

Katie's Zoo

by Mark Whitaker

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CHAPTER 1

A Monster on the Settee

It was a cold, dark winter's evening, and Katie was just finishing her tea when her little brother Matthew came running into the kitchen and shouted, 'Mummy, there's a monster on the settee!'

Katie looked at Mum, who looked at Matthew. Matthew was pointing behind him, through the kitchen door and into the hall, his eyes bulging. His mouth was a perfect O shape. 'In the living room!' he gasped.

Mum glanced towards Katie, and Katie saw a small wrinkle appear next to her eye, which meant she was trying not to smile with her mouth. Matthew was a typical three-year old: he lived in a dream world.

'A monster?' asked Mum. 'What kind of monster?'

'A big *scary* one!' replied Matthew.

'A *scary* one?' said Mum, rolling her eyes. 'What was it doing?'

'Watching the telly!' said Matthew, who was still pointing towards the living room.

'Come on,' said Mum, 'you show me.'

She reached out a hand to Matthew, who took her finger then waited. He didn't seem in an awfully big hurry to actually *show* them the monster. He just looked at Mum nervously and twisted his feet around on the spot.

'It can't have been *that* scary,' said Mum.

Matthew just nodded vigorously and didn't budge. Katie walked over and took his other hand.

'Shall I come too, Matthew?' she said, and then bending down she whispered in his ear, 'I'm good with monsters. I'll protect you if it tries to eat you.'

'OK!' chimed Matthew brightly. 'Come on, Katie, I'll show *you* the monster.'

So, all holding hands in a chain, they made their way into the hall. It was only six o'clock but it was already pitch black outside. The hall was in darkness, although the light spilling out of the kitchen behind them was enough to see by. It had been a cold, miserable day, and Katie could hear the rain pattering on the landing window above her. No wonder Matthew had been in the mood for seeing monsters: if Katie hadn't been in charge she might have been pretty scared herself. They tiptoed on towards the living room. As she reached out for the door handle, Katie felt Matthew's grip on her hand get tighter.

Katie opened the door quietly. The living room light was on and made their shadows stretch all the way back to the bottom of the stairs. Katie leant around the doorframe and peered cautiously into the room, then dived back out into the hall with a shriek. She felt Matthew jump.

'Matthew!' she hissed. 'It's a monster! A big, huge, *scary* one! Sitting on the settee, watching the telly!' Matthew squeezed her hand and she could feel him beginning to tremble.

'Katie –' began Mum sternly.

'Don't worry,' said Katie, 'I'll sort him out!' And without waiting for a reply she slipped her hand out of Matthew's and darted back into the living room, pushing the door closed behind her.

From the darkness of the hall, all that could be heard for a few seconds were some muffled footsteps and a rustling noise. Then Katie screamed.

'Aaaarrgghhh! Matthew, he's got me!' she cried. 'He's eating me alive!' There were more muffled noises and then the footsteps were running back towards the door. 'And after he's eaten me, he's coming for *you!*'

The door flew open and Katie burst into the hall. She was wearing a long, dark cloak from the dressing up box, and a witch mask left over from Hallowe'en. She lunged for Matthew and tickled his sides. Matthew screamed.

The hall light came on. Katie pulled the mask off and looked up. Mum was standing with one hand on the switch and a scowl on her face. They both looked at Matthew. Matthew looked down at his feet where a puddle was beginning to form, and when he looked up again he had started to cry.

'Honestly, Katie!' snapped Mum. 'What have I told you? For heaven's sake, he's only little. Go and sit in there while I take Matthew up for a bath.'

'Sorry, Mum!' called Katie as Mum and Matthew disappeared up the stairs, but Matthew was wailing his head off now. Katie didn't stand a chance. 'Sorry, Matthew!' She raised her voice as they reached the landing. 'There wasn't really a monster!'

'Yes there *was*!' sobbed Matthew, and started bawling again.

Katie went back into the living room and threw the cloak and mask back into the dressing up box. It was times like this that she hated being a big sister. It was so easy for a little bit of fun to turn into a lot of trouble. She wished she had someone her own age to play with.

'Stupid baby,' she muttered as she flung herself onto the settee. She snatched up the TV remote control and grumpily switched channels. 'Of course there wasn't a monster.'

There was a creak from behind the settee.

'Well,' said a dry, wheezing voice, 'not *exactly*.'

Katie froze. She felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck. Until now she'd never even realised she had hairs on the back of her neck.

