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Opening extract from

Laura Marlin Mysteries 2: Kidnap in the Caribbean

Written by

Lauren St. John

Published by

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LAURA MARLIN
MYSTERY

KIDNAP IN THE CARIBBEAN

Lauren St John

Illustrated by David Dean

Orion
Children's Books

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'IMAGINE WINNING A CARIBBEAN CRUISE TO AN ISLAND WITH *THREE HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FIVE* BEACHES – ONE FOR EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR. LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, BOYS AND GIRLS, THE SAND IS SO WHITE IT SPARKLES. PICTURE YOURSELF IN PARADISE. IMAGINE LYING IN A HAMMOCK SIPPING COCONUT MILK WHILE DOLPHINS FROLIC IN A TURQUOISE LAGOON, SO CLOSE YOU CAN ALMOST REACH OUT AND TOUCH THEM.'

It was a grey, rainy Saturday in St Ives and, as much as she adored her new home, Laura Marlin could think

of nothing better than doing exactly that. She especially liked the dolphin part. By the look of things she was not alone. Despite the drizzle, a crowd was gathering around the speaker – a woman in a sky-blue shirt with the words Fantasy Travel on the pocket. An old-fashioned pillbox hat in a matching blue was perched on top of her sleek reddish-brown bob. She was sheltering beneath a beach umbrella patterned with smiling suns, holding a basket filled with mauve bits of paper.

'AND THAT'S NOT ALL. ONCE YOU GET TO THE BEAUTIFUL ISLAND OF ANTIGUA, WE'LL THROW IN A FREE WEEK AT A FIVE STAR HOTEL FOR YOU AND A FRIEND, PLUS RETURN FLIGHTS. IF YOU WANT TO COME BACK TO THE RAIN, THAT IS, HA HA!'

Skye's wet nose nudged Laura and she gave his furry ears a rub. She knew she should be getting home because her uncle was taking her for a fish and chip lunch at the Porthminster Beach Café, but she was intrigued to hear what one had to do to win a trip to paradise. Rain or shine, Laura loved St Ives more than anywhere else on earth, but that didn't mean she didn't long to travel, particularly if it involved basking in the sun in hammocks, or paddling with dolphins in turquoise lagoons.

Until a few months ago when Laura had discovered she had an uncle she never knew existed and moved to number 28 Ocean View Terrace in St Ives, Cornwall, a seaside resort on the southern tip of England, she'd spent her whole life at Sylvan Meadows Children's Home in a northern town prone to Arctic temperatures. There, her

room had overlooked a car park and a concrete playground – a vista so dull she'd preferred to lose herself in stories.

Over the years, books had become her window on the world. Her favourites were those about her hero, Detective Inspector Matt Walker, a genius at outwitting deadly criminals. Laura had spent hours staring out of the window wishing she could have a life of excitement like the characters in her books, but at Sylvan Meadows nothing ever happened. There were no sinister characters or mysterious lights in the night.

That had changed from almost the moment she arrived in St Ives. Before she knew it she was up to her ears in enough adventures to keep most people happy for a lifetime. Laura, however, was no ordinary girl. Far from quenching her thirst for excitement, she had become all the more determined to make a career out of it.

Her fervent hope was that when she was older and an ace detective like Matt, her travels would take her to places like the canals of Venice, the vampire-haunted mountains of Transylvania, or the African savannah, where lions roamed. In the meantime, she couldn't think of anything more wonderful than winning a trip to a palm-fringed island in the Caribbean.

The only downside of such a life would be leaving Skye and Tariq who, next to her uncle, was her favourite person in the world.

'DOES THIS SOUND LIKE THE HOLIDAY OF YOUR DREAMS?' demanded the Fantasy Travel representative.

'Are you kidding?' cried a harassed-looking mum,

practically mowing Laura down with an oversized buggy that looked as if it had been designed to climb Everest. 'I'll take ten tickets so I have ten times the luck.'

Laura rolled her eyes and moved with Skye to a new spot. Several people shrank away from the Siberian husky who, with his hypnotic blue eyes and thick, grey-darkening-to-black coat, resembled a wolf. Laura grinned to herself until she noticed a young couple gesturing at the jagged silver line in Skye's fur where his right foreleg should have been. They were whispering behind their hands. Laura bent down and hugged the husky protectively. Skye might only have three limbs (he'd lost one after being hit by a car as a puppy), but he was worth a hundred of most dogs with four.

'And you're worth a thousand of people like them,' she told him in a whisper loud enough for them to hear. She was about to kiss him on the muzzle when he gave a sudden snarl.

Laura glanced up and saw, with a slight shock, that the Fantasy Travel woman was gazing directly at her.

'We haven't got all day. How much are the tickets?' called out a man in a green sweatshirt with a frog on the front.

The woman switched her attention to the frog man. Her voice boomed down Fore Street. 'ONE POUND. FOR THE TRIFLING SUM OF ONE POUND, YOU AND A FRIEND COULD BE SAILING AWAY ON A LUXURY CRUISE.'

