

The Mystery at the
**KENTUCKY
DERBY**



by
Carole Marsh

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C O N T E N T S

1	Thoroughbreds in the Mist.....	1
2	Trouble at the Stables.....	7
3	When Plans Backfire.....	11
4	A State of Heightened Mystery.....	17
5	Sowing the Seeds of... a Mystery!.....	23
6	Quiz Time!.....	29
7	The Ohio River is Falling!.....	37
8	Paddle Wheels and Ferris Wheels.....	47
9	Prelude to a Clue.....	53
10	A Clue in Blue... Overalls, That Is.....	57
11	The Fog Rolled in Overnight.....	65
12	Oh, Horse Tack!.....	75
13	Riders Up!.....	85
14	Riders on the Storms.....	89
15	Dangerous Intersection.....	97
16	I Love a Parade!.....	99
17	Back in the Saddle Again.....	107
18	Romeo, Romeo, Wherefore Art Thou, Romeo?.....	111
19	Out of Time!.....	115
20	Grant's Hot on the Trail!.....	119
21	And They're Off!.....	127
	Kentucky Derby Connections.....	132
	About the Author.....	135
	It's Snow Much Fun Glossary.....	136
	Scavenger Hunt Quiz.....	138
	Bibliography.....	139
	Write Your Own Real Kids Mystery.....	140
	Six Secret Writing Tips from Carole Marsh.....	141
	Be a Carole Marsh Mysteries Character.....	142
	Excerpt from <i>The Mystery in the Rocky Mountains</i>	143

J THOROUGHBREDS IN THE MIST

A thick, swirling fog hung low over the ground in the cool air of the pre-dawn darkness. The rich moisture had settled on every surface. Billions of tiny droplets reflected what little light penetrated the fog. The fence rail where Christina and Grant stood stretched away to their left. Eerily glistening in the bluish light from the Churchill Downs grandstand, the railing faded away into the fog.

Christina and Grant peered through the mist at the wide expanse of dirt between the outside and inside rail. Across the track, near the big white column that marked the finish line, stood three men. Their dark silhouettes were punctuated by the blue-green glow of a digital stopwatch.

The sound of a lone horse at full gallop came from far in the distance, the hoofbeats muted by the mist.



“He’s entering the third turn,” Sara said quietly.

Christina, nine years old, turned away from the track to look at Sara, the ten-year-old daughter of Mimi’s friend. Mimi, Christina’s grandmother, had brought her and her brother Grant to Louisville, Kentucky for the 130th running of the Kentucky Derby.

“How do you know?” Christina asked. She rubbed her arms to rid them of the creepy goosebumps.

“The hoofbeats stopped moving away from us,” Sara explained.

“Wow! You’ve got good hearing!” Grant, Christina’s seven-year-old brother, whispered excitedly.

“It’s creepy sometimes,” said Tanner, Sara’s twelve-year-old cousin. “You can’t sneak up on her.”

“Shh!” Sara hissed. “Quarter-mile,” she said, and stood up to grip the wet rail.

Tanner moved up beside her, and the four of them focused on the fogged-up Home Stretch. Some called this short 1/4-mile-long patch of dirt Heartbreak Lane, because it was where the Kentucky Derby was really won or lost.

The hoofbeats grew louder as the horse raced up the home stretch. The gallop became faster as the invisible horse put forth a final surge of speed.



Then, as if caught in slow-motion mid-stride and seeming to float on the fog, the horse and jockey burst into sight. Curls of fog swirled in the horse's wake like the tentacles of a ghostly octopus. Dirt flew up from the horse's hoof steps in shadowy globs.

The horse passed the finish line and flew by the four kids in a streak of dark hair and yellow silk. Christina watched the horse and jockey disappear into the fogbank as the gallop began to slow down.

Grant giggled excitedly. "Oh, man!" he exclaimed. "That was fast!"

"Not fast enough," Tanner said.

"What do you mean?" Christina asked.

"What's his time?" Sara asked.

Tanner held up his stopwatch for them to see. Black numbers floated in the blue-green glow: 2:09.13.

