

The  
Girl  
from the  
Attic



Marie Prins

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COMMON DEER PRESS

Published by Common Deer Press Incorporated.

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Published in 2020 by Common Deer Press  
3203-1 Scott St.  
Toronto, ON  
M5E 1A1

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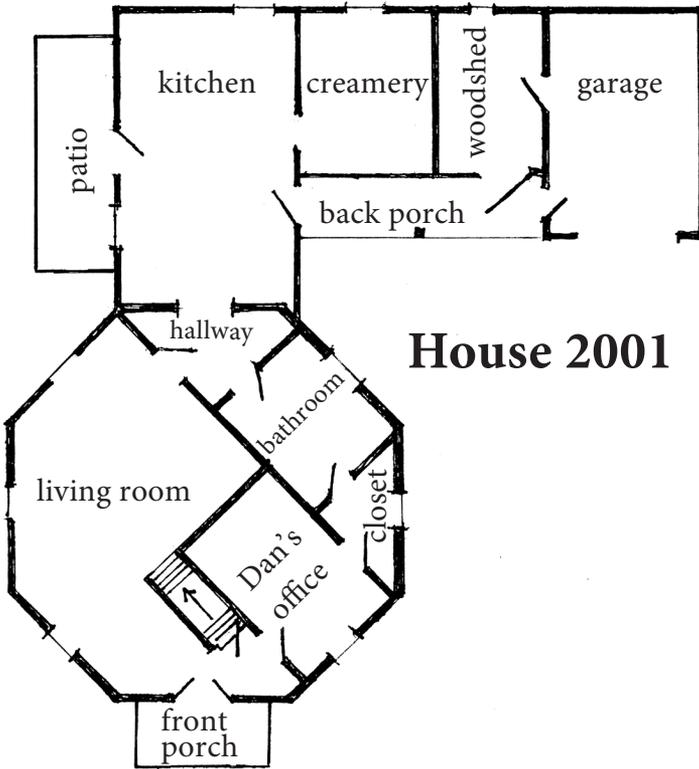
Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Marie Prins—First edition.  
The Girl from the Attic / Marie Prins  
ISBN 978-1-988761-51-0 (print)  
ISBN 978-1-988761-52-7 (e-book)

Cover Image and Interior Illustrations: Edward Hagedorn  
Book Design: Siobhan Bothwell

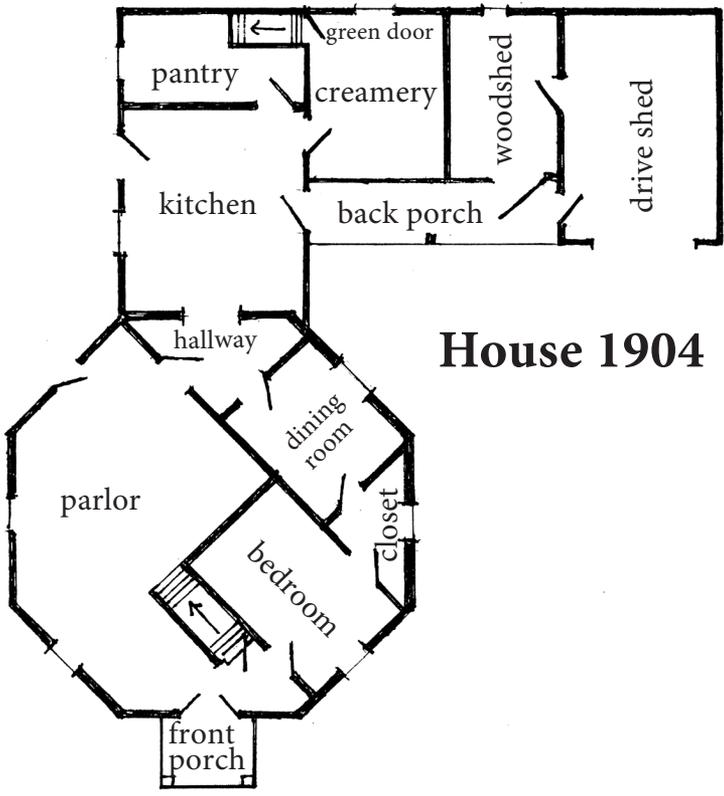
Printed in Canada

[www.commondeerpress.com](http://www.commondeerpress.com)

