

A
LAURA MARLIN
MYSTERY

THE SECRET OF SUPERNATURAL CREEK

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Illustrated by David Dean

Orion
Children's Books

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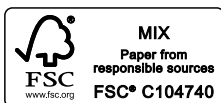
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*For my godson, Matis Matarise,
in the hope that he keeps reading and following his dreams . . .*

*'I am the Tree.
You are Me. With the Land and the Sea.
We are One Not Three.'*

Kevin Gilbert, Indigenous Australian Author & Activist

~ PROLOGUE ~



'FLYING DOCTOR, THIS IS KATHERINE CLINIC. WE HAVE A CODE ONE EMERGENCY.'

NURSE OLIVIA WARD braced herself. In its century of operation Australia's Royal Flying Doctors Service had dealt with many unusual medical crises, but recent events at the Katherine Gorge had taken weirdness to a whole new level. On a scale of 1–10, Livvy Ward rated them a 12.

She blamed the heat. When the Outback sun broiled their brains, even sensible people with triple-digit IQs became as barmy as bandicoots. University professors set off on twenty-kilometre hikes without water, hats or phones. Grey Nomads (pensioners in campervans) roared

across deserts and along bone-shaking Kakadu roads like teenagers on a joyride, then were surprised when they had heart attacks at the wheel.

These, however, were common occurrences. The goings-on at the Katherine Gorge were not. At the RFDS base station in Alice Springs, normally discreet doctors and nurses joked about them beside the watercooler.

‘Did you hear the one about the woman who was watching the sunset at the Katherine Gorge? She fell off a cliff after seeing a wallaby walk on water.’

‘Was it religious?’ Dr Gordon had asked before bursting into rude laughter.

Days later, a fisherman had to be taken for a ‘psych’ evaluation after crashing his truck following a night-time encounter with ‘demonic piranhas’ with red teeth.

Never mind that there *were* no piranhas in Australia.

And an entire family had wrecked their canoes and suffered an array of ghastly injuries trying to escape in the darkness from a shoal of ‘monster fish with eyes like headlamps’.

So when the Katherine Community Clinic called with a Code One emergency at 7.45 p.m. on the hottest night of the year, Livvy Ward steeled herself for more silliness. Instead she heard the words that struck fear into the heart of every man, woman and child in the Northern Territory: ‘CROC ATTACK!’

The details were sickeningly familiar: *Forty-seven-year-old male tourist. Severe trauma to right hand. Heavy blood loss.*

Livvy rapidly initiated the process that would dispatch

an aero medical team within minutes. She couldn't help wondering whether the attack was an unfortunate case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time or if the tourist had courted disaster. It never failed to amaze her how many people tried to imitate the late, great wildlife presenter Steve Irwin by wrestling crocodiles, only to find the croc wrestling them instead.

The Northern Territory was a place of extremes. Boiling deserts and lush tropical wildernesses. Raging floods and leaping wildfires. Cuddly possums and savage or lethally poisonous reptiles. The only thing any RFDS team crew knew for certain was to expect the unexpected. Their onboard medical kit reflected that. Depending on the emergency, they carried vacuum mats, head collars, ventilator machines, chest tubes, heart monitors, infusion pumps, snake and spider antivenom, drugs, dressings, drips and bandages.

'The ambulance will meet the plane at the airstrip,' said the community nurse at the clinic near the Katherine Gorge, a majestic natural wonder carved through Northern Territory wilderness. 'There'll be someone on the ground checking for stray emus, camels and kangaroos before it lands.'

'And bush turkeys,' Livvy reminded her. 'If a couple of those decide to party on the runway, our crew will be the ones in need of rescue, not the patient.'

She was about to sign off when the nurse said: 'One more thing. Either the patient suffered a blow to the head or he's missing a couple of kangaroos in the top paddock, if you know what I mean. You might want to pack a

safety blanket and have him assessed by a mental health professional once he's out of surgery. His description of the croc – it was a little spooky.'

Something in her tone sent a chill up Livvy's spine. 'How spooky?'

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ST IVES, CORNWALL, UNITED KINGDOM. ONE WEEK LATER.

'**DO YOU BELIEVE** in aliens?' Laura Marlin asked her uncle over a boiled egg and Marmite soldiers.

