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Opening extract from

Laura Marlin Mysteries 3: Kentucky Thriller

Written by

Lauren St John

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A Laura Marlin Mystery

Kentucky Thriller

Lauren St. John

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Laura Marlin Mysteries

Dead Man's Cove
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The White Giraffe
Dolphin Song
The Last Leopard
The Elephant's Tale

The One Dollar Horse Trilogy

The One Dollar Horse

A Laura Marlin Mystery

Kentucky Thriller

Lauren St John

Illustrated by David Dean

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1.

The horsebox was lying on its side when they came over the rise. Afterwards, it occurred to Laura Marlin that if they'd done one thing differently that morning their story would have been someone else's story, only it would have had another ending entirely, and who's to say whether that ending would have been good or bad.

Laura had a theory that life was like a passage and how things turned out depended on which doors you opened or which ones opened for you. For instance, fate could have decreed that she remain forever at Sylvan Meadows Children's Home, where she'd lived since her mum had died giving birth to her. Even now she could have been in her old room overlooking the car park, longing for a life of excitement and adventure like the characters in her books while in reality having nothing to look forward to but another meal of glutinous porridge or bleached vegetables.

Instead, a door in the corridor of Laura's desperately dull existence had blown wide open and who should be waiting on the other side but Calvin Redfern, her mother's brother. He was a fisheries inspector with the handsome but slightly careworn looks of the hero of an old black and white movie. When he'd learned of her existence five months earlier, he'd immediately come forward to claim her. Before Laura knew it, she was living

at number 28 Ocean View Terrace in the beautiful seaside town of St Ives, Cornwall, had adopted a three-legged husky named Skye, and was up to her ears in all the adventures she could handle.

That was how she'd met Tariq, a Bengali boy from Bangladesh in South Asia, who'd become her best friend. They were the same age, but where Laura had a cap of pale blonde hair and peaches and cream skin, Tariq was the colour of burnt honey, with glossy black hair shaved short at the back. His brutal childhood as a slave, first in a quarry in his home country and later in St Ives until he was rescued by Laura, had left him thin but very strong, and was responsible for the shadows that sometimes showed in his tiger's eyes before his easy laugh chased them away again.

Tariq and Laura did everything together and for that reason he was the first person she called when her uncle woke up on that sparkling Saturday in April and spontaneously decided they should go to Sennen Cove for a picnic. That should have set the scene for a perfect day, but almost immediately a series of things conspired to delay them.

First, Tariq was twenty minutes late. As he was leaving his foster parents' home near Carbis Bay, a car screeched up and he had to help his foster father, Rob Ashworth, a vet, with a cat emergency.

Next, Skye slipped his lead as Laura was coaxing him into the car. He went racing down the road after a seagull while their eccentric neighbour, Mrs Crabtree, yelled approval. That had held them up for a further eight minutes, and they lost more time still when they drove away without the picnic basket and had to return for it.

All of which meant that they were approximately thirty-six minutes later than they'd intended to be as they

twisted through the sunny lanes past fields dotted with sheep. That didn't matter since they weren't on a schedule, but it was the reason Laura's uncle decided to take a shortcut. 'It's such a beautiful day that it seems a shame to waste a second of it,' he'd said. Shortly afterwards, they flew over a blind hill into a shadowed copse and almost crashed into the horsebox.

If it wasn't for the fact that former Chief Inspector Redfern had taken part in numerous high-speed pursuits in years gone by when he was Scotland's most famous detective and thus had lightning reactions, they'd have had a head-on collision. As it was the children were slammed hard against their seatbelts as he braked, swerved and brought the car to a skidding halt beneath a canopy of dark trees. An overnight shower had made the road slicker than an oil spill.

When Laura opened her eyes, he was staring down at her anxiously.

'Laura, are you all right? You've had quite a scare. Thank goodness you and Tariq were strapped in. If something had happened to you both, I'd never have forgiven myself. Skye, are you okay? If you're still capable of washing my face, I guess you are. Well done, Laura, for hanging on to him.'

Laura clambered from the car, bruised, cold and shaky. She leaned on Skye and he whined and licked her hand. Tariq was pale beneath his dark skin. For a good two minutes nobody spoke. Calvin Redfern dug the flask out of the picnic basket and poured them each a cup of hot, sweet coffee 'for the shock'. He gave Skye a couple of dog biscuits. Then the trio stood in the green gloom, regarding the horsebox that could have killed them as if it were a hostile spacecraft that had landed in their path with the sole intention of harming them.

‘You can tell from the skid marks what’s happened,’ Calvin Redfern explained, breaking the silence. ‘The driver swerved to avoid something – a rabbit or a deer – and the trailer hitch snapped off, causing the horsebox to overturn. It’s an ancient thing, barely roadworthy. I dread to think what sort of injuries the pony or donkey or whatever was in there sustained. Presumably the owner was unhurt because he or she managed to drive away, as you can tell from the muddy tracks.