"Two minutes, nine point one-three seconds," Sara moaned. "That is slow."

"If that's slow," Grant began, "then what's *fast*?"

"The closer to two minutes, the better," Sara explained. "That—" she pointed at the stopwatch—"is seven seconds off the average time to win the Derby."

Christina peered down the track past Tanner and Sara as the racehorse cantered back toward the finish line and



the three men. It was a dreamy, fairy tale-like sight. The horse's dark shape glided through the mist at a trot's pace, with the jockey sitting tall on his back. The yellow silk of his shirt and the horse's saddlecloth shimmered in the light from the grandstand.

After a minute, the jockey turned the Thoroughbred back down the track, and they trotted off. Two of the three men disappeared into the fog over the infield, but one had hopped over the inside rail and was approaching them.

"Is that your Dad?" Christina asked Sara.

"It is," Sara replied. "And I'll bet he's disappointed. Skit usually runs fast in the morning."

"Hiyo, kids," Sara's Dad called. "Whatcha think? Have we got a winner, or what?"

"I'll bet you do," Grant said happily. "That horse is fast!"

"Looks good to me," Christina chimed in.

"Hmmm," Tanner hummed skeptically.

"He was slow this morning, Dad," Sara said sadly.

"That's okay," Dad said. "We were trying something a little different in the running."

"I guess it didn't work," Sara said.

"Not the way we expected," Dad replied. They fell silent as the sound of a starting bell pierced through the foggy darkness. The hoofbeats of another horse making an



early morning run quickly blurred from a trot to a canter to a gallop. Christina and Grant scooted away from the rail so Sara's Dad could jump over.

The horse streaked by and disappeared into the fog, its hoofbeats quickly fading.

An electronic tone chirped from the wireless phone on Sara's Dad's waist.

"Charles..." a hurried voice said.

Charles lifted the phone to his mouth. "What is it, Earl?"

"We need you in the stable," Earl said anxiously. "*Lickety-Split is pitching a fit. He's been going on since before we got back—screaming and kicking up a storm. Something's got him spooked!*"



2 TROUBLE AT THE STABLES

“Whoa, boy! Easy! Drew! Grab that rope!” Earl yelled.

In the background, they could all hear a horse squealing. “He’s scared,” Charles said into the phone. “Is there anyone else around?”

“Not close by,” Earl said. *“I think there are a couple of crews warming up on the other side of the stables, but this side’s quiet.”*

“Well, see if you can get him into his trailer to calm him down. I’ll be there in five,” Charles said. He clipped the now silent phone back to his waist.

“I’ve got to get over there,” Charles said to the kids. “Want to come see the stables?”

“I’d love to see the stables,” Christina said.

“Sure, Mister—” Grant started. “Uhh... I can’t remember your family name!”

“Grant,” Sara’s Dad said, laying a hand on Grant’s



shoulder, “please, please call me Charles.”

Grant scrunched his eyebrows, then shrugged and nodded an okay. He wasn’t used to calling an adult by his first name. Mimi and Papa always insisted on “Mr. Him” and “Mrs. Her”—and always “Yes, ma’am” and “No, sir.”

Charles turned on his heel and led them toward the stables on the other side of the track.

“Who’s Lickety-Split?” Grant asked.

“That’s our lead pony,” Sara answered.

“What’s a lead pony?” Christina asked.

“Everybody uses lead ponies to escort the racehorses to the gate,” Tanner said. “The lead pony is there to help keep the racehorse calm. It’s pretty noisy at post time!”

“Sounds like it’s a little backwards right now,” Charles said. “The racehorse is going to calm down his pony.”

“What’s post time?” Grant asked.

“That’s when they play that tune on a bugle,” Christina replied. “It’s called the Call to the Post.”

“Oh, yeaah!” Grant crooned, as he remembered the tune. He curled both hands into hollow fists and held them end-to-end in front of his mouth, like a bugler. “Brrp-b-t-brrp-b-t-brrp-b-t-brrrrpp...” he played before Christina told him to hush.

“Who’s Earl?” Christina asked.



“He’s our trainer,” Charles answered. “One of the best trainers in horse racing.”