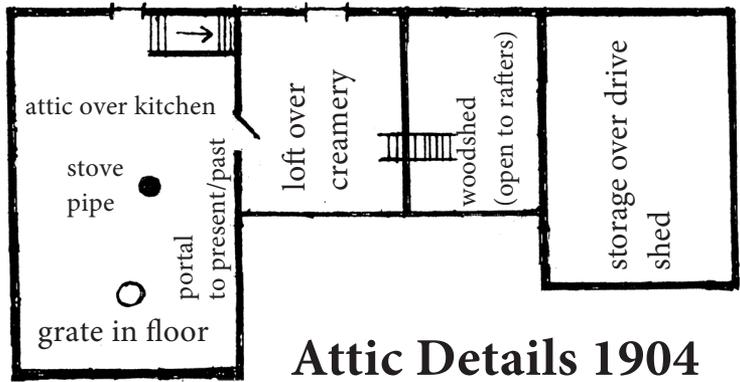
To my mother, Alice Suzanne Wisse,  
who taught me to read.



## The Octagon House



**House 1904**



**Attic Details 1904**

# Prologue

Spring 2001

*The cat sat on the old windowsill, as she had off and on for a hundred years. Below, a green station wagon rumbled to a stop on the slushy road. A pale face peered out its rear window. The glass rolled down with fits and starts and a pair of green eyes squinted at the dilapidated house covered in dull red bricks, which were crumbling along its foundation. Instantly the cat crouched behind the curtain.*

*“You’ve got to be kidding!” a girl said, her voice sullen but penetrating. “We’re going to live here? This place looks like a huge, moldy cupcake.”*

*The man turned off the engine and unfolded his body from the car. With long strides, he stepped onto the uneven sidewalk towards the boxy front porch that sagged in one corner. Above, the cat slunk further into the shadows.*

*“It’s an octagon, Maddy,” the man said. He widened his*

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arms as if to embrace its eight sides. "Some guy built it a long time ago. In the 1800s. It was a wedding present for his wife."

"Too weird." The girl slipped lower in her seat.

The car's front window slid down. The cat watched a woman lift a camera to her eye and aim it at the house.

"It's an antique, hon," the woman said as she snapped away. "A very neglected one."

The man pulled on thick gloves. "It needs a lot of work. I'll start as soon as the sale closes and I get the keys."

The cat's eyes widened. She knew her long sleep was over. Just that morning, a cardinal wakened her with its song, and beneath the bird's feet, red buds on the maple branch swelled in the sunlight. Spring was arriving, and with it, this family. Now began the last undertaking before the cat could sleep forever.

From below, the man called over his shoulder. "C'mon, Maddy. Let's walk around the house." He disappeared down the driveway.

With her boot, the girl pushed open the car door and climbed out. A cold breeze blew a strand of red hair into her eyes. She coughed. The woman called after her.

"Maddy Rose, your scarf!"

The girl frowned and wound it around her neck. She followed the man to the side of the octagon. The cat jumped off the sill and sprinted to a window overlooking the driveway. It saw the woman adjust her camera lens and take more pictures before carefully stepping over ice patches on the concrete drive. The woman stopped and stared at the L-shaped, wooden building extending from the back of the octagon.

"What's that?" she asked the man.

"It's a kitchen with an enormous wood stove." His voice

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*was loud, exuberant. "You'll love it!" He waved his hand towards the shorter part of the L. "Next to it is a workroom! Your new studio! And here is the woodshed."*

*He swung open a crooked door. "It's full of junk now, but I'll stack it high with wood for the winter."*

*The cat smiled. Wood for the stove meant warmth for her old bones. Below, the woman, who'd left the car, leaned forward and glanced inside the woodshed. But the girl stood stock still, her arms pressed stiffly against her sides. The cat twitched its nose. Better pay attention, she thought. Woodsheds have lofts and lofts have secrets.*

*As the three people trekked around the back of the house, the cat dashed downstairs through the cold kitchen and into the workroom. She scratched open a small green door next to an old porcelain sink and bounded up narrow steps to a low-ceilinged room above the kitchen. From the sill of its only window, the cat surveyed the garden through its grimy glass. Below, the woman was talking excitedly to the man and taking pictures of withered cabbages that poked through thawing snow. The girl was kicking clumps of ice. She turned and trudged towards the maple trees on the south lawn. Halfway up the path, she wobbled on its slippery stones.*

*"Careful, Maddy!" the woman called out.*

*The girl turned and scowled. "You be careful too!" She pointed at the woman's swollen stomach.*

