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opening extract from

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LAURA MARLIN
MYSTERY

DEAD MAN'S COVE

Lauren St John

Illustrated by David Dean

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THEY CAME FOR her at 6.47am. Laura made a note of the time because she'd been waiting for this moment for eleven years, one month and five days and she wanted always to remember it – the hour her life began.

It was still dark but she was already awake. Already packed. The sum total of her possessions had been laid out in her suitcase with a military neatness – two of everything except underwear and books, of which there were seven apiece. One pair of knickers for each day of the week, as ordered by Matron, but not enough novels by half. Then again, Laura wasn't sure how many would be enough. When you spent your whole life waiting,

books became like windows. Windows on the world; on the curious workings of the human mind; on shipwrecks, audacious jewel thieves and lights that signalled in the night. On giant hounds that roamed fog-wreathed moors, on magical tigers and savage bears, on incredible feats of survival and courage.

Laura sighed and pulled back the curtain beside her bed. Her real window didn't open onto any of those things. Once it had faced the rolling, flower-filled landscape that had given the Sylvan Meadows Children's Home its name, but that was before a Health and Safety official decided that nature presented a danger. As a result, Laura looked out onto a car park and a tarmac playground with a couple of swings.

Beyond the hedge was a suburb of identical brown brick houses, now covered in snow. It was a vista of unrelenting dullness. Sometimes, when Laura was absorbed in a book, she'd glance up and be startled to find that she was still in a factory town in the far north of England; that she hadn't been spirited away to a forest of dark secrets or to the Swiss Alps or a poppy-strewn meadow.

But it wasn't about the meadow or the forest. Laura had been to some foster homes which had gardens the size of football pitches, packed with roses, ancient oaks and decorative features like birdbaths and loveseats. One had even had a swimming pool. She'd been to houses run like army units and another that smelled of incense and had a mum who sprinkled patchouli oil everywhere and a dad with hair down to his waist. And yet none of them had felt right – not even the last one, which was actually Laura's favourite

because the dad loved books as much as she did. It was he who had given her four Matt Walker detective novels, Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens.

'Apart from the books, they were boring,' Laura told Matron when she returned after only two weeks. 'They spent a lot of time talking about recycling.'

The shortest time she'd ever lasted in a foster home was half a day, but that was because she'd refused to spend a night in the house of a woman who kept a chihuahua in her handbag.

'You're too fussy,' scolded Matron. 'Life is full of compromises. You have to give people a chance. It's her choice if she wants to keep her dog in her bag.'

'Yes,' said Laura. 'And it's my choice not to be around people who treat animals as if they're toys with no feelings. It's also my choice if I don't want to eat tofu seven nights a week.'

Matron put her hands on her generous hips. 'What is it you're wanting? What's going to make you happy? A castle on a hill with a Rolls Royce parked outside?'

'What I want,' said Laura, 'is to have a life packed with excitement like some of the characters in my books.'

'Be careful what you wish for,' cautioned Matron.

'Why?' asked Laura, because she knew that nothing raised grown-ups' blood pressure faster than challenging their stated truths. They hated inconvenient questions such as: 'What is the reason for that rule?'

Or: 'Why has it taken Social Services eleven years to find that I have an uncle living by the sea in Cornwall who is willing to adopt me?'

In her short time on the planet Laura had only ever come across one person who truly had answers to life's many questions and that was the hero of her favourite novels. Detective Inspector Matt Walker was taciturn, eccentric and moody and in reality would have driven clients up the wall with his brusque manner and curt replies, but if there was one thing the great detective was never stuck for, it was answers.

When faced with an impossible puzzle, such as how a man came to be murdered in a locked room with the key on the inside of the door and no sign of forced entry – a situation in which anyone could be forgiven for feeling baffled – Matt Walker would come up with a dazzling explanation, usually involving wax or a fake wall. He had an uncanny knack for spotting inconsistencies. A murderer could plan the perfect crime and Matt would catch him out because he'd made an error regarding the migration habits of the Long-Tailed Skua bird.

Sadly, Matt was a fictional character. When faced with a question that left them blank, such as, 'Why do I have to go to bed at 8pm while you stay up till midnight, when I'm young and full of energy and you're old, stressed and have big bags under your eyes?' (out of consideration for people's feelings, she didn't usually say the last part out loud), the men and women in Laura's life were most likely to reply: 'Because I said so.'

The funny thing about grown-ups was that they frequently didn't have answers. They just pretended they did. They fudged things and hoped they could get away with it.

For instance, if Laura asked why she had to eat porridge, which she loathed and detested – particularly since the Sylvan Meadows cook watered it down until it tasted like prison gruel – she was told it was good for her. But if she asked exactly why the vile grey glue was good for her and chocolate was bad for her, they were flummoxed. Because they themselves usually had no idea. Somebody had told them years before that oats were nutritious and chocolate was fattening and they'd been parroting it ever since.