“Drew is his assistant,” Sara said.

The foggy black of night had slowly turned to a dark, dull gray by the time they reached the stables. Charles led them past several buildings before they entered one end of a brightly lit stable that smelled of freshly laid hay. Charles slipped into a small office near the entrance. Sara walked on ahead, peering into each stall.

It was quiet. Almost too quiet. There was none of the squealing and whinnying they had heard just minutes ago.

“Where did everyone go?” Tanner asked.

“Fritz and Skit aren’t here,” Sara reported. “But they might still be cooling off.”

“Who’s Fritz?” Grant wanted to know. He was unusually full of questions this early in the morning. “And who’s Skit?”

“Fritz is our jockey,” Sara explained as she walked past them, heading for the office.

“And Skit is the racehorse’s nickname,” Tanner finished. “His official, registered Jockey Club name is—”

BANG!!!!



3 WHEN PLANS BACKFIRE

The loud noise shattered the silence of the dawn! Everyone jumped at the loud sound. Christina snatched a wide-eyed Grant away from the entrance to the stable and backed into an empty stall.

Charles exploded from the office, accidentally knocking Sara and Tanner to the floor in a tangle of arms and legs as he left the stable. Tanner scrambled to his feet and darted to the entrance. He peered out into the fog.

“What’s going on, Tia?” Grant whispered.

“I don’t know, Grant,” she whispered back.

“Was that a gunshot?” Grant asked.

“I don’t know,” Christina said.

They strained their ears to listen and heard a truck’s engine racing away. They heard horses in the nearby



stables whinnying nervously, having been rudely awoken by the loud bang.

Then they heard men's voices. They were speaking in angry tones, their words fast and short. Christina and Grant just couldn't hear them well enough to understand what they were saying.

"Here they come," Tanner said, backing away from the door.

Charles appeared in the doorway, supporting another man on his shoulders. The man's clothes had been dirtied, and one sleeve of his jacket was torn.

"C'mon, Earl," Charles said, "let's get you into the infirmary."

Earl was holding a hand to his forehead. As they passed, he lowered it to his jacket pocket to get a towel. Christina gasped as they all saw the bloody gash on Earl's forehead. It seemed as if the whole right side of his face was coated in blood.

"Eeeewww!" Sara cried.

"Whoa!" Grant exclaimed. "Did you see that?" he said to Tanner.

"Yeah! I bet that hurt," Tanner said, and he followed Charles and Earl further into the stable and through a set of doors.



“Let’s go,” Grant said, and he headed out of the stall and right for the doors to the infirmary.

“Grant!” Christina called.

“Wait!” Sara cried.

“What?” Grant said, as he turned around.

“We can’t go in there,” Christina said.

“Why not? It’s safer in there with the adults,” Grant said, and he turned back around. He knew she could not argue with that reasoning.

Christina and Sara glanced at each other, then followed him into the infirmary.

Earl sat on the edge of a big metal table—big enough to hold a horse. Christina and Sara entered the room just in time to see Charles swipe a huge glop of some kind of yucky green ointment over the gash on poor Earl’s head.

“Ewww!” Christina cried. “What’s that?”

“It stops the bleeding,” Charles answered, as he grabbed for some sterile cloths. He gently wiped away the blood from around Earl’s wound.

“Where’s Skit?” Sara asked. “And Fritz?”

“I don’t know,” Charles answered. “Drew went to go find them.”

“Where’s Lickety-Split?” Tanner asked.

Charles stopped wiping. “He’s—”



“Charles! Earl!” a voice cried.

“In here, Drew!” Charles called back.

The doors to the infirmary swung open, and a tall out-of-breath young man with seriously messed up blond hair burst in.

“Skit and Fritz are okay,” he said, trying to catch his breath.

“They were cooling off,” he gasped. “They’ll be back here any minute now.”

“Do you know who that was?” Charles asked. “Who drove off with our truck?”

Drew now had his hands on his knees to support his hunched-over frame. He shook his head, no.

“I didn’t get a good look. Someone wrapped a towel around my head and gave me a good knock on the noggin’.”

