

Name: _____ Class: _____

Laura's Key

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*Anne-Marie Reidy is an educator and author based out of Washington, D.C. "Laura's Key" shares the story of a young girl who feels defeated after her experiences with her 6th grade soccer team. **Skill Focus:** In this lesson, you'll practice analyzing theme. Analyzing theme means paying attention to topics or big ideas that come up in a text. As you read, take notes on how Laura's attitude changes throughout the story and what message this reveals.*

- [1] At Piedmont Middle School, a kid could run track or play tennis, but everyone wanted to be on the soccer team. Piedmont and the surrounding towns were pretty small, so instead of having separate girls and boys teams, each school had one co-ed squad. Laura had dreamed of earning glory for the Falcons — or "*Los Halcones*," as most people called them — ever since the first grade, when her older brother Toni scored the winning goal in the county middle school championship. Now he was away at college on a soccer scholarship, and Laura wanted to be the next Martinez to dazzle the whole county with World Cup-level displays of soccer wizardry. The day she joined the team as a sixth-grader, she felt like she could fly.



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But, unfortunately, her joy didn't last. She spent most of the season on the bench.

Walking to the car after the last game of the season, Laura tried to smile at her mother. Having spent yet another game sitting on the bench, Laura hadn't even broken a sweat. "Well, at least you don't have to wash my uniform," she joked, but she could feel tears in her eyes.

"Oh, *mija*,"¹ her mother sighed, "you'll have another chance. You'll see."

- [5] Laura could only shake her head as she climbed into the backseat.

Lying in bed that night, Laura thought back to her first game, the day of her huge mistake.

"Pass, pass, pass!"

"Clear that ball!"

1. term of love meaning "my daughter"

Voices yelled from every side. Laura hovered nervously in front of the goal as both teams charged down the field. A boy on the opposing team had the ball when a battle for possession broke out a few feet from her. Green and blue uniforms swirled around her, and Laura could barely keep track of the ball. Then, suddenly, it came her way!

- [10] *"Laura, I'm open!" one of her teammates called from near the sideline. A quick, easy pass and the ball would be away from their goal, the danger over. Laura drew back her foot and kicked.*

But the ball went in the completely wrong direction! Straight to an enemy in blue, who quickly shot it into the corner of the net, scoring. As the other team high-fived by the goal, Laura cringed from the laser beam stares of her own teammates.

The coach had benched Laura for the rest of the game. When *Los Halcones* lost 1-0, she was crushed.

If Laura hadn't been too ashamed to tell Toni that she was a failure, she would have quit the team that day. In practice, no one passed her the ball. The best players on the team would steal the ball from her and leave her in their dust. As she sat on the bench for game after game, Laura began to think only one Martinez was meant to be a soccer star.

Now that the season was over, she just wanted to forget about soccer. She clearly wasn't good enough to play with *Los Halcones*, and that was that.

- [15] A few days later, Laura's mother found her sprawled on the couch, watching music videos on her phone.

"You'd be better off watching soccer videos, *mija*," her mother said.

"What for?" Laura said, rolling her eyes. "Watching videos won't help me."

"Oh, really?" Her mother put her hands on her hips, which usually meant somebody better shape up. "I saw that boy take the ball from you in practice last week, Laura. No one ever takes the ball from Tobin Heath.² You could learn a lot from watching videos of her dribbling."

"That won't work," Laura whined. "I need someone to watch me and tell me how I can improve. I can't get better by myself."

- [20] Sighing, her mom sank down on the couch. "Laura, for every lock, there is a key. We just have to find it." After a moment, she added, "What if I film you during practice to help you find ways to improve?"

"But the season's over, Mom. No more practice, remember?"

"The best players keep practicing even when the season's over," her mother said. "You remember Toni spending all summer bouncing a ball off his head in the driveway. That boy used to run ten miles a day in the Arizona summer sun. You think he did that for fun?"

"But to practice plays I need at least one other person," Laura protested.

2. member of women's national soccer team and the Portland Thorns National Women's Soccer League team

Her mother patted her on the knee. “We’ll find that key, too,” she said. “Let’s just start with the dribbling.”

- [25] The next day was Saturday. Laura’s mother shook her awake early. “Come on, Laura, let’s go! Your breakfast is on the table, and then it’s soccer time.”

