

Sample Chapter

Zoe and the Great Summer Jubilee · Book 1 · Merevale Creek Farm

A free sample: the opening chapter, in full.

Chapter One • The New Arrival

The gate at Merevale Creek Farm had stood for a very long time. It was old and crooked, patched with new wood where the old had rotted, and it creaked when the wind blew from the east. Every animal on the farm knew its voice. The long, low groan that meant someone was arriving. That morning, the gate groaned loudest of all, the animals stopped what they were doing and looked.

Zoe was large. That was the first thing anyone noticed. For most of the animals of Merevale Creek Farm, it was also the last thing they needed to know. She was a Rottweiler, black as a rain cloud, with patches of warm tan above her eyes and along her broad chest. Her paws were the size of Margot the Hen's best serving plates. Her tail was long and natural. When she walked through the gate that morning, the gravel crunched beneath her as if the lane itself was paying attention. She carried nothing with her except a quiet expression that gave nothing away.

The farmyard was not exactly welcoming. Mayo the Horse stood at the front of the assembled animals with the expression of someone who had been elected spokesman without being asked. He was tall and chestnut-brown, with a mane that he kept very neat, and he had opinions about most things. "We weren't told to expect a dog," he said, to no one in particular and to everyone at once. Margot the Hen clutched her clipboard, the one she kept for Jubilee preparations, then peered at Zoe over the top of it. "A large dog," she added, as if this were relevant information Mayo had carelessly omitted.

George the Rabbit, who was small and prone to worry, had retreated behind the water trough. Only his ears were visible, twitching like two nervous question marks above the rim. Mo the Goat said nothing at all. He was leaning against the fence post at the edge of the yard, chewing slowly, watching Zoe with the patient eyes of an animal who had seen many things come and go and had learned not to make up his mind in the first five minutes.

Zoe stood in the middle of it all and let them look. It was not the first time she had been looked at this way. It did not mean the conversation was over. It meant the conversation had not yet begun. That was different. That was something she could work with.

"Good morning," she said. Her voice was calm and unhurried, like the creek on a still day. "My name is Zoe. I've come to help with the Jubilee."

A silence settled over the farmyard, the particular kind of silence that is not peaceful at all, but full of unspoken things. “The Jubilee,” said Mayo slowly, “requires a great many helpers.” He paused. “It does not, as a rule, require dogs.”

“Mayo,” said Mo, from his fence post, “the Jubilee requires whatever it requires. Let the animal speak.”

It was George who caused the trouble, though he hadn’t meant to. An hour after Zoe’s arrival, he had been fetching water from the creek. The bucket was large, far too large for a rabbit, and the path back up the bank was steep and slick with summer mud. Halfway up, his back foot went, the bucket lurched, and George went tumbling sideways into the reeds with a small, alarmed squeak.

Zoe arrived at the top of the bank to find George sitting in the mud, staring at his bucket with an expression of complete despair. “Are you hurt?” Zoe asked. “Only my dignity,” said George, which was a very brave thing to say for an animal sitting in a muddy reed bed.

Zoe looked at the bucket, which had caught on a branch a little way downstream. She waded in, collected it, filled it at the clearest part of the water, and carried it back up the bank. She set it down beside George without a word about how easy it had been, or how small he was, or how he really ought to use a smaller bucket. She simply said: “Where does this need to go?”

George glanced at Zoe briefly, then bravely looked at her for the first time, not from behind a trough or through a curtain of reeds. He had expected teeth. He had expected something to be afraid of. Instead, he found a pair of calm brown eyes waiting patiently for directions.

“The barn,” he said at last. “For Margot’s flowers. She’s doing the Jubilee garlands.” “I’ll carry it,” said Zoe. “You’ve had a difficult morning.”

That was the thing about Zoe’s help. It did not make you feel smaller for needing it. It made you feel as though needing it had been a perfectly sensible thing to do.

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