Earl groaned on the table. “Must have been the same fella who clunked me on the head. And stole my keys.”

Charles went back to wiping the blood off Earl’s face.

“Tell me exactly what happened,” he said. Christina could hear the anger in his voice. She could tell, though, that he was very good at keeping it under control.

“We finally got Lickety to stay on all fours,” Earl began. “It took a minute, but we got him calmed. We took him out to the trailer—Skit’s trailer—and loaded him in.”



Earl moaned again. He held his head up with one hand and said, “My head really hurts.”

“He was real calm after that,” Drew continued. “He let us tie him up like normal. We had just closed the gate when it happened.”

“When what happened?” Charles demanded.

“Well, this guy wrapped a towel around my head and knocked me out—hit me on the back of my head with something...” Drew paused and gingerly placed a hand atop his head. “The next thing I know, somebody’s shootin’ at us!”

“That wasn’t a gun, Drew,” Earl said. “The truck backfired when he shifted gears.”

“Earl? What happened to you?” Charles asked.

Earl looked up. He shook his head. “I turned around when I heard Drew get clunked, and all I see is this shadow swingin’ a two-by-four or somethin’ at me. Got me right here...” Earl pointed at the gooeey gash.

Christina shivered. At least Charles had wiped all the blood away, Christina thought.

“That didn’t stop him, though,” Earl went on. “That first swing got me good, but not good enough. Soon as I was stupid enough to try and get back up, I got clunked again. I couldn’t move until you picked me up, Charles.”



Charles put the blood-soaked towels in a bright red bin labeled Bio-Hazardous Waste. “I think you’ll live,” he said, “but I’m calling for an ambulance just in case you’ve got a concussion.”

Christina, Grant, Sara, and Tanner watched in anticipation as Charles sat down on the table next to Earl. He plucked his phone off his belt and dialed 9-1-1.

Just seconds later, he said, “Yes, officer, I need an ambulance—and I need to report a horse-napping!”

4 A STATE OF HEIGHTENED MYSTERY

A little over an hour later, Christina and Grant sat high atop a stack of hay bales and sipped their hot chocolate—made with milk, not water! Tanner and Sara sat below them with their own steaming mugs. The lingering fog was beginning to burn away in the rising sunlight, but it was still pretty thick. Thick enough, anyway, to nearly hide the flashing lights of the police cars and the ambulance.

A lone horse stood behind them, munching the grass in its enclosure. Christina would occasionally turn and watch it. That horse has been moving closer and closer to us, she thought. Ever since we sat down—now it’s only... maybe... as far from home plate as first base is? Hmmm...

Grant sighed. “I hope we still get to the Great Steamboat Race,” he said. Grant fiddled with the Churchill Downs V.I.P. Pass that he wore around his neck on a dogtag



chain. The others wore similar Passes.

“I’m sure we will,” Christina said. “It’s not like this is a mystery *we* can solve.”

“Huh?” Tanner grunted. “What do you mean? It’s not a mystery *you* can solve?”

“Yeah, Tanner!” Grant said. “We solve mysteries! All across America!”

Sara just looked at him. “Yeah, yeah, Grant. Sure.”

“It’s true!” Grant cried. “Tell ’em, Tia!”

Christina told Tanner and Sara about some of the mysterious events into which she and her brother had gotten swept in the past.

“Like, just last year,” Christina explained, “we were in New York City for the Fourth of July, and somebody stole the original torch from the Statue of Liberty—”

“—but we were the only ones who knew!” Grant added.

“And at Christmas last year,” Christina continued, “we were at the White House—”

“In Washington, D.C.?” Tanner asked.

“Yes!” Christina replied, “and nobody could find the President in the middle of a blizzard!”

Grant giggled. “And I was running all over the White House in my underwear!” He giggled and giggled and nearly spilled his hot chocolate.



“And that’s not all!” Christina said, almost as excited as Grant. “This runs in the family!”

“Our Mom and her brother used to do this mystery stuff, too!” Grant added.

“Yeah! This one time, they were in Bath, North Carolina for the Blackbeard Play, and—”

“Oh, no! What have you kids done this time?!” a concerned, familiar voice said, startling them from their chocolate-and-flashing-lights-induced trance.