Calvin Redfern poured himself another coffee. It was brewed the way he liked it, more rocket fuel than breakfast beverage. 'Aliens? Yes, I do.'

Laura stared. Former Chief Inspector Redfern was a legendary seeker of truth. He dealt only in fact. That's why *Future Science* magazine was propped against the toast rack. Once he'd been Scotland's most decorated detective. After the death of his wife, he'd quit the force and moved to St Ives and these days, so far as the outside world was

concerned, he was an ordinary fisheries inspector in and around Cornwall.

Only Laura and her best friend, Tariq, knew the vital role he'd played in the Secret Intelligence Service's (MI6) decade-long operation to bring the Straight As to justice. Laura was still struggling to take in that the gang's key players were safely behind bars, their reign of terror over.

Nearly six months had passed since Edward Ambrose Lucas, then Deputy Prime Minister of the UK, had been sensationally unmasked as the Straight As' shadowy leader. The news that criminal masterminds had infiltrated the corridors of power at such a high level had caused shock waves around the world. Even now, half a year later, feverish media interest surrounded Mr A's story. His upcoming court case began in less than a week. Television crews from as far afield as New Zealand and Alaska were descending on London in the hope of attending it. The newspapers were calling it the 'Trial of the Decade'.

Until then, Ed Lucas was being held in solitary confinement under heavy guard within the razor-wired walls of a maximum-security prison.

Logically, Laura knew that Mr A could never harm her again. Even so, he stalked her nightmares and ruined her daydreams. She'd be doing something utterly unrelated, such as painting a parrot for an art project or walking Skye, her three-legged Siberian husky, on Porthmeor Beach, when all of a sudden she'd feel his arm clamp around her like an iron bar. The classroom or beach would melt away

and she'd be back in St Petersburg, being abducted by Ed Lucas on a speedboat.

Only a week ago she'd been gazing in the window of the St Ives Bookseller when the wind teased her nostrils with his peculiar smell. For ages after leaving Russia she'd tried to work out what it reminded her of. Finally she'd figured it out. He smelled of the two faces of money.

Crushed to his chest as he used her as a human shield, Laura had been assaulted by the heady scent of luxury. It was the fragrance of the finest cashmere and silk clothes cut by the best tailors; of the gold and steel watchstrap of his Rolex: of new Italian leather shoes, polished to a mirror gleam.

But his expensive cologne failed to disguise the stench of the laundered money that had paid for it all. Nor did it hide the pong of dirty, sweaty cash clutched in unclean hands; cash won by evil means.

Laura had been unable to get that smell out of her head. After catching a whiff of it on Fore Street, she'd shaken like a jellyfish on a wobble board for twenty minutes. For that reason and so many others, she was counting the hours until she departed on the school trip to Australia. If cuddling koalas didn't take her mind off Mr A and his 'Brotherhood of Monsters', nothing would.

Skye's wet nose nudged her insistently, bringing her back to the present. Discreetly, she slipped him a strip of buttery Marmite toast.

Her uncle opened his mouth to object but she cut him off. 'You're telling me that you, a detective . . .'

‘Former detective . . .’

‘. . . believe that little green men go round abducting people in flying saucers? Or are aliens huge slimy things with black teeth? Do you think they’re going to take over the planet and destroy us in some gruesome way?’

Her uncle was amused. ‘Oh, you mean those kind of aliens? No. I don’t. But neither do I believe we’re alone in the universe.’

Laura cocked her head. ‘So who do you think is out there?’

‘No idea. Could be something as microscopic as bacteria that, once unleashed on earth, will wipe us out. Could be super-beings who are as handsome as film stars and as saintly as Mother Teresa and are not in the least slimy, pointy-headed or Darth Vader-like.’

He picked up *Future Science*. ‘What I do know is that a couple of scientists recently updated the Drake Equation, with intriguing results. Ever heard of Frank Drake? He was the pioneering American astronomer and astrophysicist responsible for the SETI.’

‘The Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence Institute,’ said Laura. ‘Yes, I’ve read about it. So you do believe in aliens?’

‘Hear me out. In the sixties, Drake attempted to calculate the number of active, extraterrestrial civilisations in our Milky Way galaxy. His equation was clever but there were too many improbables. The new Drake calculation by Adam Frank and Woodruff Sullivan is ingenious. Mathematically, they’ve proven that what has happened

here on earth has been replicated at least ten billion other times in cosmic history.'