Even people who were supposed to be experts in their field were unable to answer the most basic questions. When Laura asked her doctor why men could fly to the moon but there was no cure for the common cold, he became quite agitated.

The same happened when she asked her teacher, Mrs Blunt, to explain how the universe began. Mrs Blunt had begun a stumbled explanation of the Big Bang theory and atoms joining together and evolution.

Laura had interrupted her to ask, 'Yes, but what was there at the beginning? *Before* the Big Bang? How did everything start? *Who* started it?'

At which point Mrs Blunt pretended she had an urgent appointment and made an excuse to leave the classroom.

'Most children grow out of the "why" phase when they're toddlers,' said Matron, who often declared herself worn down to her last nerve by Laura's questioning. 'They learn to accept the answers grown-ups give them. They understand that we know best.'

Laura stared at her unblinkingly. 'Why?'

Laura had difficulty accepting that grown-ups did know

best. In fact she sometimes thought that the average ten-year-old was a lot more clued up than almost any adult you could poke a stick at.

As far as she was concerned, if grown-ups were as smart as they liked to believe they were, then her mother would have remembered to ask for the contact details of the handsome American soldier with whom she'd had a brief romance. So brief that history had not recorded the name of the man thought to be Laura's father.

If they really were the fonts of wisdom they claimed to be, doctors might have been able to save her mother from dying on the day she gave birth to Laura, and Social Services would not have taken eleven years to discover that Laura had an uncle, her mum's brother, which meant that Laura wouldn't have had to spend more than a decade stuck in Sylvan Meadows or shuttling between foster homes, living her life through books while her real life ebbed away.

She wouldn't have spent hours of every day waiting.

Now, it seemed, the waiting was over.

There was a knock at the door. Laura lifted a silver-framed photograph off her bedside table. It showed an elfin young woman with a cap of fine, pale blonde hair, peaches-and-cream skin and grey eyes. She was smiling a serious smile. People who saw the picture always told Laura she was the image of her mother. Laura kissed it, packed it carefully between her clothes and closed her suitcase.

The knock came again. 'Laura? Laura, are you awake? Hurry now. You have a long journey ahead of you.'

Laura took a last look around the simple room that had

been the centre of her universe almost her whole life. 'I'm ready,' she said.



By late afternoon, the road was unfurling in a hypnotic grey ribbon in front of Laura's eyes. Hour after hour of traffic jams and road works had delayed them and they were much later than Robbie had planned. Laura hoped they didn't have much further go. She felt sick. A greasy breakfast at a roadside diner had been followed by a lunchtime car picnic of chocolates, chips and ice cream. Laura suspected that Robbie, a gentle, genial man who'd been driving for Sylvan Meadows since he was old enough to earn his license, and was soon to retire, was under orders from Matron to give her as many treats as possible.

Much to Laura's surprise, Matron had been quite tearful at their parting.

'You'll be sorely missed,' she'd said, standing ankle-deep in snow to give Laura a hug.

'Really?' asked Laura disbelievingly. She felt a momentary pang. Sylvan Meadows had its imperfections, but it was the only real home she'd ever known. The staff were kind and some of them had really cared for her. She'd heard horror stories from other girls about *Oliver Twist*-style orphanages, but Sylvan Meadows wasn't one of them. If she hadn't had big dreams and plans she'd have probably been perfectly content there.

Matron squeezed her hand. 'Hush now. You know

Sylvan Meadows won't be the same. You have a spirit about you that's given life to the place. But we'll fear for you. Or at least I will. It's those books of yours. They've filled your head with unrealistic expectations.'

Laura said teasingly: 'What about those romance novels you're always reading with the tall, dark, muscly men on the front? Don't see too many of them around here. Only Dr Simons with the comb-over and the odd bin man.'

'That's different.'

'Why?'

Matron smiled thinly. '*That*,' she said, 'is one word I won't miss.'

Now, as every mile carried her closer to her unknown future, Laura wondered if she was doing the right thing by leaving. Not, she supposed, that she had a choice. You couldn't turn down uncles the way you could turn down wealthy, chihuahua-toting strangers who just wanted another toy to add to their collection.

She wound her window down a fraction and looked out at Cornwall. A short while ago they'd crossed the county border. The bitter wind made her stomach feel better, but a portion of her thigh went numb. She closed it again.

Robbie looked at her. 'Nervous?' he asked.

'No,' said Laura, which was partially true because she couldn't decide if she was nervous, excited or both. She kept trying to picture her uncle. She imagined him as a taller, broader, older version of her mother. His skin would be weathered from the sun and sea and he'd own a sailboat and live in a converted boathouse with a border collie named Scruff. At weekends he'd take Laura on trips

to secret islands. He'd be a spy, or a round-the-world yachtsman, or a dolphin trainer.

A voice in her head reminded her: Or he might be a one-eyed tyrant, but she closed the door on the thought.