There was a stampede to buy raffle tickets. The drizzle had stopped but the buildings were still dripping, and

Laura watched the frenzy from the shelter of the bakery awning. It was late March. Spring had sprung, but so far it had, the weathermen admitted, been a washout. Record amounts of rain had meant that Laura and Calvin Redfern had spent many sodden days walking Skye and Lottie, her uncle's wolfhound. It was a challenge attempting to towel them dry afterwards. Rowenna, their new housekeeper, was forever burning sandalwood incense in the hallway in a bid to eliminate the smell of wet dog.

'House smells like a monastery these days,' her uncle would grumble every time he came home, but he'd wink at Laura as he said it. It was obvious he regarded Rowenna – a big-boned country girl who'd replaced Mrs Webb, their previous housekeeper – as the best thing since clotted cream scones. So did Laura. Rowenna was sunny-tempered, loved dogs and had a fine line in rhubarb crumble and custard, whereas Mrs Webb had always reminded Laura of a tarantula.

Laura watched the crowd around the beach umbrella disperse, some people clutching handfuls of mauve raffle tickets.

'Three days till the draw,' the harassed-looking mother told her friend. 'Don't think I'll sleep, I'll be so excited.' She glanced down at the buggy, in which a red-faced infant was building up to a crescendo of screaming. 'Not that sleep's an option.'

Laura noticed the Fantasy Travel representative staring at her again.

'Fine animal,' the woman said, nodding in Skye's direction. 'Siberian husky, is he? Used to have one myself.

Very regal they are. Think they're royalty, I suspect.'

Laura was so thrilled to have met a fellow Siberian husky owner that she was across the cobbled street before she could stop herself, her usual wariness of strangers evaporating in an instant.

'Did you, really? Aren't they amazing? Skye's the best dog on earth. He's my best friend. Actually, I have two best friends. Skye and Tariq. He's from Bangladesh.'

'Lucky you. Most people count themselves fortunate to have one friend.' Up close, the woman was wearing rather too much makeup and had a diamond in her front tooth. Laura thought that Fantasy Travel must be a very successful company if its agents could afford precious gems in their teeth. The woman bent to pet Skye, but he bared his sharp fangs.

'Skye!' Laura said reprovingly.

The woman chuckled. 'Like I said, they think they're royalty.' She took a ticket from her basket. 'How would you like to win a trip to paradise, my dear?'

Laura hesitated. 'I only have two pounds and I was planning to buy some coconut ice. It's this pink and white fudge with coconut bits. What was your husky's name?'

'Coconut ice? Why would you need a lump of pink sugar when you can eat real coconut until it's coming out your ears in Antigua?'

'That's only if I win,' Laura pointed out, 'and the chances of that happening are slim to non-existent. I've never won a thing in my life.'

The Fantasy Travel woman smiled and the diamond winked. 'You never know. Miracles do happen.'

It was true. Miracles did happen. How else could Laura have been plucked from the dreary confines of Sylvan Meadows orphanage after eleven long years and deposited in a room with a sea view in the home of her uncle, where she was quite blissfully happy. Especially since Skye was allowed to sleep on her bed every night.

It was the possibility of being able to repay Calvin Redfern for his kindness that won her over. Money was tight and there was no way her uncle could afford a holiday otherwise. Laura held out a pound coin. 'All right, I'll buy one ticket.'

'Just the one? I suppose if it's a lucky ticket, one is all it takes.'

Laura studied the ticket. It was about three times the size of a postage stamp and had the number 252 printed on it. She closed her eyes and made a wish.

When she opened her eyes, the woman was watching her intently.

Disconcerted, Laura said: 'What was the dog's name?'

'What dog?'

'Your husky.'

'Oh, of course. It was . . . ' She cleared her throat. 'Hudson. His name was Hudson.'

Sensing that the woman had lost interest in the subject of Siberian huskies and was probably keen to attract more customers, Laura put the ticket safely in her purse and set off down Fore Street.

A voice rang out behind her. 'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, CAN I INTEREST YOU IN A DREAM VOYAGE TO A TROPICAL ISLAND?'

As she and Skye neared the alley that was a shortcut – via a set of steep stone steps – to Ocean View Terrace, Laura glanced over her shoulder. The Fantasy Travel representative, her beach umbrella and her tickets to paradise were all gone!

It seemed so impossible that the woman could have vanished in under two minutes that Laura walked back a little way, convinced the rain was blurring her vision.

For a moment, she wondered if the whole thing had been a product of her over-active imagination. But the ticket was still in her purse, now speckled purple with drizzle.

She was halfway home when she remembered that Hudson – or, at least, TM Hudson & Sons – was the name of the bakery opposite where the Fantasy Travel rep had been standing. More than likely it was a coincidence that she happened to have had a husky of the same name. After all, what possible motive could she have had for inventing one? But then Matt Walker always said that there was no such thing as a coincidence.