He flipped through the magazine until he found the article. 'Here's the equation that shows that the odds of us being the only intelligent species on a habitable planet in the universe are less than one in ten billion trillion.'

'That good?' said Laura.

'Less of the sarcasm, please. Here's the equation. It's a simplified version of Drake's original:

$$N_{ast} \times f_{bt}$$

'That's infinitesimally small by the way!'

Laura was unconvinced. Scientists knew a lot but they didn't know everything. They had yet to find a cure for the common cold.

Her uncle tucked *Future Science* into a vacant slot in the toast rack. 'Why are you asking about aliens, anyway? Do you believe that there are little green men roaming round Mars, plotting our destruction?'

'No,' said Laura, 'I don't, and a few N plus X equals Cs in a magazine are not going to change my mind. I'm only asking because, yesterday, our teacher showed us a story from last week's *Darwin Examiner*. It's about the Katherine Gorge, where we're going to be camping when we're in the Northern Territory. In a million years, you'll never guess the headline.'

'Uh, "BOXING KANGAROO CROWNED HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION OF THE WORLD"?'

Laura laughed. 'Good try but not even close. "ALIEN

CROC FLYING DOC CRASH CAUSED BY UFO.”

Calvin Redfern choked on his coffee. ‘You’re joking!’

‘Nope. And it isn’t funny because the Flying Doctor and pilot crash-landed and ended up in hospital themselves. The plane is a wreck. They were responding to an emergency callout late one night. A tourist almost had his hand bitten off by what he described as an “alien” crocodile.’

‘What made him think it was an alien croc as opposed to a regular one?’

‘It glowed a fluorescent green.’

Her uncle pushed his chair back. ‘Oh come on, Laura. Someone is having a lark. Either it’s a spoof story or the bitten tourist had overindulged in the local liquor.’

‘Yes, but that doesn’t explain the UFO. That’s what Eden Jackson, the pilot, thinks it was, and she doesn’t seem the type to make up stories. She’s worked for the Flying Doctors forever and is quite old. About fifty.’

‘Ancient,’ her uncle said drily.

Laura flushed. ‘Sorry, I just meant . . . Anyway, she’s highly respected. She told reporters that, as she flew towards Nitmiluk National Park, a blinding white light shot out of nowhere and hovered in the sky right in front of them. While Eden was dealing with that, the cockpit computer system fizzled and died. She had to make an emergency landing in pitch darkness.’

‘Did everyone on board survive?’

‘Thanks to Eden’s fab flying skills, yeah, they did, but the plane was smashed to pieces because some kangaroos got in the way. Apparently, that’s a hazard of landing in

the Outback: kangaroos, camels and bush turkeys. And emus.'

Her uncle shook his head. 'I knew I should have taken that job with the Australian Federal Police when I was offered it. Investigating alien crocs and UFOs would have been so much more fun than doing battle with failed burglars and the Straight As. What's the doctor's version of events? Is he also claiming they were pursued by a flying saucer?'

'Dr Kelly was napping at the time. He'd been up since dawn with a patient and slept through the whole thing. Not the crash-landing, obviously, but everything else.'

Calvin Redfern snorted. 'Course he did. Wouldn't surprise me if it emerged that Ms Jackson did too. Asleep at the controls of a plane; it's the stuff of nightmares. Where did you put your Australian itinerary, Laura? Are there any excursions in light aircraft or helicopters? No? Just as well because I'd have banned you from going on them. It's disturbing enough that you'll be spending ten days in a country notorious for having ten of the world's most venomous snakes.'

'Tariq says that snakes only bother you if you bother them.'

He smiled. 'Doubtless, the same applies to UFOs. You're travelling to one of the wildest, most remote places on earth. You will have to keep an eye out for creepy-crawlies but I think I can safely guarantee you won't have to worry about aliens. Or fluorescent green crocodiles.'

'Or the Straight As,' added Laura.

‘Or the Straight As. In one way or another, you’ve been through a lot in the year since you moved to St Ives. You’re due a proper holiday, Laura. Just relax and enjoy yourself. You deserve it.’