*Then she stamped her foot. "I can't believe we're moving to this creepy place in the middle of nowhere!" Without waiting for a reply, she stomped around the corner and out of sight.*

*With a rare burst of energy, the cat streaked back to the front upstairs window and pressed herself against the glass. She watched the girl climb into the back seat of the car and*

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*slam the door. The cat's eyes narrowed. She needs to know this house's stories, she growled in a purring sort of way. The old stories. The hard ones too.*

*Below, the girl shifted in her seat and stared at the upstairs window. The cat stared back. As the girl's eyes widened, she flicked the white tip of her tail like the flame of an old, tapered candle pulling the girl towards its light.*



# Chapter 1

Early Summer 2001

**C***rack!* An egg slid out of its shell and disappeared into the bowl. *Crack!* The dry pancake flour swallowed another. Sitting with folded arms at the kitchen table, Maddy watched her mother beat the mixture and pour its lumpy batter onto a sizzling grill.

Amy was right. Eggs and promises were meant to be broken. The last time Maddy's mother, Carla, had whipped up a pancake breakfast, they had lived in a bungalow in Scarborough. Then she married Dan. Despite their promise to stay in the city until Maddy's twelfth birthday, here she was, hunched over an empty plate under the peak of a high wooden ceiling in a huge kitchen over a hundred kilometers away. It felt like the other side of the world.

"With the baby coming, we need a bigger house," her mother had explained. "Don't worry, you'll like living in the

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country. All that fresh air. It'll get rid of the cough that's plagued you all winter. Maybe help clear up your asthma too. And soon you'll have a new sister. How wonderful is that?"

Maddy didn't really think it was wonderful at all. She didn't like babies, with their wobbly necks and all their fussing. She'd probably end up babysitting all the time. At least, that's what her best friend Amy had predicted—*You'll see. They'll break their promises. Before you know it, you'll be changing dirty diapers!*

Carla flipped a pancake in the cast-iron frying pan and tapped it down with the spatula. Its buttery smell filled the air. Maddy's misery melted as she stared out the picture window by the table.

A beam of summer sun filled the syrup jar with an amber light. Maddy poured a puddle of its golden sweetness onto her plate. As she traced circles in the syrup, she squinted into the bright sunshine outdoors. Beyond the patio, shadows danced under the maple tree. A chipmunk ran up the trunk. In a wink, a long black tail with a white tip vanished into the bushes.

"Hey Mom! Did Dan find any cats when he was fixing up this place?"

"Not that he mentioned." Carla slipped the hot pancakes onto Maddy's plate.

Maddy frowned. Dan wouldn't mention finding a cat. He didn't like them. Said they would make her asthma worse. Her mother thought she could get a cat from the Humane Society as soon as they moved, but that was another promise bound to be broken. Dan would convince her that he was right.

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The back door banged open and Dan stomped into the large kitchen.

“Boots off!” commanded Carla.

“No worries, I’m leaving right away! Gotta get to the dump with the junk from the woodshed.”

Maddy cut a pancake into quarters and folded one into her mouth.

“After the dump, it’s the woodlot for firewood. Want to come, Maddy?”

Maddy swallowed. Really? Go to the dump and then tramp through the woods all day? She’d rather be on MSN with Amy planning her escape from this weird place. Covering her mouth, she pretended to cough.

Dan reached for his coffee mug and leather gloves. “Ahh, your cough! Well, maybe next time.” He nudged open the door with his boot. “Maddy, with the baby coming, your mother could use your help around here.” Eyebrows raised, he sent her a knowing look before the door snapped shut behind him.

Maddy glanced at her mother who was patting her stomach as she gazed out the window by the sink. Maddy knew she wouldn’t be able to fool her. With a sigh, she poked at the last pancake. It was round like her mother’s belly. Feeling suddenly full, she pushed the plate away.

“Dan’s right, Maddy Rose!” Carla turned around. “I need help in the garden. Time to get dressed.”

Maddy groaned. She hated pulling weeds. How was she going to escape this one? With a scowl, she dragged her feet through the living room and past the den. Inside, Dan’s new blue iMac sparkled on his desk. Maddy eyed it. She wondered if Amy was online and whether or not Dan had

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changed the password again. Perhaps if she disappeared for a while, her mother would forget about her and she'd have time to go online. Upstairs in her room, Maddy stripped off her pajamas and tugged on a T-shirt and jeans. Back at the bottom of the stairs, she edged open the front door, careful not to rattle its loose, antique knob.