'Please don't worry,' said the voice. 'I know how it looks, but I promise I won't harm you.' There was a low rustling sound, like a sack of something heavy being dragged across the carpet. It was *very close behind her*.

'In fact,' said the voice, 'I was rather hoping you could help me.' Katie was rooted to the spot. The voice sounded like a very old person, but there was something frightening about it too, a bit like a growl.

Katie heard the dragging sound again. She looked down, and there, coming out from behind the settee, with a long mouth full of sharp teeth, and orange eyes with thin, black pupils, was a crocodile.

'My name's George,' said the crocodile. 'I'm very pleased to meet you. You must be Katie.'

CHAPTER 2

George

Katie tried to sit absolutely still. The crocodile looked almost as long as the settee, with tough, knobbly skin like tree bark, and stout, strong-looking legs. His eyes stuck out from the top of his head on bumps the size of apples. But worse than anything else was the mouth: that enormous long mouth, packed with crooked rows of razor-sharp teeth. Goosebumps rippled all the way down Katie's arms and she realised she couldn't move now even if she wanted to. She was completely rooted to the spot.

'Please don't worry, my dear,' said George for the second time that evening. 'I know what you're thinking. We crocodiles really do have a dreadful reputation.' He rolled his eyes in a way that actually looked quite sad. 'It's the same every time I meet new people. All they see is the big teeth and the scary eyes. It's enough to make a chap feel quite downhearted.'

Katie felt herself begin to relax a tiny bit. George had a very gentle way of speaking, and somehow it just didn't feel like he wanted to attack her – not like her grandad's dog, Spitfire, who had to be locked in the kitchen every time Katie visited. 'So...' she said cautiously, 'you're not going to... well, you know... I mean –'

'What, *eat* you?' said George. 'Good gosh no, nothing of the sort my dear! As I keep telling you, Katie, you have nothing to fear from me! I mean heavens, if I'd wanted to eat you I could have done it by now!' He gave Katie a smile which was probably supposed to be friendly but just ended up showing her an awful lot of teeth.

'Is that supposed to make me feel better?' said Katie crossly. George shut his mouth quickly, although a couple of teeth still managed to poke out here and there. He rolled his eyes sadly again and managed to look so sorry for himself that Katie almost reached out to pat him on the head. 'I'm sorry, George,' she said, deciding not to pat him just yet. 'I didn't mean to... well, snap at you.'

'That's perfectly alright, my girl,' mumbled George, trying to keep his mouth as tightly closed as possible. 'It's completely understandable, and as I've told you, it happens all the time. But you have to realise that we're not all like the ones you see on the television.'

George nodded across the room towards the TV which was still on and showing a nature programme. Katie reached for the remote control to switch it off and then she stopped and thought. Without the sound of the TV, Mum might hear her from upstairs and wonder who she was talking to. Worse still, she might come downstairs to investigate. At the moment things seemed to be nicely under control – at least, as nicely under control as things *can* be when you find a crocodile in your living room. Who knew what might happen if Mum and Matthew suddenly appeared? Katie put the remote control back down and thought for a moment until a question suddenly occurred to her.

'So how do you know my name?' she asked.

'Ah,' said George, his face brightening, 'I thought we might come to that. The answer is very simple: you and I have a mutual acquaintance!'

'A what?' asked Katie. For a crocodile, George knew some very big words.

'We have a friend in common,' beamed George. And then, after a dramatic pause, he announced, 'We both know Twitty!'

There was an awkward silence.

'Who's Twitty?' asked Katie.

'Oh,' said George and his face fell. 'Yes, I don't suppose you would have known him by name. But I'm sure you haven't forgotten him. Twitty is the little starling you rescued last spring.'

Katie gasped. She *did* remember, but only just. It seemed like such a tiny incident, and such a long time ago but gradually it started coming back to her.

She had just fallen asleep one evening when she was woken by a thump against her bedroom window. Once she had plucked up the courage to pull back the curtain she had seen a small bird lying on the window ledge outside, fluttering its wings weakly. She opened the window and carefully lifted it inside. It seemed frightened and dazed, its tiny black eyes darting to and fro like tadpoles. Katie murmured softly to it while she stroked its wings with her fingertips. It didn't seem to be in any pain and Katie decided its wings weren't broken. It had probably just knocked itself dizzy when it hit the window.