“Papa!” Grant exclaimed. He turned so fast that hot chocolate splashed out of his mug and onto his leg. “Ouch!”

“What’s going on here, kids?” Mimi asked. “Why are the police and EMTs here? Are any of you hurt?”

Christina carefully put her mug down on a fencepost behind the hay bales before she made any sudden moves. She joined Grant, who climbed off the bales to hug Mimi and Papa.

She heard the horse in the pen neigh.

“We’ve had a kidnapping,” she said as she greeted them.

“A *horse*-napping,” Grant corrected, as he dabbed at his pants with a towel.

Papa’s eyes nearly popped out of their sockets in surprise. Mimi’s jaw dropped.

“Which horse?” Papa, Mimi’s husband, wanted to know.

“Lickety-Split,” Sara answered.



“How on earth did that happen?” Mimi asked.

Grant clambered back up on the bales as Christina filled them in on the events of the last couple of hours. She wrapped up her account with one bit of speculation...

“The catch is, Lickety-Split was driven away in Skit’s trailer. I think that whoever stole Lickety-Split thinks they really stole Skit. They’ve got a lead pony when they think they have a racehorse!”

Mimi—her mystery-writing mind now in Mystery Mode—nodded in agreement. “That sounds quite possible. I just wonder what might happen if and when they find out that they’ve got the wrong horse!”

“Now,” Papa said, raising a finger, “I’m confused. How does somebody steal the wrong horse while thinking they stole the right one?”

“Skit and Lickety-Split are the same color, chestnut,” Sara answered. “Skit is a little short for a Thoroughbred, and Lickety-Split is tall for a pony.”

“Ohhh,” Papa said. “So Skit is the racehorse I’ve heard so much about? The one called—“

“Friends!” a man called. “You made it!”

Charles approached the group and shook Papa’s hand, then gave Mimi a big hug and a kiss on each cheek. Mimi blushed till her cheeks were as red as roses.



Christina heard the horse neigh again. It was even closer now.

“Did you enjoy your sleep? Was the cabin warm enough?” Mimi and Papa had spent the night in one of the guest cabins at Charles’s horse farm—the legendary Swamp Fox Farm.

They nodded politely and thanked him for being so generous, especially for the real country breakfast—farm-fresh eggs (over easy), fresh bacon (cut just the day before), grits (*not* the instant kind), toast with fresh creamery butter, and coffee and OJ—cooked for them right in their cabin by a personal chef!

Grant arched an eyebrow as Mimi described their wonderful breakfast and kept right on talking to Charles. His mouth started to water. His tummy started to rumble. Grant arched his other eyebrow and said, “Oh, man! I’m hungry!”

“Grant, is food all you can think about?” Christina asked.

Grant nodded. “That breakfast sounded real good!”

“It’s all I can think about right now,” Tanner said, rubbing his tummy.

Sara and Christina looked at each other and rolled their eyes. “BOYS!” they moaned.

The horse neighed, as if to agree with them. It’s only about 30 feet away now, Christina thought. “Why don’t you finish your hot chocolate,” she suggested.



Grant whinnied. “I can’t! I spilled some of it when Papa surprised me, and then—well, I guess I knocked my cup over.” He looked around for the Kentucky Derby mug he’d been drinking from.

“Grrrrant!” Christina growled. “There’s more hot chocolate in the stable. Where’s your cup? I’ll get it for you.”

Grant was still looking. “I can’t find it!” he cried, trying to move the loose bales so he could see in the gaps.

“Did it fall behind you?” Sara asked.

The horse neighed again. It had crept closer.

Grant looked down at the ground behind the stack of hay bales. There, lying in the thick, green, unmowed grass between the hay and a fence, lay his mug.

“There it is!” he exclaimed. He jumped off the bales and over the fence in one motion. He didn’t notice the horse.

Christina climbed back up on the bales to get her hot chocolate.

“Got it!” he called.

“Hand it to me, Grant,” Christina said, and she stretched out her arm.

“Whoa, Nellie!” Grant cried. “What’s this?!”

