

KERRIE O'CONNOR has been a journalist for twenty-six years. Her career has spanned print and radio and she has won awards for investigative reporting. She left ABC Radio to answer the call of *Through the Tiger's Eye*, the first book in the Telares series. The story had bubbled away since she travelled to war-torn Eritrea to make a series of documentaries for Radio National.

Kerrie was born in the Year of the Tiger and *By the Monkey's Tail* grew big and strong in the Year of the Monkey, sharing a nursery with Kerrie's baby son.

Also by Kerrie O'Connor

Through the Tiger's Eye

BY THE
MONKEY'S
TAIL



KERRIE
O'CONNOR


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To our golden monkey, Atticus Panckhurst

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Before you begin

Last summer, when Lucy and Ricardo and their mum moved to the Mermaid House, they found a way to another world. A mysterious Tiger-cat showed them a secret tunnel leading to a country called Telares.

In the jungle of Telares, Lucy and Ricardo discovered a terrible injustice – children chained up and working as slaves for the Bull Commander. Bull soldiers had invaded Telares and renamed it East Burchimo.

Meanwhile, back at the Mermaid House, the strange tiger carpet in their room seemed to be growing itself alive, and Nigel Scar-Skull was causing trouble. His aunt Nina Hawthorne, the owner of the Mermaid House, begged Lucy and Ricardo to protect her precious dragon chest. Somehow the chest was linked to the rug and to the future of Telares.

*Lucy and Ricardo risked everything to rescue their new friends from the Bull Commander. But then they had to say goodbye, as Rahel, Toro, Pablo, Carlos and Angel headed for the safety of the mountains. Their job isn't over yet, though . . . as you will see when you read *By the Monkey's Tail*.*

Kissing Carlos the Criminal



'Hey, Lucy! Is your boyfriend still in jail?'

Laughter burst from the back of the bus, where Blake Richards sat with all his jerky Year 9 mates. Up the front, Lucy smouldered, trying not to explode.

'Just ignore them,' hissed Janella. Then she went back to gazing out the window, as if the wire fence around Kurrawong High School were the most fascinating thing she had ever seen. Easy for Janella, thought Lucy, knuckles white on her soccer bag, as another round of guffaws rolled up the aisle.

There was only one thing to do: she would have to arrange for Ricardo to be kidnapped. Again.

The first term of high school had been great – until her jerky little brother Ricardo got talking to Blake's jerky little brother at primary school. In a quiet moment, feeding the school rooster, Ugg Boot, Ricardo had blurted out everything about Telares. Well, not *everything*, he assured Lucy later. Not the part where Lucy and Ricardo had travelled down a weird time tunnel to get there, with

a bit of help from a mysterious half-cat, half-tiger who could not only beam video clips into their brains but also talk. He wasn't *that* dumb.

What he did confess to saying, before Lucy dunked all his Spiderman comics in the bath, was that he and Lucy had flown to another country called Telares for the Christmas holidays and they had met some kids. One of them was called Carlos and he was a boy and he was Lucy's friend. What was wrong with that? Oh yeah – and Carlos was in jail.

'Well, it's not true, so I didn't do anything wrong,' he had argued with his usual twisted logic. 'Carlos isn't in jail any more and we didn't fly to Telares.' He opened his mouth to continue, but something in Lucy's face made him gulp and finish lamely, 'So it's all good.'

All good? Lucy had first felt the impact of his big mouth the following Monday morning, on the bus, when Blake struck up a chorus: 'Lucy loves a criminal! Lucy loves a criminal!' By recess it had spread through Years 7, 8 and 9; by lunch, the whole school. By 3 p.m., every boy on the bus (along with a few of the girls) was singing Blake's tune.

After an excruciating few days the novelty had worn off a bit. Most of Year 7 was bored with it, or had started to feel sorry for Lucy, or had shut up when she and her soccer team cornered them at recess. Only Blake and his back-seat mates kept it up, but today was the last day of term, so Lucy just had to get through the trip home and she wouldn't have to see any jerks (apart from Ricardo) for two weeks. Besides, if she turned around and said anything, it would only make matters worse.

'Hey Lucy! What's it like kissing Carlos the criminal?'

Lucy turned around and said something. Actually, she shouted it. ‘He isn’t a criminal!’

The bus fell quiet. Even the driver swung his head, and Janella looked at her piercingly. Oops. Lucy remembered she had denied knowing anyone called Carlos.

Blake’s words stabbed the silence like a poison dart.