She wrapped it in a towel then crept downstairs and out of the back door. She returned a few minutes later with some twigs, a handful of grass, and a cardboard box with some woodlice in it from the garage. She made the bird a nice comfortable nest, where it eagerly gobbled up the creepy-crawlies before settling down to sleep. Katie finally went back to bed herself, although it was ages before she managed to doze off. The next morning she was woken at dawn by a tapping sound and opened her eyes to see the bird on the window sill, pecking impatiently against the glass. Katie opened the window and before she had a chance to lift the bird out it was away, soaring into the sky, over the rooftops, past the clouds and disappearing out of sight.

‘Yes,’ whispered Katie, ‘I do remember him.’

‘Well *that*,’ said George triumphantly, ‘was Twitty!’

‘I didn’t really rescue him, though,’ said Katie with a shrug. ‘I only looked after him for one night.’

‘But that was the night that counted!’ said George. ‘Twitty never forgot your kindness, I assure you. He told me all about it on several occasions.’

Katie was finding it difficult to take all of this in. A talking crocodile in her living room was one thing – but to find out he’d heard about her from a *starling*? It was just ridiculous! She had to think hard to make any sense of it at all.

‘So... you and Twitty are *friends*?’

‘Oh, more than that,’ said George, ‘Twitty was my dentist!’ Katie was baffled. ‘Maybe you’ve seen it on one of those nature documentaries on television?’ said George. ‘It’s one of the few things they get right.’

‘Of course!’ murmured Katie. She loved watching nature programmes – it was the closest she ever came to having a pet. ‘Those birds that peck out the food from between crocodiles’ teeth.’

‘Precisely!’ said George. ‘Oh, Twitty was a wonderful dentist. He kept these choppers of mine absolutely spick and span!’

‘So what happened to him?’ asked Katie.

But George suddenly seemed not to have heard her because instead of answering he said, ‘Now listen, my dear, we mustn’t chatter on all night. We have urgent matters to discuss before your mother and that lively little brother of yours come downstairs.’

'Of course!' gasped Katie. She had completely lost track of time and George was right, there wasn't a moment to lose. 'You said before that you wanted my help?'

'Yes,' said George, and then he paused awkwardly. 'Now, I really don't like to ask,' he said, 'it's just... is there any chance at all that you could... well... put me up?'

'Put you up?' asked Katie.

'Let me stay,' said George, then hurriedly added, 'just for a short while, you understand.' And at this he gave Katie another of his sad looks and closed his mouth especially tightly.

'Listen, I'd love to,' she said, 'really I would, it's just... well...' Katie's mind began to race again. Of course she couldn't have a crocodile to stay – that went without saying – but she wanted to think of a reason that wouldn't hurt his feelings. She looked at George, but his face had become so sad now she had to look away again. She could feel the palms of her hands starting to get sweaty. And then, all of a sudden, it struck her and she wondered why she hadn't thought of it sooner. 'It's just that my dad's allergic to animals!'

She looked back down at George and tried to look disappointed, but she was surprised to see George grinning a huge, toothy grin.

'No he isn't!' he beamed.

'He is!' Katie insisted. 'That's why I'm not allowed any pets!' She could feel herself getting cross. Who was George to tell her about her own family? But George was still smiling and shaking his head gently.

'Calm down, my dear, calm down,' he said soothingly. 'Let me tell you something absolutely fascinating: *nobody is allergic to animals*. It's true! You can no more be allergic to animals that you can to other human beings. What your father is allergic to, my dear girl, is *fur*. That's the dreadful stuff that gets up his nose and makes him sneeze, poor chap. And he has my every sympathy. I'm not at all fond of furry animals myself.' A look of distaste came across George's face as he ran his tongue absent-mindedly down the side of his mouth, poking it between his teeth. 'But as you can plainly see,' he continued, 'there is most certainly no fur on me. Not a whisker! So it seems we're in the clear!'

Katie couldn't believe it. Her perfect excuse had just disappeared before her very eyes. She would have to come up with another one, and quickly.

'Er... well...' she flustered, but she didn't get any further because at that exact moment the front door closed with a loud slam. Katie jumped.

'I'm home,' called a voice, and a bunch of keys jangled right outside the living room door. George looked up at Katie. His cheerful smile had been replaced by a look of sheer panic.

'Oh no,' said Katie. 'It's Dad!'

CHAPTER 3

Time for Bed

Katie leapt to her feet and ran for the door but it was already opening. She threw herself against it and grasped the handle as tightly as she could.

