

Opening extract from
Born to Dance

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Born to Dance

Dylan and Red Tabby's Great Adventure

Part I

Friendship and loyalty win through
in times of hardship and danger.

Dylan's Big Mistake

Emlyn the Milkman flicked the reins smartly across Dylan's haunches. 'Walk on, my lad!' he called. The young chestnut dray horse put his shoulders against the harness collar and heaved. Bottles rattled and clinked and Emlyn's milk cart trundled forward. Dylan knew the milkman's delivery route by heart. Every shop, every house and cottage, every twist and turn was as familiar to him as the four walls of his stall. Eyes shut, he plodded along, the clip-clop of his hooves echoing down the empty streets.

'Tap-tap. Tippety-tap. That's it, now. Once again. Tap-tap. Tippety-tap. You're doing fine, Dylan. Keep it up!' Mr Spatz beat out the rhythm with his stick. 'One and two and tap and two.'

'Whoa, there, Dylan, lad. You've gone and overshot again.' The milkman's voice cut like a whip across Dylan's daydream and he halted abruptly as the bit pulled hard at the corners of his mouth. Emlyn jumped down. 'What's the matter with you?' he demanded as he filled up his carrier with milk bottles. 'At this rate, you'll have me walking half my route.'

Dylan sighed. As he watched the milkman stride back along the street, he thought again of the magical world he'd known as a foal. He longed to break free from the shafts and harness that bound him to the dairyman's cart – for Dylan was born to dance.

It had been a long, long night and the mice more than usually active. Not once, since the cheese shop had shut the evening before, had Red Tabby managed more than a wink of sleep. She cast a critical eye along the high shelves which held the cheeses. Nothing was amiss. She'd done her job well. A gleam of dawn light found a chink in the shutters as the sun rose above the rim of hills surrounding the town. From outside the shop door, the sound of footsteps and the clink-clink of milk bottles announced the daily milk delivery.

Each morning, it was Red Tabby's habit to follow Dylan on his route for she knew it was likely that a pot of thick cream or a bottle of sweet milk would topple from the milk cart as it bumped its way along the rough country lanes. The thought made the ginger cat's nose wrinkle and she licked her lips. But she knew she daren't leave the shop before the owner opened up for the day, so she settled on the counter to wait. Paws tucked under her chest, she closed her eyes and was soon lost in her favourite dream of tall ships and billowing sails.

While still a kitten Red Tabby had run away to sea. The swashbuckling life had suited her restless nature, but it was a young cat's game and times had changed. While guarding cheeses was perfectly respectable work for any cat, she, like Dylan, yearned for livelier days gone by.

The thatched roof of Hilltop Cottage poked raggedly above the hedgerow bordering the lane. In the long grass opposite, Red Tabby waited patiently. The instant the cheese

shop had opened, she'd raced out after the milk cart and now a tell-tale clip-clop reached her ears. Moments later, Dylan plodded over the brow of the hill.

'Hallo Dylan! Hallo Emlyn!' Emlyn's favourite customer, Widow Medlar, stood waving from the doorstep of Hilltop Cottage. 'Kettle's on!' she called brightly.

'Be right with you, Doris,' Emlyn called back. He quickly reined Dylan to a halt and disappeared inside the cottage for his regular mid-morning cup of tea. Left to himself, Dylan moved off to enjoy some temptingly lush grass that grew at the edge of Widow Medlar's front yard. Red Tabby followed after him, a thirsty eye fixed on the equally tempting goods stacked up on Emlyn's cart.

On this particular summer's morning, Widow Medlar's windows hung wide open. As Emlyn settled to his tea, she switched on her brand new radio, sending a catchy tune dancing out onto the warm air. The lively rhythm set Dylan's fore hooves twitching. 'Tippity-tap, tippity-tap' they went – his hind hooves joining in, 'tappity-tip, tappity-tip.'

In his imagination, the sun became a giant spotlight beaming down on his chestnut flanks as he danced – blond mane and tail flying – before a vast audience. He lurched and lunged between the shafts, jerking and pulling on his harness, his horseshoes making satisfying clicking noises on the widow's flagstones.

That horse could be a star, mused Red Tabby as she watched Dylan's antics from a safe distance. *He could really go places –but not while he's hitched to that milk cart.*

The cart bucked and bounced as Dylan's hooves tapped faster and faster. Soon, Emlyn's milk bottles were jiggling violently up and down in time to the jaunty music. Red Tabby watched hungrily while butter pats and eggs came tumbling down. As she edged closer, eager for her long-awaited treat, Gold Top and Silver Top bottles tottered and fell, shattering on the hard ground. This was the moment she had hoped for. Milk and cream ran in little rivers along cracks and into crevices, forming deliciously inviting puddles.

But the sound of breaking glass brought Emlyn rushing from the cottage. Widow Medlar switched off her radio and came hurrying out after him. As the music stopped, Dylan's favourite daydream came to an abrupt end. Broken bottles and scattered dairy goods lay everywhere. He hung his head in shame.

'Will you never learn?' yelled the dairyman, his face turning red with anger. 'Each time this happens I lose a whole day's takings.'

Widow Medlar wrung her hands in dismay. 'Poor Dylan. He couldn't help it,' she pleaded. 'It was a catchy tune, after all.'

But Emlyn wasn't having it. 'No, Doris, I'm only a small dairyman and I can't afford it. For that matter,' he went on, turning to Dylan, 'I'm beginning to think I can't afford you.'

Dylan had never seen his owner so worked up before and he began to feel frightened as well as ashamed. Emlyn's outburst had alarmed Red Tabby too. She hastily licked the last delicious drops from a puddle of cream and stole away through the hedge.