‘I’m surprised your foster father didn’t get a call, Tariq. He’s one of the best vets around. Then again, maybe the horsebox was empty. Probably was since I can’t see any hoof prints. At any rate, it would have been helpful if the driver had phoned the incident in so that the police could have towed the damaged box out of the road. We need to act fast to prevent a serious accident. Laura, would you mind if I borrowed your red sweatshirt? You can wear my jumper. You’re in shock and I don’t want you getting a chill.’

As Laura shrugged out of her top, he found a stout stick and stripped it of its leaves. Tying the sweatshirt to one end, he handed it to Tariq. ‘Son, I need your help. While I call the police, would you mind standing at the top of the rise and waving this as a red flag warning if any vehicles approach? Make sure you stand safely on the side of the road. There’s plenty of visibility coming the other way, so I think the blind hill is our main concern.’

As the boy hurried away, Calvin leaned against his car and took out his mobile phone. ‘Laura, would you be good enough to call out the number plate of the horsebox when I get through to police?’

‘No problem.’ Yet as Laura walked towards the fallen horsebox with Skye, she felt oddly scared. Overhead, the twisting grey branches of the trees laced

together like hands, their dense black foliage muffling the birdsong and shutting out the sunshine. As she circled the horsebox, noting the cracked old tyres, buckled mudguards and caved-in rear, something struck her as strange. There *was* no number plate. In the place where it should have been was an empty slot. Curiously, the area around it was free of dust, almost as if the driver had wiped it clean after the accident. A couple of screws lay on the ground nearby.

'Hold on a minute, Pete,' her uncle was saying into his phone. He put his hand over the mouthpiece. 'What is it, Laura?'

'There is none. No number plate, I mean.'

'What do you mean? Has it fallen off in the crash?' He marched over to her. She saw surprise register on his face. He took in the screws on the ground and the polished bumper. 'Pete, there's something wrong here. The plate's gone and it seems as if someone's gone to a fair amount of effort to erase any fingerprints. I'll take a look and call you back. In the meantime, I'd appreciate it if you could send that tow truck right away.'

The last three words were almost drowned out by a blood-curdling growl from Skye, who was sniffing the horsebox. This was followed almost immediately by a dull thud.

Calvin Redfern went still. 'I don't believe it.'

'I think I saw something move!' cried Laura, crouching down and peering into the darkness of the box. 'Uncle Calvin, there's a pony inside. I think it's still alive.'

Two violent thuds followed, rocking the trailer. 'Alive and kicking by the sound of things.' Calvin Redfern hit the speed dial on his phone. 'I'm calling Rob Ashworth. We need a vet urgently. Laura, take Skye to the car and lock him in. We don't want him frightening the creature any more than it already has been.'

By the time Laura returned, splinters were flying. She bent down and tried talking to the pony in a soothing voice. It worked until two cars drove through the tunnel of trees. Flagged down by Tariq, they drove relatively slowly, but one had music blaring and didn't bother turning it down. The animal started kicking harder than ever.

Calvin Redfern checked his watch. 'It'll be at least ten minutes before Rob gets here. We're going to have to try to help the poor creature before it injures itself any further. Laura, help me try to pull the side back. It's in a wretched state, this horsebox. It wouldn't surprise me if the driver fled the scene because he didn't want to be held responsible. He probably thought the horse was dead.'

'Maybe he was a horse thief,' suggested Laura, pulling with all her strength at the wooden planks that held the box together. She felt one give.

Despite the situation, her uncle laughed as he tackled a screw with his penknife. 'You read too many Matt Walker novels,' he teased, alluding to the fictional detective inspector who was Laura's hero. 'You're always looking for mysteries to solve. It's not that horse thieves don't exist. There are plenty about, make no mistake about that, just not around here. I doubt the Cornish police are overburdened with reports of abandoned stolen ponies on idyllic country lanes.'

'But why else would the driver have gone away and simply left it?' asked Laura, jumping back as a hoof struck the side of the box again, showering her with splinters.

'There could be a million reasons. Maybe he'd been drinking. Perhaps he was uninsured. The pony was silent when we got here, which probably means it was unconscious. The owner might have assumed it was either fatally injured or dead and decided that he or she didn't

want to pay the vet bills. There are any number of reasons.'

A pickup truck rattled over the hill, its headlights pushing back the shadows. It squeaked to a halt beside them and a man with the ruddy, weather-beaten face of a fisherman or farmer leaned from the window. 'Need a hand, mate?'

Whatever was in the horsebox launched a final assault on the sagging wood. The side exploded, like a boat disintegrating under the onslaught of a hurricane. Tariq came running down the road. 'What's going on? It sounded as if a bomb went off.'

There was a squeal of rage and the creature beneath the wood stirred and gathered itself. Laura caught a glimpse of a chestnut ear and a length of dusty mane before the beast gathered itself and surged to its feet, shaking off debris like a phoenix emerging from the ashes.

She gasped. In the white glow of headlights, the coat of the stallion was all flash and fire, his flaring nostrils scarlet. Every inch of him rippled with muscle. He stood on the wreckage of the horsebox, statuesque in his perfection, gazing at them with a mixture of terror and pride.

Calvin Redfern exhaled. 'I'm not an expert but I will say one thing. That's no pony.'