Rubbing sleep from her eyes, Laura stumbled out of bed. She pulled on shorts and a t-shirt, her pursed lips and flared nostrils broadcasting her mood. But once she’d finished a plate of her father’s famous scrambled eggs with jalapeños and warm tortillas, she rushed to the closet to dig out her cleats. Could I really become a better soccer player? she wondered.

Laura ran to get a soccer ball from the garage, but her mother said, “We won’t be needing that.”

“Why not?” Laura asked.

“You’ll see. Come on!” Her mother strode down the street with a tote bag over shoulder and a jumbo box of trash bags under her arm.

- [30] Frowning, Laura followed her mother to a vacant lot a few blocks from their house. Though the lot was certainly big enough to practice dribbling, it was also full of weeds, old tires, rusty beer cans, and take-out cartons. Laura raised her eyebrows. “You want me to practice here?”

Her mother handed her a big black trash bag and a pair of thick gardening gloves. “You do too much sitting around watching YouTube, *mija*,” she said, pulling on her own gloves. “If you squat down each time you grab something, your legs will get stronger and faster. Let them try to catch you then!”

It took all weekend to clear the lot. Late Sunday afternoon, Laura stood next to her mother, gazing out at the newly cleared ground. Her legs burned when she moved, so she supposed they must be getting stronger. She caught her mother’s eye, and they shared a big grin.

Laura built a rickety goal with scrap wood and duct tape. It looked like she could knock it over by sneezing, but it was good enough for her to practice shooting. She and her mother developed a routine: each weeknight before dinner, they headed to the lot for one hour. Laura practiced dribbling by dodging around a course of old tires, pretending she was protecting the ball from some of the best players in the world: Messi, Neymar, and Suarez.³ She practiced shooting, imagining that Tim Howard⁴ was staring her down from the goal. Her mother recorded everything, chuckling to herself. Between the uneven ground, bad lighting, and mosquitoes, Laura made more faces than a ventriloquist.⁵

At first, when they sat down to watch the videos, they doubled over in laughter. But Laura began to be able to see her mistakes, like the way she leaned back too far when she shot the ball. As spring blossomed into summer, she struggled to correct what she saw. Her mother told her she was improving, but when Laura watched the videos, all she saw was those same mistakes, over and over. Like a pot of water on the stovetop, Laura’s frustration bubbled hotter and hotter.

3. refers to Lionel Messi, Neymar da Silva Santos Junior, and Luis Suarez, three of the top professional soccer players in the national league

4. goalkeeper in the American professional soccer league

5. A person who can make sounds that seem to come from a puppet or a person or animal; they change their faces to react to what the puppet says.

[35] When summer vacation began, Laura was spending every day down at the sandlot soccer field, practicing her moves. Her mother would come to film her after work. They must have looked crazy: Laura running up and down the lot kicking a ball and her mom, still in her suit and heels from the office, jogging after her with a smartphone in her hand.

One evening, Laura was running down the sideline when she heard, “Uh, Laura? What are you doing?” She stopped, panting, and saw it was Dequan, a boy in her grade at school, and a couple of other kids from the neighborhood.

“I’m perfecting my dribble against imaginary defenders,” Laura said. She laughed when she saw the looks on their faces. Then she asked, “I don’t suppose any of you want to practice with me?”

“I would,” said Dequan, “but, uh, they wouldn’t take me on *Los Halcones* because I don’t run fast enough.”

“Oh, I have the key to open that door!” said Laura. “I used to be so slow, but my mom taught me how to get faster by strengthening my leg muscles.” She ducked her head and peered out at Dequan from behind her bangs. “I can show you how, if you want.”

[40] “Dope!” Dequan said. “I have a net we can set up at the other end of the field, too.”

Isabel, who lived a few blocks over from Laura, said, “I want to play! I can kick the ball anywhere I want to, but... I don’t really understand the rules.” Her cheeks reddened as she lowered her eyes, and Laura knew why. In their neighborhood, not understanding soccer was like not knowing two plus two!

“No worries, I can teach you,” Laura assured her. “I spent so much of last season on the bench that I basically have the rulebook memorized.” Laura rolled her eyes and let out a theatrical groan.⁶

Isabel smiled. “Cool! I bet I could get my little brother and his friends to play, if you want.”