‘But you did kiss him?’

The bus erupted. His mates were high-fiving and hooting. Janella tried to stop Lucy jumping out of her seat, but she was too late.

‘Oooh! Look out, Blake. I think you made her mad,’ a chorus crowed as Lucy strode up the aisle. But something about her expression as she bore down on them caused some to giggle a little nervously. Lucy ignored them. Her eyes were fixed on Blake, who was pretending to hide behind the guy next to him. A familiar thunder was building in her feet and it took all her control not to let it boil up into her chest and erupt.

Blake, acting terrified, peeked out from behind his mate’s shoulder – and froze. Lucy had stopped half a pace away, eyes blazing. Suddenly, he looked confused. He didn’t move, or laugh, the way any normal Year 9 boy would if he was threatened by a mere Year 7 girl. All his mates watched. Lucy leaned closer, not taking her eyes from his. Every cell thundered, but still she held back, battling to stay within her own skin.

Blake paled, shrinking into the seat. Lucy saw goose-bumps on his arms. She leaned closer and saw fear in his eyes. A centimetre closer and she saw panic. She waited until he knew that she knew he was scared – and all his mates did too – then she growled two words: ‘*Back off!*’

The stunned faces of all the back-seat boys gave her a particular feline pleasure. Lucy shook herself and stalked back down the aisle to flop next to Janella, who was gazing at her with both admiration and disbelief.

‘What did you say to him?’

‘Just told him to back off,’ Lucy said casually – but her voice had a curious purring timbre.

‘But . . .?’

Lucy followed Janella’s gaze back to where Blake and the others sat, strangely subdued.

‘But how . . .?’

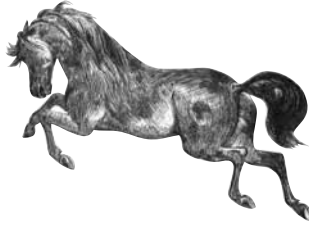
Janella gave up.

‘Weird!’

As the driver fired up the engine, the only person tempted to sing was Lucy.

2

Lucy's Confession



Janella had never been to the Mermaid House – but she was about to make up for that by staying for the whole Easter holidays.

‘Cool!’ she exclaimed, thumping the knocker – a mermaid’s scaly bum – on the heavy wooden door. She didn’t seem to notice how old the house was, or how wobbly the verandah. Thank goodness Mum and Grandma had done such a great job tidying the front yard. Instead of a jungle, it was now a proper old lady’s garden, with roses blooming over the archway (disguising the fact that they were actually holding it up) and bright flowers lining the path.

Lucy escorted her friend up the mermaid carpet to the ballroom, T-Tongue bouncing at their feet. Janella was blown away.

‘Wow! Let’s have a party here.’

Stripped of the layer of dust that had once cloaked them, the ballroom and its polished grand piano were awesome. Painted sea creatures swam on walls, floor and

ceiling, as though you were walking underwater.

‘Fantastic! Why didn’t you bring me here before?’

Lucy blushed. She didn’t know how to say she had been too ashamed, ashamed about Mum and Dad breaking up and about living in a daggy old house, even if it was weirdly cool and she loved it.

Just like Lucy and Ricardo the first time they saw the house, Janella could not resist turning on all the bathroom taps to watch water cascade from the brass dolphins’ mouths. She admired the stained-glass starfish in the windows, before falling in love with the fierce dragons emblazoned on tall vases that guarded Lucy’s bedroom.

Lucy was suddenly quiet. She opened the red, carved door and formally invited Janella in. This was her room now, so it was clean-ish. Ricardo, to his utter disgust, had been banished with all his junk to a smaller room. He’d thrown his biggest tantrum in years, but for once Mum had stuck up for Lucy, insisting she needed her own room to study in now that she was at high school.

Janella stepped onto the tiger rug. Would she notice?

‘Wow!’ Janella fell to her knees and Lucy couldn’t restrain a giggle of delight as her friend began to stroke the mane of the midnight-black horse in one corner of the rug. Except for a white star on its forehead, the horse was so dark that it almost vanished into a patch of woven night sky. It had appeared only in the last few days, very faint at first, and Lucy almost hadn’t dared to hope – but now she was sure. The rug was growing itself alive again, and so was the stubborn hope she would see her Telarian friends soon. Cool! Life in Kurrawong just wasn’t the same after everything that had happened over summer. Even the

excitement of going to high school did not make up for the loss she felt whenever she thought about Telares. Which was weird, as Telares was dangerous – Ricardo had almost not made it home from there, and if he hadn't it would have been *her fault*.

