

H A U N T E D



THE HOUSE NEXT DOOR

JOEL A.
SUTHERLAND

Illustrations by
Norman Lanting

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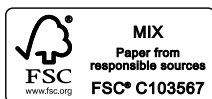
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*In memory of George Lenart — the most gentle man,
who left the most permanent mark*



CHAPTER ONE

“Look on the bright side,” Dad said to my sister, Sophie, as he placed one hand on her shoulder and the other on mine. “You always wanted a horse.”

Sophie sighed. “Just because there’s a horse next door doesn’t make it mine.”

The horse was in the snowy field beside our new house. Dad, Sophie and I had spent the afternoon unloading the rental truck and unpacking boxes as Mom started putting things away. I’d walked in and out dozens of times, but I hadn’t noticed the horse before. It didn’t make a sound or move a muscle. It stood as still as a statue. I was beginning to wonder if the horse was actually alive, but then its tail swooshed side to side, just once.

“And even if that horse was mine,” Sophie continued, “I think I’d ask for my money back.”

I saw her point. The horse was jet black with a white spot on its forehead, but you’d never mistake

it for Black Beauty. It was tall and should've been muscular, but its ribs were visible beneath its dull and matted coat. And I couldn't tell for sure in the dim light, but I thought I saw some dark liquid trickling out of one nostril. Three of its ankles were white, while the fourth was as black as the rest of its body. I didn't know the correct term for horse ankles but I knew Sophie would, so I asked her.



“Horse ankles?” she laughed. “I think you mean pasterns, the part between the hoof and the fetlock.”

I didn't bother asking what a fetlock was. Sophie knew more about horses than anyone I'd ever met, even though she was only ten and she'd never owned a horse or taken lessons. We'd gone



riding for a few hours a handful of times, but that was all. She was horse crazy, had been ever since she was old enough to say “neigh.”

Dad picked a clump of tall, dead grass from under the old fence that separated our new house from the rickety farmhouse next door. He held the grass over the fence and whistled through his teeth, a high, piercing sound that hurt my ears a little.

“Here, girl,” he called to the horse, trying to entice it over. “Or boy. I don’t actually know what you are. Sophie, can you tell if it’s a girl or a boy?”

“I can see everything you can see from here,” Sophie said. “No, I can’t tell.”

The horse continued to stare at us. *Swish-swish* went its tail. Otherwise it didn’t move.

“What’s the matter?” Dad called across the field. “Did your mommy teach you not to take grass from a stranger or something?”

“Richard?” It was Mom. She was standing in the front doorway behind us with a confused look on her face. “Who are you talking to?”

“Our new neighbour,” Dad said.

Mom peered at the farmhouse. “New neighbour? Where?”

“There in the field,” I said, pointing. “Shadowfax.”

“Nice one, Matt!” Dad said. He ruffled my hair.

“Who?” Mom said, her frown deepening.

“Shadowfax,” I said. “You know, Gandalf’s horse.”

Dad was quick to join in the nerd fest I’d started. His voice rose as his excitement grew. “Descendant of Felaróf and Lord of the Mearas, the greatest horse breed in all of Middle-earth.”

“Half of what you both just said was English, and the other half was, well, I have no idea.” Mom looked to Sophie for support. “Do you have any clue what they’re talking about?”

“*The Lord of the Rings*, I think,” Sophie said. “But other than that, no. Not really, no.”

At thirteen, I’d read *The Lord of the Rings* three times and Dad and I had watched all the movies a dozen times. We’d even watched the director’s extended editions with hours of cut scenes added back in.

We were bona fide geeks and proud of it.

Mom was an auditor. Or something. I was never really sure what she did. She told me during breakfast one day, but I started thinking about the wallpaper in our kitchen, which was slightly more interesting. We had moved from Bracebridge to Courtice because of her job. She got a new one in Toronto auditing products or processes or numbers



or whatever auditors audit. So we had to leave our totally awesome house to come to this bland suburban neighbourhood so she could be closer to the city.

Dad was an artist, so he could work pretty much anywhere. Although painting or sketching beside the creek that flowed through our old backyard had to be better for his muse than sitting under the baking sun in our new treeless yard, listening to barking dogs and crying babies and whatever radio station the neighbours listened to while mowing their lawns.

Mom finally spotted the horse. Its black hair was like camouflage against the darkening sky. “Look at that! In all the times we came out here to check on the progress of the house I never once saw a horse. Hey, Sophie, you always wanted a horse and now you live next door to one. Pretty cool, huh?”

Sophie looked like she was about to tell Mom the same thing she’d told Dad, but then she took a deep breath and forced a smile. “Yeah, Mom. Pretty cool.”

“You never know,” Mom said. “Maybe once the neighbours discover how much you love horses they’ll let you ride theirs.”

I looked at the farmhouse but didn’t see any sign of life other than the horse. No movement in

the windows, no lights turned on, no car in the driveway. The house looked one hundred years old, easy. Maybe even older. It was as white as the snow that surrounded it. To the right of the door was a small white statue of a horse, and beside that was a porch swing that creaked back and forth slowly in the wind.

The other thing that caught my eye was a sign at the foot of the driveway. It read BRIAR PATCH FARM and had a silhouette of a horse in mid-run. I couldn't picture the real horse of Briar Patch Farm running half as fast as the horse on the sign — it was far too sickly looking.

Around back was a large stable that had seen better days. It used to be red, but most of the paint had peeled off the wooden boards. I didn't think the roof had much time left before it collapsed.

The house looked stubborn. Though I guess it wasn't the house but whoever lived there that was stubborn. The old house sat surrounded on all sides by cookie-cutter homes in our newly built subdivision. All the other farmers who used to live in the area had sold their properties to developers, but not my new neighbours. They'd obviously refused to move, and now the white house, with its large field, stable and horse, stood out like a sore thumb.



My family and I looked at the house in silence for a moment or two. Cold wind blew snow along the street and froze my skin. It was the first day of March break and instead of spending the week skiing and snowboarding and skating with my friends like I'd done the past few years, I'd be spending it getting settled in my new home. Alone.

Mom shivered and hugged her arms to her body. "Brrr. It's cold. Let's go inside. Pizza's about ready to come out of the oven."

We all forgot about the horse — pizza, even frozen pizza, always had that effect on us — and followed my mother inside. But as we sat in a circle on the family-room floor, eating cardboardy pizza off paper plates that probably tasted about the same, I happened to look out the window. It was pitch-black outside, but I thought I saw two large eyes reflecting the light from the family room. There was a shadowy blur of movement, and then the eyes were gone.

"What is it, Matt?" Mom asked.

"Nothing." I shook my head. "Nothing at all."

But I had a feeling that wasn't true.