Dequan said, “Yeah, my ten-year-old sister will want to play, too. And we could take turns recording video when your mom’s at work — then everyone would get a chance to play.”

[45] Laura spun around to where her mother was standing and was surprised to see she had put her phone away and picked up her purse. Time had flown by so quickly! “Okay, *mija*, it’s dinner time. We gotta go.” Smiling at Isabel and Dequan, she added, “You kids make sure you bring plenty of water with you tomorrow — maybe oranges, too. You know how hot it gets, running around in the sun!”

Laura waved goodbye to her new practice buddies and skipped after her mother. When she caught up, her mother winked at her. “See, Laura? A key for every lock.”

Laura met Dequan and Isabel the next morning, and they’d each brought siblings or friends along. Laura’s mom had packed her old red wagon full of water and oranges for snacks. They started their practice with the squats and sprints Laura’s mother had recommended for strong legs, and then practiced passing the ball to each other. They missed a lot of passes, but everyone encouraged each other and tried their best.

6. dramatic emotion

Laura never knew soccer practice could be so much fun. As she walked home for dinner, she thought, I really hope they all come back tomorrow!

They did come back, and, as the summer days passed, more friends from the neighborhood joined in. The kids took turns being the “official videographer” and, on rainy days when they couldn’t play, they gathered at Laura’s house to watch the videos.

- [50] That summer, Laura’s feelings about soccer were like a rollercoaster: one moment she would feel like Carli Lloyd⁷ smashing in a goal, but the next she would trip over her own feet and land in the dirt. Sometimes she didn’t even want to get up. It was like *Los Halcones* practice all over again.

But there was one big difference between those practices and these. When she landed on her face, Dequan pulled her back up, asking, “Okay, cap?”⁸ When one of her passes went awry, flying off toward who-knew-where, Isabel would joke, “Hey, I’m over here! It’s too hot to run after crazy balls!” They discussed plays and techniques with her, helped her identify her errors, and shared suggestions on how she could improve. Some evenings, wincing while her mother cleaned her latest scrapes with rubbing alcohol, Laura thought about quitting. But when she pictured her friends at the sandlot field, waiting for her to appear, she knew she couldn’t desert them.

One afternoon they were practicing passing — still Laura’s weakest skill — when Isabel called out, “Hey, Laura, I think you have a visitor!”

Looking to the side of the field, Laura thought she would see her mother, home early from work. But instead she saw a tall, lean young man with a huge smile. “TONI!”

Full of excitement, she dashed towards her big brother. Laughing, he scooped her up in his arms. “Hey, little Lulu, when’d you get so tall?” he laughed. “I gotta ask Dad what he’s been feeding you.”

- [55] Laura squeezed him hard. “I thought that college coach was going to keep you practicing soccer all summer and you’d never get to come home!”

Toni smiled and held her at arm’s length, admiring how fit and brown she was. “Believe me, I needed the practice, but I also needed some of Dad’s *huevos y jalapeños*.⁹ And when I heard my little sis was starting her own soccer empire, I decided to come check it out. Wait till *Los Halcones* see you in September!”

Laura’s heart fell. In her embarrassment, she had avoided telling Toni about how she blew it with *Los Halcones*. What would he think when he knew his little sister was a failure?

Seeing her facial expression, Toni frowned. “Lulu, what is it? Suddenly you look like your best friend just moved to Alaska.”

Laura knew she couldn’t put it off any longer; she had to tell him. Waving to Isabel, she pointed toward Toni and then toward her house. Isabel nodded and waved goodbye.

7. American women’s soccer player; two-time Olympic gold medalist; two-time FIFA Women’s World Cup champion

8. “Cap” refers to “captain,” as in the team captain.

9. eggs and jalapenos

[60] Grabbing her water bottle, Laura started walking toward the house and tried to figure out where to begin.

“Toni, I don’t know if they’re going to let me play on *Los Halcones* next year. I messed up so badly — everyone on the team hates me!” Toni snorted, but Laura plowed on with her story: the missed pass, the goal, and the loss in front of the whole school. By the end, she was barely whispering, tears running through the practice dust that coated her cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Toni. I didn’t mean to let you down.”

Toni stopped walking and crouched down, turning Laura by her shoulders so that they were face-to-face. He gently wiped the tears from her cheeks. “How could you ever say that? You could never let me down. I mean, I just saw you out there using all your free time to get better and help your friends get better. Don’t you know how proud that made me?”