Moments later, she heard the kitchen screen door bang shut. Maddy waited a minute for Carla to make her way into the backyard and then snuck around the octagon to the woodshed. She silently swung open its heavy, wooden door.



A dull shaft of daylight seeped through a small window cut high in the back wall. It revealed a loft stretching above her head into the shadows. The perfect hiding place! Bracing a ladder against the wall, Maddy climbed over its top

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rung and scrambled onto a dusty floor. Under the window sat a worn captain's chair. Maddy sank into its seat and, bracing an elbow on its arm, propped her chin in her hand.

Living in the country was soooo boring. The TV had only three channels. The VCR was broken and Dan refused to upgrade to a DVD player. And, worst of all, she could only use Dan's computer when he gave her permission, which was once in a blue moon. Totally unfair.

Even then, chatting with Amy on MSN messenger was nearly impossible. It took forever to download anything with the abysmal, dial-up internet. Basically, she was stranded on a desert island. Except there was no sand, no beach. Just a round house and two dumb acres in the land of nowhere.

The whole situation, she concluded, was Dan's fault. Dan the Man. That's what Amy called him. Carla had said things wouldn't change after he moved into their house in the city. But they sure had. Like, right away. First he took up way too much space because he was such a big guy—like, he wore size thirteen boots! Then he piled his stuff everywhere. Even stored his tools in her mother's studio. Then he married her. And then she got pregnant. Or maybe it was the other way around. She certainly didn't want to think about that. But no matter, because right away Dan convinced her mom to buy this house on the edge of Colebrook, far from its downtown block of stores. Which was as weird as building an octagon for a wedding present, like that guy did for his wife over a hundred years ago. And now all Dan the Man did was eat! Like a huge carpenter ant. "We'll plant a big vegetable garden in back," her mother had gushed when the house sale closed. "Carrots, potatoes, zucchini. You name it!" Now

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she was always tired, and she needed Maddy's help . . . like, all the time.

As Maddy's eyes adjusted to the darkness of the loft, she spotted a brown trunk in the back corner. She crept towards it and pushed on its rounded lid. It didn't budge. She banged its rusty latch. Dust spiraled into the air. She sneezed and banged again. The lid slipped sideways a sliver. With a heave, she lifted it and peered inside.

In the faint light, Maddy recognized the hunched shape of a black cat stitched onto a quilt. Faded yellow eyes peered back at her. Cautiously, she touched the cloth. The white tip of its tail twitched. She yelped and fell backward with a hard thump.



## Chapter 2

The cat in the bushes!

Maddy scrambled to her feet. She bent over the trunk. Nothing moved. She stared at the cat for a long moment, then took a deep breath and tugged the quilt all the way out. More dust and a faint musty smell rose out of its folds. Maddy sneezed. Nose twitching, she bunched the quilt in her arms and draped it over the back of the captain's chair. She could see that its edges were frayed and a mouse had chewed a hole in one corner. A ray of light from the window spot lit a large red barn stitched in the middle. Farm animals circled around it—a rooster, three hens, two cows, a black horse, and a black cat with a white tip on its tail.

Maddy brushed her finger over the cat. Again, its tail twitched. She jerked back as if it had bitten her. But then she noticed a worn, loose thread. She smiled. The cat did not. It sat still, its yellow eyes unblinking.

A shiver of excitement ran up Maddy's spine. Someone

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who'd lived in this house had probably sewn this quilt a long time ago. Did her mother know about it? Apparently not. She was a photographer. If she'd known, she'd already have hung it up somewhere and taken a dozen pictures of it for a country craft magazine.

"Maddy Rose, where are you?" Her mother's voice floated up through the floor of the loft. It sounded like she was standing right below her. Maddy quickly folded the quilt, making sure the cat lay on top, and shoved it in the trunk. With a determined heave, she pushed the trunk further into the corner. Then she climbed down the ladder, left the woodshed, and slipped back into the kitchen.

Her mother stood at the sink rinsing lettuce and spinach leaves.

"What's up?" Maddy asked nonchalantly.

Carla raised an eyebrow. "Where have you been? You didn't show up in the garden."

Maddy shrugged. "Getting dressed."

"C'mon, Maddy. I really do need your help. There's stew to be made for supper. But first," she tilted her head and waved a hand in the air. "I want to tackle this ceiling. Look at those cobwebs!"

Maddy crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one leg. She eyed the wide pine boards high above her head. For the first time, she noticed a fringe of grimy dust covering the blades of a ceiling fan.

