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Opening extract from

The One Dollar Horse

Written by

Lauren St. John

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THE ONE DOLLAR HORSE

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THE ONE DOLLAR HORSE

Lauren St John

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CASEY USED THE twin points of her horse's ears to line up the jump, like a sniper lining up a target on a gun barrel. Even from a distance it looked enormous: Everest in miniature. An artistic flower display attempted to make light of it, but the blossoms and shrubs did little to disguise the reality of Badminton Horse Trials' most notorious fence. The Wall of Fear was the nickname given to it by riders who'd fallen there. If she survived it, she'd be well on her way to winning the greatest championship in three day eventing. If not . . .

'Rhythm and balance, rhythm and balance,' Casey told herself. 'Trust your horse, trust yourself.'

The fence seemed to grow in size as they approached it – a towering monster.

'Come on, boy, you can do it,' Casey urged, driving her horse on with her legs and seat.

But Patchwork had had enough. Already today he'd been required to cart around a brat who wouldn't stop kicking him, a woman the size of a double-decker bus and a boy who had refused to share his Polo mints, and he had no intention of hurdling the abomination before him. Spying a direct line from the school to his stable, where his dinner was waiting, Patchwork veered around the jump, ramming the assembly of junk with his shoulder as he went. The din could be heard three streets away.

From the direction of the office, Mrs Ridgeley's penetrating voice started with a yell and built to her trademark roar. 'Who moved my flowers? *Where* is my good chair? Where ... ? Casey! CASEY BLUE! IF YOU'VE BEEN RAIDING MY OFFICE AGAIN SO THAT YOU CAN PRETEND YOU'RE RIDING AT BADMINTON, I AM GOING TO MURDER YOU!!'



Hope Lane Riding School was known to all who passed through its rusty gates as Hopeless Lane, albeit not within earshot of Mrs Ridgeley. The potholed road that ran alongside it was indeed called Hope, but anywhere further from a place of optimism could scarcely have been imagined. Situated between a toxic wasteland and a row of businesses in various stages of decrepitude – a second-hand electronics shop, a Chinese takeaway,

a barber and a car wash which was, Casey was convinced, a front for a stolen vehicle operation – the twelve horses and three donkeys, overlooked by the listless trees that guarded the stable-yard, represented a last ditch stand against the city's concrete advance.

Barely a kilometre down the road lay the green and lovely contours of Victoria Park, where the young professionals who'd become Hackney's fashionable new residents sipped flat whites at cool cafes, shopped for funky clothes, visited art galleries devoid of paintings and bought exotic fruit and veg at crowded ethnic street markets, but the money and buzz had not yet filtered down to Hopeless Lane Riding School. Or, for that matter, to another of Hackney's hotspots, the infamous Murder Mile, a thoroughfare frequented by gangsters, drug dealers and a rich array of immigrants, legal and illegal.

An invisible wall seemed to separate the two worlds. A sliding door. Sometimes that door would open a chink and Casey would catch a glimpse of how the other half lived and entertain ideas of how she might join them. But an instant later it would slam shut again, as impenetrable as a bank vault. Casey would be reminded that this was where she belonged: at 414 Redwing Tower with her father, barely a stone's throw from Murder Mile, at school, and with the horses of Hopeless Lane.

And yet hopeless was not at all how Casey viewed the riding centre. Beneath its shabby exterior and sagging stable roofs it *was* a place of hope and sanctuary

for many people. For all her bluster, Mrs Ridgeley (no one had ever dared to call her by her first name, Penelope) was a good and even inspirational leader to the motley collection of waifs, strays, disadvantaged and broken folk who were bussed in by well-meaning charities. Others wandered, bemused or simply curious, into her stable-yard. More often than not they left uplifted, ready to fight another day. One such person, a woman who'd found the strength to walk away from a life of petty crime after falling in love with riding, had remarked to Casey that Hopeless Lane's owner was the patron saint of lost causes.

To her instructors – Gillian, burly but big-hearted; Hermione, who had long dark tresses and the air of someone who expected to be tapped on the shoulder any day and informed that a mistake had been made and she was actually a princess; and Andrew, a drippy boy who was in love with Hermione – Mrs Ridgeley was a mother figure.

To Casey and the other volunteers, she was part mentor, part tyrant.

'CASEY BLUE!' yelled Mrs Ridgeley. 'Where are you hiding?'

'Can I help you, Mrs Ridgeley?' Casey asked innocently, materialising out of the shadows with a grooming kit. She'd persuaded one of the other volunteers to whisk the piebald cob back to his stable while she took advantage of the winter dusk to sneak the flowerboxes, chair and foldout camp bed back to the stable owner's office.

Mrs Ridgeley glowered up at her. A wiry woman with jaggedly cropped yellow hair and skin like an ageing peach, she barely came up to Casey's chest. But what she lacked in stature, she made up for in sheer force of personality.

'Don't come the innocent with me, girl. I know your tricks. I've told you before that I don't mind if you want to have a trot around the school on Patchwork at the end of the day once the paying clients have gone. It matters not a jot to me if you want to exhaust yourself coaxing him over a pole or two. But I will not have you misusing stable property in order to playact these ridiculous fantasies of yours.'

