun, fair freckly skin and a wide sweet smile. They looked almost like twins.

The first thing I said was, "Am I going to die?"

Uncle Herb let out a hoot of laughter and the straw he had been wiggling between his teeth flew out of his mouth. "You do and your aunt will kill you!" he cried.

That made us all laugh. Then the doctor assured me that I was going to get well, and my aunt and uncle thanked him for dropping me off (like a sack of potatoes, joked Uncle Herb). I was soon tucked in under an afghan on the day-bed in the big farm kitchen.

I liked the kitchen. It was a homey room with a huge black iron stove, a long wooden table and six plain chairs. A washstand stood by the door with a graniteware basin on top and a pail of water underneath. The floor was made of wide boards with no linoleum. At the end of the room was a door that led upstairs to the bedrooms.

Both my aunt and uncle were nice, which in my experience is pretty unusual. Most often if your aunt is nice your uncle is awful — or vice versa.

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Aunt Marg worried a lot about my loneliness because she said that pining would hinder my progress. But since I wasn't allowed within a mile of other people, especially children, what could she do?

Of course she spent as much time with me as she could spare. Every night before bed she'd play a game of dominoes with me or read me a story when the TB made me too tired to read to myself.

But because it was the haying season and Uncle Herb didn't have a hired hand, Aunt Marg had to help out. So she had to leave me on my own more than she really liked.

It was a small farm, with just one horse — Starr — two cows — Flora and Fauna — and a flock of black and white hens that Aunt Marg called her "ladies." They didn't have regular names like the other livestock. Uncle Herb said his farm was a one-man operation. "One man and one woman!" Aunt Marg reminded him dryly.

"You're right there, Mag." That's what he called her sometimes — Mag. She didn't like it because it rhymed with hag, but there was no use trying to stop him. "That man!" she wagged her finger in his direction. "That uncle of yours. Why, if I didn't love him so much I'd have sent him packing long ago!"

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The second week I was there it rained cats and dogs so I had to stay indoors and rest on the daybed, with only my imaginary friend, Emily, for company. Sometimes I heard Starr neighing in the distance, which only made me feel more lonely.

Then one day Uncle Herb came in sopping wet; he slapped his hat on his knee and showered me with raindrops as he handed me a letter. I recognized the writing instantly. It was from my sister Josie, the one I was the closest to and shared the bed with at home. Squealing with delight, I ripped it open.

June 16, 1925

Dear Peg,

How are you? I hope you are lots better. We're all fine down here. We are having a swell summer so far. Do you know what we did last Saturday? We had a block picnic and all the families on our block went to High Park. All the mothers packed lunch baskets. Ma made egg and bologna sandwiches and gumdrop cake. There must have been a hundred people there altogether. Even Olive and Elmer went. (Olive and Elmer were the oldest in our family and they usually thought they were too grown-up to go on family outings.) The minute we jumped off the trolley car we all trooped down to where the animals are kept and fed them carrot tops through the fence. Then we played games like Shadow Tag and Cowboys and Indians. That's lots of fun in High Park because there are so many big trees to hide behind. The big boys played Buck, Buck, How Many Fingers Up? Our Harry was at the bottom of the heap and he nearly got his back broke when fat Theodore Duncan landed on top of him. So Jenny begged him to quit. (Jenny was Harry's twin so they were extra close.) Gracie and Davey were good as gold and didn't fight once because they were having so much fun playing London Bridges and Here I Sit A-Sewing. Bobby wet his drawers once so Ma put him back in napkins, but she didn't spank him. Flossie Gilmore went with Zelma Speares because Mrs. Gilmore had the vapours and couldn't go. (Flossie Gilmore was my best friend, but who the heck was Zelma Speares?)

At suppertime the men put the picnic tables in rows, end to end, so we could all sit down together. There was tons of food and oceans of lemonade. Afterwards we kids lay around on the grass moaning and holding our stomachs. Then we started telling jokes and stories.

When the women got the tables all cleared up and the men came back from their walk, the grown-ups played progressive euchre. The big kids, like Olive and Elmer, were allowed to play, too.

On our way home on the trolley car we flipped the wicker seatbacks over so we could ride facing each other. Then everybody sang "Hail, hail, the gang's all here, what the heck do we care, long as we got our carfare" and after that we sang "Show me the way to go home, over land or sea or foam." It was the most fun I ever had in my life. Even better than kids' day at the Ex and the rides at Sunnyside. Too bad you missed it.

I was so tired when I got home I went to bed without washing myself and Ma didn't even notice. I really like sleeping alone. There's no one to poke me when I wiggle my toes, and make me shove over. And it doesn't matter that the bed sinks down in the middle when there's only one person in it. But I miss you quite a bit, Peg, and hope you miss me too. Goodbye. Write soon.

*Your sister,
Josie.*

P.S. Ma and Pa want to add a line.

Hello there, daughter. I hope you're being a good girl and not giving any trouble. And I hope this finds you

well. Write me a note when you feel up to it. I'll hand the pen to your Pa now.

Your loving mother.

Well, Peg, we received your aunt's welcome letter a day or two ago saying how much better you are. That's sure good news to us. We'll be looking for you home at the end of the summer.

Lovingly, your father.

That night I went to bed early, but I didn't blow out the lamp right away. Instead, I got the picture of my family down off the washstand mirror and studied it for a long time. We all looked so happy standing in a bunch on the steps of our house on Jones Avenue. I noticed every little thing — the welcome mat hanging crooked over the railing, Bobby's damp drawers drooping down, our old Flyer wagon lying on its side on the weedy lawn. I remembered what fun it was coasting down the hill on Jones Avenue. I stared hard at each face, especially Ma's and Pa's, hoping I could make myself dream about them.

Josie's letter had made me feel better and worse both at once. I was glad to hear all the news from home, but how come, I wondered, they never thought of having a block picnic before, then all of a sudden when I'm not there, they have one?

I sighed and stuck the snapshot back up on the looking glass. Then I spread-eagled myself on the bed. It *was* nice having a bed to myself. And my own room, too! At home there were two beds in each room and two kids to a bed. My bed on the farm was a double one that didn't sink in

the middle. And it was extra soft because it had a downy feather tick. And Emily never wiggled her toes and she didn't take up any space at all.

Now, if only I could win over that stubborn horse!