‘Dad! Don’t come in!’ she shouted. ‘It’s... it’s a secret!’

‘Come on, Katie,’ said the voice from the other side of the door, ‘stop messing about.’ The door began to shove gently at her shoulder. ‘Let me sit down. I’m tired out.’

‘Dad, please!’ cried Katie, but the door was already pushing her backwards into the room and a moment later Dad’s head appeared. Katie felt her stomach leap just like it did when Dad drove over a bridge too fast.

‘Don’t panic, Dad!’ she gasped. ‘I know how it looks but I can explain everything! He’s perfectly harmless! Just don’t panic!’

But Dad didn’t look panicked at all. He just looked puzzled. Katie stayed where she was, with her foot against the door, and glanced quickly over her shoulder. The living room was empty. Her mind began to swirl and her feet took a step backwards all by themselves.

‘Crikey, Katie,’ said Dad, looking concerned, ‘what was all that about?’

Katie just stood and gawped, trying to work it all out and think up something to say at the same time. And just then a voice drifted down from upstairs: ‘One... two... three... *wEEEEEEEE!*’ It was Mum lifting Matthew out of the bath.

‘Matthew!’ said Katie, realising that her voice sounded a bit strange and high-pitched. She swallowed and tried again. ‘It was about Matthew.’ That was better, but Dad was still looking at her oddly. ‘I made him cry and he wet himself and Mum took him for a bath and that’s what I meant. When I said I could explain. I’m sorry!’

Dad still looked puzzled.

‘And... when you said he was perfectly harmless?’

'He is!' said Katie. That strange voice again: she wasn't making a very good job of this. 'So don't panic. About him getting cross and... well... hurting someone. He's harmless.' She tried a smile but it came out a bit wobbly. Dad gave Katie one last perplexed look but he seemed too tired to ask any more questions. He walked around her, loosening his tie, and flopped down onto the settee. Katie heard a dull squeak as the settee edged back slightly under Dad's weight, and then the sound of someone sucking their breath sharply through their teeth. Lots of teeth.

Katie sat down carefully on the armchair next to the TV and tried to think hard. So George was hiding behind the settee again. The same settee Dad was now sitting *on*. This wasn't good. It wasn't that Dad might find George – the settee made a triangle with the corner of the room and Mum and Dad never looked behind it unless they were looking for Katie or Matthew. No, it was that George might find Dad. Imagine if he popped his head out and spoke to Dad the way he had to her. It just didn't bear thinking about. She had to get Dad out of the room, if only for a moment, while she warned George to stay put. Dad picked up the TV remote control and started flicking through the channels to find the evening news.

'Dad...' said Katie, carefully.

'Yes, sweetheart?' said Dad without looking up from the TV.

'Mum's left your tea in the microwave. Why don't you –'

'Oh would you, poppet?' said Dad. 'Just pop it in the microwave for two minutes. And a glass of water would be lovely. Thanks, Katie.' He started to unlace his shoes distractedly, still paying more attention to the news. Katie was about to protest but she could see that it would be pointless now he was so absorbed. Still, on the plus side there was no chance of Dad going fishing around behind the settee while he was riveted to the television.

'OK, Dad,' said Katie, getting to her feet, and then in a louder voice she added 'YOU JUST STAY THERE. DON'T MOVE A MUSCLE. I'LL BE RIGHT BACK!' But Dad was completely engrossed now which Katie found very reassuring. She darted out of the room and down the hall to the kitchen.

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Katie got back with Dad's dinner just as Mum came downstairs carrying Matthew. Matthew was in his pyjamas, his hair all fluffy like a duckling, and he was clinging tightly to Mum's

shoulders. When he saw Katie he screwed up his face and stuck his tongue out at her. Katie just ignored him. She had more important things to worry about. The living room was starting to get uncomfortably crowded.

'Good girl, Katie,' said Mum when she saw her carrying Dad's dinner, and she gave Katie a little smile that meant she was just about forgiven for the Matthew incident. Katie smiled back but her mouth felt all wonky again. She decided to avoid smiling altogether until this whole business got sorted out.

'I've just brought Matthew down to say goodnight,' said Mum as Katie gave Dad his dinner. 'It's already past his bedtime.'

'Yes,' agreed Katie eagerly, 'you're looking very sleepy, Matty. Time for bed!'

'No, Katie!' squawked Matthew and punched Katie on the head.

