

WILD HORSE SUMMER

‘St John’s **finest novel**, balancing beautifully lyrical writing with a propulsive and intricate plot. The perfect summer holiday beach read’ Nicola Garrard, author of *On the Edge*

‘A **wonderfully immersive** love story, an intriguing mystery and a powerful exploration of resilience against adversity, set against the dramatic backdrop of Exmoor. **Beautifully written and passionately told, it will have you gripped** from the very first page’ Mel Darbon, author of *What the World Doesn't See*

‘A **delicious mix of romance, mystery and, most importantly, horses**, this is a story about second chances and speaking out, set in moody, picturesque Exmoor. **I galloped through it**, and readers will do the same’ Gina Blaxill, author of *Love You to Death*

‘A **heart-filled, pulse-racing** glorious summer romance’ Abi Elphinstone

‘An **absolute delight** of a read, brimming with atmosphere and drama . . . a compulsive and propulsive read that will leave you with a full heart long after you turn the last page’ Dev Kothari

‘A **stunning** story of heartbreak, healing, the most incredible horses and like the blurb says, handsome surfers. **One of her greatest ever**’ Amy, *Golden Books Girl*

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

The One Dollar Horse

Race the Wind

Fire Storm

The Glory

Finding Wonder

The Snow Angel

Wave Riders

Kat Wolfe Investigates

The White Giraffe

Dolphin Song

The Last Leopard

The Elephant's Tale

Operation Rhino

Dead Man's Cove

Kidnap in the Caribbean

Kentucky Thriller

Rendezvous in Russia

The Secret of Supernatural Creek

W I L D
H O R S E
S U M M E R

LAUREN ST JOHN

faber

For the dreamers, artists & animal healers . . .

First published in 2026
by Faber & Faber Limited
The Bindery, 51 Hatton Garden
London, EC1N 8HN
faber.co.uk

Typeset in Garamond Premier
Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

All rights reserved
Text © Lauren St John, 2026

Special thanks to Ross Jacobs for the kind permission to quote from
his brilliant book, *The Essence of Good Horsemanship*.

The right of Lauren St John to be identified
as author of this work has been asserted in accordance
with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-571-37619-3



Printed and bound in the UK on FSC® certified paper in line with our continuing
commitment to ethical business practices, sustainability and the environment.

For further information see faber.co.uk/environmental-policy

Our authorised representative in the EU for product safety is
Easy Access System Europe, Mustamäe tee 50, 10621 Tallinn, Estonia
gpsr.requests@easproject.com

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

‘It’s not over till it’s over.’

SIMONE BILES,
US OLYMPIC GYMNAST

SANCTUARY COVE

LUCKY

‘Miss, wake up. You need to fasten your seatbelt. We’re landing in fifteen minutes.’

Morgan blinked into consciousness, the blurred sleeve of a British Airways uniform filling her vision.

‘Uh, sure. Sorry.’

Groggily, she sat up, but the flight attendant was already securing her tray-table and levering her seatback into position.

He moved off, gathering cups and slamming shut an overhead locker.

‘Would it have killed him to let you sleep until Exeter?’ remarked her neighbour in 17B. ‘You look as if you need it.’

‘Gee, thanks,’ said Morgan, although she didn’t need a mirror to tell her that there were pro fighters whose faces had fewer violet shadows.

The woman shrugged. ‘You know what I mean. Seriously, why do they make such a big deal about the seat? What does it matter if it’s tipped back when we land? Do they expect us to believe that that’s the difference between living and dying – a few degrees?’

Morgan said nothing. She was not about to explain to a total stranger that she’d learned from bitter experience that a few degrees really could mean the difference between life and death. *Had* made the difference, in her case.

‘I’m guessing it doesn’t feel that way now, but you’re one lucky

young lady,' a nurse had commented while changing Morgan's dressings at the hospital in Vermont. 'What *I've* heard, it's a miracle you're even here.'

Morgan had had to bite her lip to keep from screaming that she wished she wasn't here. Wished she'd been obliterated.

Still did.

What a relief it would be to no longer exist.

Instead, she'd had her mother in her ear 24/7 for the past five months, cheerfully insisting that even near-death experiences had their upside.

No change there. Assorted relatives and other positivity police had been telling Morgan what to think and how to feel ever since a neighbour had sidled up to her at her tenth birthday party and asked: 'Is it true your mom's going to marry the "Cookie King"? Congratulations! Y'all just won the jackpot.'

From the day of her mother's glittering second wedding onwards, it seemed that Morgan was never allowed to have a bad day, much less a sad one.

Never allowed to be upset that her mom had, in three short years, moved on from Morgan's dead dad.

Never allowed to forget that, thanks to Lincoln Reynolds, her new stepfather, she'd not only struck gold but won herself a lifetime's supply of (terrible) chocolate chip cookies.

'Wow! Is that your house/pool/pony/bike/bedroom? You're sooo lucky.'