The angry dairyman began cleaning up Widow Medlar's front yard and tidying the cart. When he'd done the best he could, he took Dylan by the bridle and led him out into the lane.

'Goodbye, Doris,' he called over his shoulder. 'Sorry about the mess Dylan made. Hope I've left things tidy enough.'

‘You’ve left everything lovely, Emlyn,’ Widow Medlar called back. ‘And try not to be too hard on that poor horse. See you both tomorrow!’ Then she hurried inside to telephone her friends and neighbours with news of the morning’s excitement.

To Dylan’s credit, he felt truly sorry about what had happened. All day long, as he plodded through the rest of his rounds, he wished with all his heart that he could undo the damage he’d done. It was true that Dylan didn’t much like being hitched to Emlyn’s cart, but he did always try his best because the dairyman cared for him well. There were always oats aplenty and crunchy apples for treats. His name was neatly lettered above the door of his stall for all to see. And better still, above his manger, the kindly Emlyn had pinned the only reminder Dylan had of his long-lost family – a small, treasured photograph of his mother – Desiree de Polka. *Yes!* he decided, as Emlyn made his last call and turned the cart around, *I suppose I’m a lot luckier than most.* But, somehow, as he began the long trudge home, the notion failed to lift his spirits.

Back at the dairy, Emlyn led Dylan to his stall, inspected his hooves for stones, then fetched him his evening nosebag of fresh, crisp oats. While Dylan munched, the dairyman ran a hand down the horse’s silken mane, tweaked his ear, and patted his neck. Dylan found Emlyn’s gentle touch reassuring and hoped that his terrible mistake, if not forgotten, was at least forgiven.

Then the blow fell. ‘Well, my lad,’ began Emlyn, looking steadily into Dylan’s soft, brown eyes, ‘it seems we’ve come to a parting of the ways. I’ve thought long and hard on our way home and I’ve decided to replace you with one of those electric trucks. Tomorrow you’ll be moving on.’

Dylan let out a frightened whinny.

‘Come on, Dylan, lad. Haven’t I always seen you right?’ the dairyman protested. ‘You’ll go to a good home, I promise you.’

And with that, he strode off across the yard to get his dinner. But, as Emlyn made his way towards the dairy, two ominous figures slipped from the shadows of the stable and hurried after him.

‘Not so fast!’ came a harsh voice. The dairyman stopped and peered warily at the tall, gangly man approaching him.

‘We ’ear you’re a mite unhappy with that nag – er – with that ’orse of yours over there,’ the man said. Dylan, watching from his stall, felt his ears tingle.

‘And who might you two be?’ asked Emlyn, as the second man, puffing heavily, joined his companion.

‘Dennis is me name and ’orseflesh – I mean ’orses – are me game,’ came the answer.

‘And you?’ asked Emlyn, turning to the second man and eyeing the whip he held coiled in his hand.

‘Golightly’s my name,’ the dumpy one wheezed.

‘Otherwise known as *Clumsy*’ sneered the one who had called himself Dennis.

‘And my boss, here,’ the little man added, ‘is otherwise known as *Dangerous*.’ An elbow shot out, catching Clumsy sharply on the ear and sending him sprawling.

‘Watch yer mouth!’ Dennis hissed as he pretended to help his victim to his feet.

‘Did you say *dangerous*?’ asked Emlyn warily.

‘Oh, no,’ replied Dennis in a soothing tone. ‘E said “Generous”. And it’s true! I’m known far and wide as Generous Dennis, though I say so meself as shouldn’t!’ Clumsy rubbed his sore ear ruefully and stayed silent.

‘Well then, Mr Generous Dennis and Mr Clumsy Golightly,’ said Emlyn uncertainly, ‘what’s all this about my horse?’

‘Well, you see, everyone in town is talkin’ of today’s unfortunate little accident,’ Dennis explained, ‘so we’ve come a’callin’ to see if we can be of ’elp.’

‘And just what sort of help might you have in mind?’ the dairyman inquired.

Dennis smiled an oily smile. ‘Sell us your fine animal and he will enjoy rich, green pastures and soft country breezes, in return for some light and pleasant work.’

‘Pleasant, certainly,’ smirked Clumsy Golightly. ‘Well, for me at least!’ he added, fingering his whip. Dennis frowned and cocked a warning elbow at his tubby assistant, who hastily stepped beyond reach.

‘Light and pleasant work you say?’ Emlyn repeated, still hesitating.

‘Indeed! Very light and very pleasant,’ the wily horse dealer assured him – and added cunningly, ‘then you might afford that electric truck we ’ear you want.’

Emlyn shot the man a sharp glance. ‘How did you come to learn about that?’

‘Why, just now, sir, while you were biddin’ your fine steed goodnight,’ came the swift reply. ‘And, anyway,’ Dennis went on, his voice dripping flattery, ‘it only stands to reason that a smart businessman like yourself, sir, would want to move with the times.’

For a long moment, the dairyman peered intently at the two men standing before him in the half-shadows. ‘Makes sense to me,’ he agreed finally. ‘So long as you promise that Dylan will go to a good home.’

Dennis put on his sincerest expression. ‘Rest assured, Squire. No ’appier steed will exist in the whole of the land. You ’ave me word on it as a gentleman.’ Clumsy Golightly rolled his eyes and suppressed a snicker.

Dylan peered anxiously over the stable door. He saw bank notes change hands, then heard the dreaded words, ‘We’ll come for ’im at first light tomorrow.’