'Hey, come on, you two, stop that,' said Dad. 'Come here for a cuddle, Matthew, before Mummy takes you upstairs.' He balanced his dinner on the arm of the settee and Mum handed Matthew to him. Matthew wrapped his arms round Dad's neck.

'Daddy,' he whimpered, 'there was a monster.' He was using the special voice he saved for when he and Katie had been fighting and he wanted Mum and Dad on his side.

'Was there?' said Dad, still watching the news.

'Yes Daddy. Here on the settee. And Katie said she kill it for me.' There was a sudden shudder in the settee that sent Dad's plate of spaghetti Bolognese tumbling onto the floor.

'No I didn't!' shrieked Katie. 'I said I'd TAKE CARE OF HIM!' But in the pandemonium of Dad's dinner disaster, nobody seemed to be listening anyway. Dad lifted Matthew off his knee and got down on all fours to begin rescuing his Bolognese.

'Right you two,' said Mum, 'up to bed. Come on, no arguing.'

'Can someone bring me a cloth?' said Dad.

'But Mum!' said Katie, 'Not now!'

'I said no arguing! Honestly, Paul, she's been like this ever since tea.'

'I have not!' said Katie crossly. Mum was being so unfair and Katie could feel her cheeks beginning to burn. 'I've been...' But what could she say? That she'd been talking to the crocodile who was hiding behind the settee? Dad paused and looked up, waiting for her to finish. In the end she just sighed and said, '...really tired.' Dad smiled.

'Never mind, sweetheart,' he said. 'You just go to bed. Shout me if you want a story, OK?'

'OK, Dad,' said Katie quietly.

Dad leaned over and rubbed her nose with his as he picked a bit of minced beef out of the carpet. 'See you later, alligator.'

Katie just stared for a moment while her brain did a somersault, and then she managed to croak, 'In a while... Dad,' before turning and fleeing for her bedroom.

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Katie's fingers were trembling so much she could barely button up her pyjamas. She switched her light off and listened to Mum reading Matthew a story in the next room. After a while everything went quiet, and then her door creaked and Mum's voice whispered, 'Goodnight, Katie.' She stayed perfectly still until the door creaked again. Katie counted to a hundred before climbing out of bed and tiptoeing across the landing. She sat on the top stair and listened to the muffled noises that floated up from the living room. She could hear the low mumbling of voices and the sound of the TV. Everything was normal. All she had to do was wait until they went to bed, and in the meantime listen out for any emergencies and try not to fall asleep.

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Katie was woken by a sudden noise. She sat bolt upright and listened. Her head throbbed where it had slumped against the banister. The noise had sounded like a scream.

A second later she heard Mum shriek at the top of her voice.

'Oh my... How did that get in here? Paul, quickly!'

Katie jumped up and scrambled down the stairs. 'Don't worry, Mum!' she shouted. 'He won't hurt you!' She reached the bottom step just as Dad came bursting out of the living room and ran into the kitchen. She followed him to find Mum backing away from the sink with her hands to her face.

'For heaven's sake, Christine,' Dad was saying, 'it's only a spider.'

'It's a tarantula!' said Mum, and then she noticed Katie standing in the doorway. 'Katie!' she said. 'What are you doing down here?' She looked more embarrassed than cross.

'She was probably woken up by all the racket,' said Dad. 'Go on Katie, back to bed. You need your sleep.'

Katie didn't think her nerves could take much more of this. She went upstairs without another word and lay in bed wide awake. It seemed like ages before she heard the lights being switched off downstairs and the tinkle of the empty milk bottles on the front step. She tried to listen as Mum and Dad made their way upstairs but they were creeping so quietly that all she could hear was her heart thumping like a drum. She waited until she could hear Dad's snoring and then made her way silently to the bedroom door. Taking care to avoid the squeaky floorboards she slipped out onto the landing and tiptoed down the stairs, pausing on each one for a breath. The living room door was ajar, and she just managed to edge through it without making the hinges groan. The room was pitch black.

'George,' she whispered. There was no answer. She tried again. 'George!'

Still nothing.

Katie took giant, slow steps over to the light by the TV, holding her arms out in front of her until she felt the lamp. She let her fingers find the switch and pressed it just a tiny bit at a time until the light finally blinked on.

'George,' she hissed again, 'it's me, Katie!' There was no reply. She crept over to the settee and peered behind it. There was nobody there.