Her mother shook her head. "What possessed Leo to put a cathedral ceiling in this kitchen? It's impossible to dust without ladders and a long extension on the vacuum cleaner."

"Who's Leo?" Maddy asked in her best flat voice.

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“The guy who owned this house before us. I wish he hadn’t...” her mother’s words trailed away as her hands circled her stomach.

“I’m tired,” Maddy grumbled.

Carla raised both eyebrows. Maddy sighed and trudged into the workroom next to the kitchen. It was an odd room, with rough, planked walls painted a dull red. Dan called it a creamery. He claimed that ages ago the farmer had separated cream from milk in this workroom before storing it in large metal cans. That now made sense to Maddy. The quilt in the trunk had a big barn and two cows stitched on it. She glanced at the narrow white boards on the ceiling. The loft and the trunk must be right above her head. No wonder she heard her mother’s voice so clearly moments ago.

Maddy circled past one of Dan’s toolboxes and pulled open the door to the storage closet next to the washing machine. When she reached for the vacuum cleaner, she noticed the back wall of the closet was made from a green wooden panel. Even though there was no knob, Maddy thought it looked like a door. But leading to where? Not another room, for her mother stood in the kitchen on the other side of that wall and its green panel.

While Carla positioned a ladder and climbed its steps, Maddy lifted the vacuum cleaner off the floor. With one awkward swipe after another, her mother sucked dust off the fan’s blades and spider webs from the pine boards above their heads. Maddy’s arms ached. A sticky gob of dust fell onto her cheek. She hunched her shoulders and tried to wipe it off. A tickle rose in her throat. She began to cough. Was her asthma going to kick in? Maddy coughed again. If she pretended to wheeze, maybe her mother would take

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pity on her and stop vacuuming. But her mother ignored Maddy's coughs and kept working. At last, she stepped off the ladder and sank into a chair.

"Thank goodness that's done! I'm exhausted!" She wiped sweat from her forehead. "Maddy, hon, check the mailbox. I'm waiting for my last contract before the baby arrives."

For the first time, Maddy noticed the dark circles under her mother's eyes. She really did look exhausted. A lot more than Maddy's pretend tiredness.

"Okay, no prob," Maddy said, surprised at her sudden willingness to help but a little worried by the way her mother had slumped into her chair.

As she walked towards the mailbox, a car backed out of the neighbor's driveway across the road. It rolled slowly past the octagon before driving off. Behind the steering wheel, a small woman with white hair and dark eyes peered at Maddy through gold-rimmed glasses. She looked as ancient as their house.

In the mailbox, instead of a letter for her mother, there was a large envelope addressed to Madison Rose Stevens. It had Poppa George's return address, her old house in Scarborough. The house her grandfather had moved into after they left. The one Maddy had begged to live in with him when her mother and Dan announced their plans to move to the country.

Maddy sat down on the front porch steps, opened the envelope, and pulled out a copy of *Country Farms* magazine from 1985. On its cover was a yellow sticky note that read, *Found this in The Antique Shoppe. Check out pp. 10 & 12.*

Maddy grinned. Poppa George enjoyed rummaging through junk shops and sharing his finds with her. He

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was a retired high school teacher who loved to tell stories about local history. When she lived in her old house, close to downtown Toronto, he had told her about the secret passages in Casa Loma and the ghosts in the government buildings at Queen's Park, often adding spooky noises to scare her.

Curious about his latest discovery, Maddy thumbed to page ten in the magazine. On it was a colored photograph of a bright, red brick octagon with a small, tidy front porch. Underneath it, she read the yellow-highlighted words, *Built in the 1850's, this unusually shaped house still stands on the eastern edge of Colebrook, close to the shores of Lake Ontario.*

"Wow!" Maddy exclaimed. "That's our house!" She frowned. It looked so different with white trim and rose-colored glass brightening the front door. Leaning against the porch pillar, she began to read the article. Suddenly, a black cat circled past her and down the driveway. Maddy blinked. Then she shoved the magazine under the doormat and sprinted around the house in time to see a black tail with a white tip disappear into the woodshed. When she yanked open the door, the cat scooted up the ladder into the loft.

Without flicking on the light switch, Maddy followed it into the darkness. In the dim light from the window, she recognized the shape of the trunk. But now, in the low back wall, a faint glow shone around the sides of a small, rectangular door.

Maddy crept towards its outline. She bent down for a better look. An old-fashioned iron latch beckoned her to lift it and tug on the handle below. Without a sound, the door swung open.