'Congrats on another ace result. S'pose it helps to have a stepdaddy with a bottomless bank account. Some people get all the luck.'

Before December 13th, any time it slipped Morgan's mind

that she was charmed beyond measure, her mother could be counted on to remind her.

‘You have everything a girl could wish for, Morgan, yet all you want to do is sabotage it and throw your life away. *Why?* I don’t understand. Do you have the faintest idea how fortunate you are?’

Until, one night, Morgan’s famous luck ran out.

When she returned to consciousness to find herself swaddled in bandages and convulsed in agony, her memory of the fire that had put her there had been wiped.

The neurosurgeon diagnosed amnesia brought on by trauma and a blow to the head.

‘Best-case scenario, it’s temporary,’ he’d told Morgan’s mother. ‘Be warned that in severe cases, it can be permanent. Your daughter may never remember the events of that night.’

Either way, the facts spoke for themselves. Their Vermont farmhouse lay in smoking ruins, along with Morgan’s dreams, and she only had herself to blame.

She didn’t feel fortunate. She felt cursed.

Her family and the dwindling band of so-called friends who sat stiffly in the hospital visitor’s chair, their expressions variously appalled or judgemental, saw things rather differently. To them, the mere fact that Morgan was alive was proof that she was luckier than ever.

Even after she was discharged and beginning the long road to recovery at home – ‘home’ being a new, New York City penthouse in the clouds rather than the Woodstock farm on which she’d lived for the past six years – the same record was stuck on repeat.

‘I get that you’re still in pain, Morgan, but you might wanna try counting your blessings,’ her stepfather had lectured her. ‘In a parallel universe, things could have gone pretty badly for you. Thanks to Cookie King Inc., you’ve had gold-standard care from the finest medical specialists in the US. How about showing some gratitude and looking to the future? You’re sixteen. You have your whole life ahead of you. Enough with the doom and gloom attitude. You’re breaking your mother’s heart.’

Morgan hadn’t bothered to reply. Her relationship with Lincoln, always a little fractious because she’d never quite forgiven him for not being her dad, had nose-dived since the move to Manhattan. She’d had the chat about her failed attitude and lack of gratitude so many times by then, she just tuned him out.

But there was no tuning out the haters in her own head. Nor was there any prospect of forgiveness from her now *ex*-boyfriend and her *ex*-best friend.

Morgan didn’t blame Heath and Piper for ghosting her. Who’d want to be close to her now?

Overnight, the world of non-stop travel and glitzy events in which she’d lived for so long had shrunk to the size of her new bedroom, a space carefully curated to be a reminder-free zone. Five months after what her family euphemistically referred to as The Accident, Morgan barely had the energy to crawl out of bed.

That was where her mother drew the line.

‘You’ll never guess who messaged me out of the blue today,’ she announced brightly over dinner one evening. It was just the two of them. The Cookie King was at a board meeting. Outside, rush-hour cars and commuters swarmed like bees in

the unseasonable April heat. Inside, the air conditioning was arctic.

‘Aunt Thelma,’ her mother prompted. ‘Your dad’s sister.’

Morgan set down her fork. ‘Mom, I know who Aunt Thelma is.’

‘Great, because she’s invited you to spend the summer with your cousins in England. Elliot, the eldest, is in Spain with Thelma’s ex-husband, so they have a spare room. Lexi’s your age and Emily’s nearly eighteen. Last time you met, you were barely out of diapers. Thelma says the girls would adore seeing you, as would she. What do you think, darling? They live between the beach and moors in a place called Sanctuary Cove. Don’t you just love the town’s name? It sounds so . . .’

‘Safe?’

Morgan braced herself. As a corporate event planner, her mother organised people for a living. Her ‘suggestions’ tended to be a *fait accompli*. It would not have surprised Morgan if her mom had already had her assistant purchase a return ticket to the UK.

Her mother sighed. ‘Don’t look at me like that, darling. Hand on heart, this was Thelma’s idea. But frankly, it couldn’t have come at a better time. It would do you the power of good to get away from everything. If you leave next week, you’ll have the entire summer to relax and regroup.’

‘So, nothing to do with the conference you’re organising in San Francisco,’ accused Morgan. ‘Pure coincidence that you want to ship me across the globe like a package two weeks before it starts?’

‘Forget I mentioned it.’ Warily, her mother pushed her plate

aside. 'I was trying to do something nice for you, Morgan. I should know better. Fine. Stay in Manhattan. I'll hire a private tutor to help get you up to speed on math and every other subject you're behind on. Your stepbrother will be in town while I'm gone. He can keep you company when Lincoln's at the office.'

For Morgan, that was the decider. Being trapped in the apartment with her stepdad was bad enough. Being spied on and ordered about by his nineteen-year-old, too-good-to-be-true, Yale-bound son Sebastian was another level of hell altogether.

'How soon do I leave?' asked Morgan.

