

The Ghost Horse of Meadow Green

Anne Louise MacDonald

KCP Fiction

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for Frank, for everything

and thanks to Kim for the beginning
and Lana for the end

CHAPTER 1

The Black Horse

Kim leaned her forehead against the school bus window and stared at the horse that ran effortlessly alongside. Today she made him black. She almost always made him black. And she was on that horse, her long golden hair streaming behind her. She rode bareback — no need for saddle or bridle. With touches as light as thoughts, she signaled to him. They sailed over fences, flew with ease through spring green pastures, bounded across driveways without missing a beat. It seemed as if the horse's hooves never touched the ground — like in her dreams. Only today, they ran for the pure joy of it, running toward, not from.

Because today Gramma-Lou was coming. The most wonderful person in the whole world. The only person who loved Kim just as she was. Who never wanted her to be braver or stronger or smarter or taller. Who never ever said she was too shy. “You’re very sensitive,” Gramma-Lou

would say, “and that’s not a weakness — that’s a strength.”

It had been more than a year since Kim had even heard that sweet voice. Gramma-Lou was too sick to talk whenever Kim phoned. That’s what Kim’s mother had said. Kim knew it was really because her father hated long-distance bills.

But today Gramma-Lou was coming to live in Meadow Green — Kim’s dream come true. Kim leaned forward and pushed the black horse to an impossible speed, leaving behind the knowledge that dreams can turn without warning.

She waved to the bus as they galloped along. Admiring faces smiled back at her.

Three girls screamed and jumped to their feet. “Aaagh! A frog!”

Reality landed with a wet *thawk* on the cracked turquoise vinyl seat. Kim jerked her mind back aboard the bus and blinked at the fat green frog crouched by her thigh. It stretched a webbed hind foot forward and squeegeed lint out of one of its glittering yellow eyes.

“Poor thing,” she breathed. She reached for the frog to tuck it into the safety of her knapsack.

“Cracker Kid picked it up!”

“Gross. You’ll get warts!”

“Hey, Cheese and Crackers, throw it to me!”

“It’s a prince. Kiss it! Kiss it!”

Every eye on the bus focused on the frog ... and Kim. She couldn’t breathe. Her heart hammered in her ears. She dropped the frog and spun back to the window. If only she could throw herself through it. Jump out and

find a hole to crawl into, a place with cool soil and leaves, safe in the shadows of whispering trees. Like under those trees right there at the far end of that field.

What was that? Under the trees, the shadows shifted slightly. In the dark, something darker still. It moved again. Coins of light dappled across a black back.

A horse! A black horse!

The horse of her dreams.

As the bus rumbled along, a row of trees blocked Kim’s view. A white house with a silver mailbox slid by. “MacLean” stood out in clean blue letters. Kim blinked in surprise.

The MacLean farm was just down the road from her place. She’d moved from Vancouver more than ten months ago and ridden from Meadow Green to Antigonish and back again every school day since. She knew every horse and pony on that route, and she had never seen that horse before. It couldn’t have been there all along.

But it was there now. A horse living almost next door. This was perfect! Things would be just like they used to be.

Just like every day of every Prince Edward Island summer for as far back as she could remember, when she and Gramma-Lou went next door to see Gramma-Lou’s horses.

Well, they weren’t exactly Gramma-Lou’s. They belonged to Mr. Cameron, her boss. But Gramma-Lou had been looking after them forever, mucking out their stalls, grooming them and training them to race. Even after Mr. Cameron had a stroke three years ago and sold all the horses except Dan and Topper, Gramma-Lou would go over every day to help muck out and groom and, weather

permitting, take each horse for a gentle jog around the track. And every day of every summer, Kim went with her.

Until last summer — because the winter before last, Gramma-Lou got so sick her doctor insisted they hire someone to look after her. Lillian, Mr. Cameron's niece, moved into the sunrise bedroom in the periwinkle blue cottage. Kim's bedroom. The one that overlooked the silken ripples of dunes and the ageless Atlantic.

Kim had to stay in the tiny airless apartment in downtown Vancouver. So did Janis, because an eleven-year-old couldn't stay home by herself.

Janis was Kim's mother. First names between friends, said Janis, who was raised in a hippie commune on Moresby Island, where everyone called everyone by their first name. She had enthusiastically weeded out "Mom" and "Dad" by the time Kim was three. Janis was like that, a nonconformist through and through. And an artist. She had been an artist all her life (and in all her past lives except when she had been a small Chinese girl who died in the influenza epidemic of 1918).

As for Colm, Kim's father, if Janis preferred first names, fine with him. As long as she looked after Kim and shipped her off to Gramma-Lou's every summer so Janis and he could go on his annual research expedition into some insect-thick, boot-sucking bog to collect data on the population dynamics of his blessed orchid, *Arethusa bulbosa*.

When Kim couldn't go to PEI for the summer and Janis had to stay in Vancouver, Colm went into a rage.

Summer was their special time, he ranted. Camping was no fun alone. Who was going to cook? Who was going to keep him warm at night? His mother couldn't be *that* sick. Kim could look after her. That Cameron woman was sucking up all of Lou's life savings. He had plans for that money. Everything was ruined. It was all his mother's fault.

Everything was always his mother's fault ... or Kim's.

By the end of June, Colm had finally shut up and gone off to a bog in Nova Scotia by himself.

But that was last year. Now they were all living in Nova Scotia, and Gramma-Lou was coming to stay. And Kim had just discovered a horse almost next door — she didn't have to worry about her grandmother leaving Dan and Topper behind. They could go visit the black horse every day. It was perfect!

All Kim had to do was get permission from Mrs. MacLean.

That was all. And that was impossible.

Janis had talked about Mrs. MacLean. They'd met at the Co-op grocery store. Janis said Mrs. MacLean grew up with Gramma-Lou and was very interesting. Kim knew "interesting" was another word for "weird." Just like Janis, who could talk to anyone, anywhere, anytime. The complete opposite of Kim.

A blackness as dark as Mrs. MacLean's horse pressed at Kim. Knock on that door? Impossible. Totally, absolutely, positively — impossible.

The bus grated to a stop at a long driveway leading to an old white farmhouse. Her house. Kim jumped to

her feet. She glanced down at the turquoise vinyl. The frog was gone.

A boy shouted, “Hey, Cracker Kid, where’s your prince?”

Once again, every eye on the bus turned to Kim. With chin to chest, she fled.

CHAPTER 2

The Haunted House

Kim didn’t stop running until the kitchen door slammed behind her. She threw her knapsack on the table and dropped into the old wooden rocker to catch her breath.

There was a horse next door! And a black horse, to boot! How was she ever going to get to see it? With Janis in PEI helping Gramma-Lou pack, there was no one to ask Mrs. MacLean.

Talking to strangers terrified Kim, especially when talking about horses. She got so nervous and so excited that she shivered and stammered and made a total fool of herself. Even if by some miracle she *could* talk to Mrs. MacLean, the woman would just think she was one more annoying kid begging for a free horseback ride. She’d see how desperate Kim was, how pathetically horse crazy. She’d laugh.

“I can’t do it!” Kim shouted to the house.

The butter yellow walls remained calm, soothing, like summer sunshine, summer smiles. But what about Gramma-