Laura wailed, “But if I hadn’t blown it with *Los Halcones*, I never would’ve needed to spend all summer practicing! I only started to because I’m the worst one on the team!”

“Come here.” Toni led her over to the stone wall that bordered their parents’ property. Sighing, he sat down beside her and put his arm around her shoulders. “Lalu, I’m sorry. I see that I’m the one who let you down.”

[65] Laura gasped. “How? You’re the best player in the county!”

Toni chuckled. “Well, maybe I am. I think you might be a bit biased about that. But I’ll tell you what I’m not: the best player in my school.” He looked away for a moment, clearing his throat. Then he looked back at her with a little smile. “Did you ever hear the saying, ‘big fish in a little pond?’”

Laura shook her head.

“Well, if there’s one big fish in a pond full of little fish, he might think he’s pretty hot stuff. But then one day, he swims downstream to the ocean. And the first time he sees a shark, he realizes he’s not that big after all.”

Laura stared at him. “Toni, are you saying... you’re that not-so-big fish?”

[70] Toni grinned. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. See, when I rolled into college on a soccer scholarship, I definitely thought I was hot stuff. But my school recruits¹⁰ from all across the country, Lalu. There are guys on my team...” Shaking his head, he let out a low whistle. “This senior from Connecticut can sink goals that would blow your mind. And there’s a guy from Miami who dribbles like he has four feet!”

“Like Tobin Heath?” Laura asked.

Toni nodded. “Yeah, like Tobin Heath. In fact, the dude missed a couple weeks of school to try out for the men’s National Team.”

Laura bugged her eyes out to show how impressed she was.

10. **Recruit (verb):** to persuade people to join your team or organization

"Exactly," he said. "I saw real quick that the level on this team was high. And if I hadn't gotten it in practice, I sure got it at the first game, all of which I spent sitting on the bench." Toni was quiet for a moment, a dark look on his face. "That was rough for me, Lalu. I went back to my dorm that night thinking I was going to quit the team, quit college — all sorts of crazy stuff."

[75] "What stopped you?"

"Well, first I thought about what Mom would say." The siblings shared a look and burst out laughing. "Yeah, I did not want to live through that. But I also got an attitude adjustment.¹¹ Bryce, that guy from Connecticut who shoots like Cristiano Ronaldo,¹² came over to me at practice that week and gave me some pointers. Just a quick comment on how I could get my goal shots to curve more. And... I realized that instead of thinking about giving up, I should be thinking about rising up: rising to the level of my teammates. Those guys wanted me to be better, so I needed to get better."

Toni looked her right in the eyes. "If there's one thing we know how to do in this family, it's work hard. I decided that I might not be the best player on the team, but I was sure going to be a better player by the end of the year. I learned, Lalu; that's all I focused on all year. And I'm ten times the soccer player I was a year ago!

"That's why I'm so proud of you. You went through a tough time on *Los Halcones*, but instead of giving up, you found a solution. You found a way to learn."

Laura smiled. "There's a key for every lock, that's what Mom says. You just have to look until you find the right one!"

[80] Toni nodded. "Exactly. And I'll tell you what: your little team is doing pretty good, but I think you've hit a locked door. You've learned as much as you can from each other. You need some outside help to keep growing." He grinned at her. "How would you like me to be your coach for the next four weeks?"

"Oh, Toni, really?" Laura wrapped him in a huge hug. "That would be amazing! With your help, nothing can stop us!"

The rest of the summer sped by in a blur of soccer. Laura and Toni planned practices together over breakfast; ran drills and scrimmages in the hot sun at the sandlot all afternoon; and watched practice videos after dinner to analyze each player's performance. Some nights as Laura lay in bed, she thought her brain was as sore as her muscles!

It turned out Dequan's father had a friend who ran a summer soccer camp a few towns over. He and Toni arranged for their practice group to play a friendly game against the kids from the camp. Laura could hardly believe it. They were going to play a game like a real team!

"We need a team name," she said to the others. It was their last practice before the game.

[85] Toni smiled. "I've been thinking about that. What do you all think of *Los Alacránes*?"

Laura grimaced. "The scorpions? Ew."