A week later, she was on a flight to Edinburgh, Scotland, where she had to change planes. Another bouncier, creakier aircraft carried her south, to Exeter, Devon, birthplace of the father who'd died a week before her seventh birthday.

'I'm sorry for your loss' were the words she and her mom had heard most often after his passing. It was as if her dad had been misplaced and might one day be found, if only they searched hard enough.

The bouncy, creaky plane tipped a wing. Drab curtains of cloud parted to reveal a jigsaw of green, copper, and ochre, edged in the far distance by a silver mirage. Morgan's stomach flipped at the sight of the sea.

Two days before leaving, she'd had a meltdown while trying to pack.

'I can't do this,' she'd told her mother 'They'll expect me to go to the beach with them. No way will I put on a swimsuit and have everybody stare at me. I'd rather die.'

‘Darling, it’s England. Don’t worry. No one sane swims without a wetsuit.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, really. And even if they do, just tell them the water’s too freezing for your thin American blood. Let’s leave the packing till tomorrow. Meanwhile, I’ll order you a full-length wetsuit.’

‘They’ll think I’m pathetic.’

‘Then prove them wrong,’ said her mom. ‘When you were younger, you were like your dad – part dolphin. A couple of months by the ocean and you’ll be that way again.’

But Morgan didn’t want to think about the way she’d been before. That girl no longer existed.

Predictably, Lincoln had blown a gasket at the news she was being treated to a summer by the sea with her late father’s family.

Morgan had overheard her mom and stepdad arguing about it.

‘Actions are supposed to have consequences, Arlene,’ Lincoln had ranted. ‘Sending your daughter on a beach vacation with her cousins – that’s a reward, not a punishment.’

‘Don’t you think she’s been punished enough?’ reasoned his wife. ‘Morgan lives with the consequences of her actions every day. Every time she looks in a mirror, she’s reminded of them. Once she’s had a rest—’

‘She’s done nothing but rest for months!’

‘She’s been recovering, Lincoln, not relaxing. There’s a difference. A change of scene will give her a much-needed reset and help her heal. Besides, she’s lonely in New York. All she does is sit in her room eating junk and watching garbage. At least in Devon, she’ll be out in the fresh air.’

Morgan had hoped to have her mom to herself when they said goodbye at JFK Airport. Once, they'd been the best of friends. Somehow it felt important that they reconnect before she left for the summer. But her stepdad had insisted on driving them.

In the crowded departure hall, she'd been forced to endure an uncomfortable wait with Lincoln while her mother talked to the British Airways crew member who'd be escorting Morgan as far as Edinburgh. They'd assist her through customs and help her board a second flight to Devon. Her cousins would meet her at the other end.

'Count yourself lucky that your mom's a soft touch,' said Lincoln, glowering at her. 'If it had been up to me, you'd be going somewhere more . . . educational. Put it this way – you wouldn't be swanning off to the UK on an extended break.'

Morgan rolled her eyes. 'Let me guess. You'd rather I was eating bugs and hiking till my feet bled at some wilderness boot camp for troubled teens?'

There was a tense silence, then a tidal wave of shame swept over Morgan. 'Lincoln, for the thousandth time, I'm sorry. I couldn't be more sorry. If I could turn the clock back and do things differently, I would.'

'Forget it,' he said shortly. 'What's done is done. Believe it or not, Morgan, I care a great deal about your wellbeing. If you want my advice—'

'I don't.'

' . . . It would be that you make the most of your summer by the sea. *Do* better. *Be* better. Stay out of trouble. You owe that much to your mom. Heck, you owe it to us both.'

Hours later, Morgan was flying away to spend three months with near-strangers, their only link her long-lost dad.

Sudden turbulence jolted her back to the present.

The little aircraft was coming down fast, its wings see-sawing in strong crosswinds. Morgan's neighbour gripped the armrests, her knuckles white.

The runway rushed up to meet them with the pilot still battling for control. The wheels smacked down hard. The plane gave a violent lurch.

Flung forward, Morgan stifled a shriek. Where her hoodie had ridden up, the seatbelt's rough edge sawed across her bare midriff.

The woman in 17B gasped. Shock and pity flickered across her face before Morgan managed to tug her top down.

The passenger intercom crackled. 'Welcome to Exeter, folks,' intoned the pilot. 'Apologies for the bumpy landing. There's a bit of a breeze here in Devon. If it's any consolation, we were lucky to be cleared for arrival. A stormfront's moving in.'

Morgan wished she'd never come. To delay the inevitable, she waited until the other passengers had disembarked before hauling her rucksack from the overhead compartment. Outside, the sky and tarmac were a uniform grey, blurred by cold drizzle.

So much for summer.

Morgan walked stiffly down the plane's wet steel steps, trying not to breathe in the dank, fume-laced air. As she set off for the concourse, spiders of pain crawled across her skin.

Luck. It was all a matter of perspective.