In the ordinary course of events, Social Services would have insisted that she met her uncle at least once before moving in with him, but the obstacles and distances involved had proved insurmountable. The saga had dragged on for months. Just when it seemed that red tape would scupper the whole thing and Laura would be at Sylvan Meadows for years to come, Social Services had received a great sheaf of character references from her uncle. These were from sources so influential and of such high moral standing that overnight the powers that be decided that there was no better person in the whole of the United Kingdom to provide a home for Laura. After she and her uncle had independently declared themselves happy to live with one another, the deal was sealed.

'. . . smugglers, moonshiners, highwaymen, gunrunners and ghosts,' Robbie was saying.

'What?' said Laura, coming back to the present with a jolt.

'I was just remarking that, not long ago, we'd have taken our lives in our hands crossing Bodmin Moor, it was so rife with smugglers and other scary folk.' Robbie took one hand off the steering wheel and made a sweeping gesture. 'Even now, you wouldn't want to be alone out here after dark.'

Laura stared at the landscape framed by the windscreen. The dying light of the winter sun had been all but

extinguished by the black threat of an oncoming storm, but it was still possible to make out the contours of the moor, and the twisted trees and downcast sheep that dotted it. An air of gloom rose from it like a cloud. But rather than being frightened by it, Laura felt a rush of adrenalin. Now *this* was a setting worthy of a novel.

'I don't spook easily,' she told Robbie.

He raised his eyebrows but didn't say anything.

The storm moved in soon afterwards. Within minutes driving rain had reduced visibility to almost zero. The wind shook the car.

To Laura, the last hour of their journey seemed to take forever. She dozed through some of it. When she came to and saw the sign for St Ives, she wasn't sure if she was dreaming. Shortly afterwards, they rounded a bend and she saw the town for the first time – a finger of twinkling lights jutting into the raging ocean far below. Boats tossed in the harbour and there was a lighthouse at the tip of the pier.

Robbie guided the car down a steep hill, through twisting streets lined with fishermen's cottages, bakeries advertising Cornish pasties and shops selling surf wear. There was no sign of life. The storm had driven everyone but the seagulls indoors.

When they reached a walled garden, Robbie accelerated up a hill. Laura caught a glimpse of palm trees twisting in the wind like carnival headdresses. Higher and higher the car went, rattling over the cobblestones. At the top they rounded a corner to see a row of Victorian houses. On the slope to the right sprawled a cemetery. Below that, the oily

black sea seethed in the gale. Silvery waves steamrollered up to the shore and crashed onto the beach.

Robbie parked outside number 28. Aside from a gleam of yellow in the opaque rectangle of glass at the top of the heavy wooden door, the house was in darkness. The front garden was overgrown, the path checkered with weeds.

Laura opened her door and the salty, rainy sea air and roar of waves blasted in. She climbed out of the car and looked up. There was something about the way the house reared back from the street, its attic eaves like watching black eyes, that made her feel as if she was about to step wide awake into one of her novels. All her life, that's what she'd dreamed of. Prayed for even. Now she recalled Matron's words: 'Be careful what you wish for.'

Robbie set her suitcase on the wet pavement and followed her gaze upwards. 'Just as well you don't spook easily,' he said, adding: 'This can't be right.'

In the light of a fizzing streetlamp, he checked the address, shielding the paper from a fresh speckling of rain. 'How odd. This does seem to be correct: 28 Ocean View Terrace. Let's hope you're expected. Wouldn't be the first time there's been a mix-up.'

Laura went after him up the steps, rotting leaves squelching beneath her shoes. The doorknocker was a snarling tiger. Robbie lifted its head gingerly and rapped hard.

From the bowels of the house came a guttural bark that seemed to spring from the slit beneath the door and slam into Laura's chest. A volley of similar barks followed.

Laura grabbed Robbie's sleeve. 'Let's go,' she said. 'I've

changed my mind. I want to come back with you. Matron will understand. She can call and apologise. If you take me back I'll be a new person, you'll see. No more questions. No more dreams. No more unrealistic expectations.'

Robbie looked at her. 'Laura, this is your family. You can't change your mind. You belong here.'

You belong here. The words had an air of finality. Unbidden, Laura's gaze returned to the crooked rows of headstones and the flat-topped pine watching over them, whipped by the wind and rain. The barking grew more hysterical. From the other side of the door came a shouted curse and the sound of claws skittering on wood. There was a snuffling and growling at the crack.

Terror seized Laura. '*Please*, Robbie,' she begged. 'Take me with you.'

A key scraped in the lock and the door screeched on its hinges, as if it were not accustomed to opening. The ink-black figure of man stood framed against the yellow light with a wolfhound at his side. The slope of his shoulders and knot of muscles in his forearm as he gripped the creature's collar, spoke of an immense power, carefully restrained.

The smile left Robbie's face and he stepped forward uncertainly. 'Laura,' he said. 'Meet your uncle.'