She followed Casey into Patchwork's stable and watched critically as the girl cleaned his feet with gentle efficiency. At fifteen and a half, her youngest volunteer was tall for her age and almost boyishly strong despite her thin frame, but the strain of the past year showed in the pallor of her face against her tangled brown hair. At first glance she was resolutely plain. A thousand people would pass her on the street without noticing her. It was only on closer inspection that you saw that her intelligent grey eyes burned with an intensity that was quite unsettling, and that there was a blue ring around the pupils, almost as if nature had intended them to be the colour of a sunny sky, but a storm had moved in.

Beneath those eyes were purple smudges, betraying many nights of lost sleep. Hardly surprising with what she'd been through. Goodness knows what her home

life was like with no mother and *that* father.

Mrs Ridgeley's voice softened. 'Casey, you're one of the most talented volunteers we've ever had at Hope Lane, and if you work hard and stay out of trouble I give you my word I'll try to obtain some sort of grant for you to do your BHSAI exam when you finish school next summer. You have the potential to be a fine riding instructor one day. We could do with you here. But this nonsense about jumping ever more crazy obstacles has to stop. Or else . . .'

'Or else what?' Casey asked nervously, straightening up.

Mrs Ridgeley pursed her lips. 'Oh, never mind. Patchwork needs grooming and I need to lock up. Turn out the lights when you leave.'

Running a brush over the cob's dusty black and dirty-white hide, Casey reflected on Mrs Ridgeley's offer. She was well aware that it was the best she was likely to receive. Trouble was, it wasn't what she wanted. As fond as she was of Patchwork, she knew she could never be content with a future riding horses like him – stubborn, lethargic and hard-mouthed. She had no interest in notching up a dizzying number of hours attempting to communicate the finer points of 'throughness' and rising on the diagonal to parents and kids who only wanted an hour away from their troubles. She didn't have Mrs Ridgeley's leadership qualities, Gillian's passion for teaching, or Hermione's fondness for being adored by dozens of pony-mad children.

Casey dreamed of soaring over heart-stopping fences on a horse of fire. Of performing incredible feats to win the greatest prizes in eventing: the Badminton Horse Trials, the Kentucky Three Day Event and the Burghley Horse Trials. Together they made up the most elusive goal of all: the Grand Slam.

Of course, to do those things she'd need lorry-loads of money, gleaming, specially bred horses, the finest tack, clothes and boots, the best instructors . . . the list went on. All of which lent weight to Mrs Ridgeley's argument that she should let go of her 'ridiculous fantasies'. She was almost sixteen. Practically a grown-up. If her teachers were to be believed, it was time to be sensible and focus on a realistic, achievable career. Unfortunately, conforming to what was expected of her had never been Casey's strong suit.

'Five minutes till lock-up,' called Gillian over her shoulder as she passed.

'Night, night.'

'See ya.'

Casey presented Patchwork with his goodnight carrot and gave his granite rump an affectionate pat.

'Not that you deserve it,' she told him. 'With the teeniest bit of effort, you could practically have stepped over that jump. It looked scary, but it was not even half a metre. A four-star horse, a *Badminton* horse, would barely notice something that small, but then those horses have wings.'

The piebald chewed without acknowledging her departure. Too long ago to remember, he'd had the

spirit snuffed out of him by the learner riders of Hopeless Lane and he was committed to spending his last years doing the same to them. If a grenade had gone off in his stable, it's doubtful he'd have flickered an ear.

It was a Friday night. Beyond Hope Lane, London's East End seethed and crackled with an energy that was both intoxicating and sinister. Bursts of music – Arabic, Bollywood, African and cheesy pop – came at Casey from doorways, along with wisps of illicit smoke and snatches of foreign languages. Food smells assaulted her senses: Lebanese, Korean, Chinese, Caribbean, Thai, Greek, McDonald's and every possible variation on fried chicken.

Mouth watering, Casey jogged to shorten the fifteen minutes it usually took to reach Redwing Tower, the January wind freezing the small part of her face not covered by her sweatshirt hood. On the front steps of the grim, grey tower she called home, a group of boys were wrestling and swigging from cans. She waited for them to leave before letting herself in. Redwing was, as her father liked to say, worse than some local authority housing and not as bad as others, but she generally found that the fewer people she encountered on a party night like Friday, the easier life would be.

When she reached the fourth floor and set off along the corridor to No. 414, she had the sensation of being watched. The hairs prickled on the back of her neck. 'I won't look, won't look, won't look,' she told herself.

Looking was weak. Looking was cowardice.

She was putting the key in the lock when the sensation became overwhelming. She swung round. A net curtain twitched but otherwise the corridor was empty. Nothing and no one was there.

Casey sighed. It was nearly four months since her father had been released from prison, but the unspecified fear that had been her shadow while he was gone had been slow to loosen its grip on her. She stood in the darkness until her heart rate returned to normal. Turning the key, she let herself in.