11. **Adjustment** (*noun*): a small change

12. Portuguese professional soccer player; captain of the Portugal national team

"No, wait, I think that's perfect!" Isabel said. "Did you guys know that bark scorpions take five years to grow to full size?"

"So?" Dequan looked unimpressed.

"So," Isabel said, "in order to get bigger, they have to shed their hard exoskeleton.¹³ It literally cracks open and they crawl out, all soft and defenseless. And then their outer layer toughens up again to protect them."

[90] They all stared at her.

"Don't you see?" she said impatiently. "They're always growing. They have to take a risk, and — "

"I get it!" Laura exclaimed. "We're like *los alacránes*! We started the summer trapped in our little shells of 'I'm no good at this.' But we took a risk and shed those shells — and now we're bigger and tougher than ever!"

"Exactly." Toni looked around at them with pride. "And tomorrow those other kids are going to feel our sting." *Los Alacránes* high-fived all around, and Laura grinned with all her teeth.

The game was on a Thursday night at the permanent, well-lit field of the soccer camp. As Laura walked out onto their perfectly groomed grass, she was surprised to see there was quite a crowd in the stands! Her mom waved at her, and her dad winked, his hands full of snacks. Dequan's brothers were there, and even Isabel's grandma came along. Suddenly, Laura's pulse picked up, and her palms felt sweaty. This was nothing like their sandlot!

[95] "Hey," Dequan said beside her. "If they play on this fancy field all the time, I bet they ain't even ready for what these desert scorpions can do." They nodded at each other and ran to where Toni was leading the team through warm-ups.

The game was exciting, and much closer than Laura had expected. *Los Alacránes* were outmatched, but they put up a tough fight. Dequan made an amazing save in the first half, and Isabel scored a goal she never could have back in June. And as for Laura, she didn't miss a single pass.

In the end, *Los Alacránes* lost the game, 3-2. But as Laura hugged Toni on the sidelines, she had never felt so proud.

On the way home after the game, Laura sat in the backseat of her parents' car, squashed between Dequan and Isabel. Classes were starting up in a week, but soccer tryouts weren't until January.

"Dequan," Laura said, "are you still trying to get faster?"

[100] "Always," Dequan said cheerfully. "That red-headed kid smoked me today."

"What are you plotting now, Laura?" Isabel asked with a smile.

13. a hard covering on the outside of some invertebrate animals to provide support and protection; skeleton on the outside of an animal

"Well, I was thinking we might run cross country this fall. For every lock..."

"There is a key!" the three of them said together, bursting into laughter.

In the front seat, Laura's mother smiled silently.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which detail would be MOST important to include in a summary?
 - A. Laura continues to practice even when she wants to give up.
 - B. Laura and her mom spend a weekend cleaning up a vacant lot.
 - C. Laura's brother visits from college and helps coach Laura's soccer team.
 - D. The Piedmont Middle School soccer team lost their first game of the season.

2. Which piece of evidence BEST supports the idea that failure leads to growth and improvement?
 - A. "If Laura hadn't been too ashamed to tell Toni that she was a failure, she would have quit the team that day." (Paragraph 13)
 - B. "Some evenings, wincing while her mother cleaned her latest scrapes with rubbing alcohol, Laura thought about quitting." (Paragraph 51)
 - C. "Dequan made an amazing save in the first half, and Isobel scored a goal she never could have back in June. And as for Laura, she didn't miss a single pass." (Paragraph 96)
 - D. "Classes were starting up in a week, but soccer tryouts weren't until January." (Paragraph 98)

3. Which statement BEST conveys what the comparison to scorpions in lines 86-93 reveals about failure?
 - A. Failure cannot be overcome without taking a risk.
 - B. Failure allows people to learn from their mistakes.
 - C. Failure is not helpful if people are trying to succeed.
 - D. Failure should be avoided because it creates weakness.

4. What is the meaning of the phrase "For every lock, there is a key" in paragraphs 102-103?
 - A. Everyone needs to find their own answers to their frustrations.
 - B. Everyone shares the same problems and frustrations.
 - C. There will always be problems to solve.
 - D. There is a solution to every problem.

5. Write a paragraph showing how Laura's attitude toward failure changes over the course of the story and what events cause those changes. Refer to two pieces of evidence to support your response.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. What personality traits can help a person overcome failure?

2. Do success and winning always look the same?