That mysterious horse meant a lot to Lucy. It meant her adventures were not just a dream. And her friends – Rahel, Pablo, Toro, Carlos (yes, Carlos) and tiny Angel – they were real and out there somewhere.

'What do you see?' Lucy asked Janella softly. But Janella's face, as she continued to stroke the carpet horse's mane, had a faraway look, as though she were seeing something so compelling she had forgotten her surroundings. Suddenly, her fingers whitened as she gripped the horse's mane and her eyes grew large. Blood drained from her face and she began panting as though she were running hard.

'Janella!' Lucy was alarmed.

Shuddering, Janella pulled her hands away from the rug and sat up straight.

'Whoa!' she whispered.

'What? Tell me!'

Janella spoke breathlessly. 'I can't believe it! The horse is real! I could hear him in my mind. He liked me stroking his mane and he was whickering to me, he wanted me to scratch his forehead and between his ears.'

'Cool,' said Lucy, with a touch of envy.

'But then – I was riding him!' The words came out in a gallop.

'Riding!'

'It's true. I was riding bareback and he, the horse, was

galloping and I had to hang on really tightly or I would have fallen off. And we were running from something dangerous.’

Lucy felt the room grow cold and almost didn’t dare to ask.

‘What were you running from?’

‘I don’t know. The horse did, though.’ Janella looked anxiously at Lucy. ‘I can’t explain it. He spoke in my head. I know it was a he. He told me to hold on tight because there was danger.’

Lucy wasn’t sure what to say. She knew all about danger. Telares had shown her things she never wanted to see – children chained up and forced to work as slaves, making soccer balls and rugs in the Bulls’ horrible jungle jails. She’d seen the Bull soldiers’ cruelty and violence.

‘Where did you *get* this carpet?’ Janella breathed. She tentatively ran her fingers through the glorious tiger’s fur, carefully avoiding the snake entwined between its front paws.

‘It was just here,’ Lucy said.

Janella shot her that look, the one that said, ‘You’re not telling me something – and I’ll get it out of you, sooner or later.’ The same way she had, finally, after a week of high school, got Lucy to admit that something *was* up, that Mum and Dad had split. And suddenly, after telling Janella, it still wasn’t great, but it didn’t feel so bad.

Lucy struggled with the urge to tell Janella everything. But she had promised the Telarians she’d keep their secret. The battle must have shown on her face because Janella took a deep breath and rammed her advantage home.

‘And who’s this Carlos you lied to me about?’

Lucy went bright red. 'I didn't,' she said lamely.
'Yeah, right!' Janella raised her eyebrows. 'Spit it out.'
So Lucy did.

It was hard to describe her Telarian friends. First of all, Rahel might be the same age as Lucy, but she definitely wasn't normal. Her life was too psycho for that. But she was as calm and still as water – until anger unleashed a storm and she did what she had to do to defend the people she loved. Then there was Pablo, who never got angry, even when he should. And annoying Toro, who at least kept even-more-annoying Ricardo occupied. And tiny Angel, mute, black-eyed Angel, who was bound to Lucy in her very dreams. And finally Carlos, who was angry most of the time – but Lucy had come to understand why, after a while.

It was even harder to describe Telares itself. More than anything, Lucy wanted to show Janella that mysterious country. But the tunnel that led there was blocked. Lucy often checked, just in case, but it had remained stubbornly closed since the day three months ago when her Telarian friends had helped her rescue Ricardo from the clutches of the Bull Commander. It felt like a year ago. Now there was only a smooth red-and-ochre clay wall where the tunnel opening had been. No rubble or broken beams like dinosaur bones, no hungry tunnel mouth leading under a mountain to another world, a world that you should really only be able to get to by flying across the Pacific Ocean. Telares – floating right on the International Date Line. A place of danger, held captive by the Bulls, who had invaded with their guns from powerful Burchimo.

Not only had the Bulls stolen the country, they had made slaves of its people, the proud Telarians. Families had been torn apart, and sent to far-flung corners of the island as slaves. The Bulls even kidnapped children, as their little fingers wove fine carpets and sewed the best soccer balls. That's what had happened to Lucy's friends. When she found the way to Telares, she just had to help them. Together, they had defeated the Bull Commander and freed every child in the jungle jail.

It took hours and a family block of chocolate to tell Janella everything, chiefly because Janella made her say everything that included Carlos twice. And Lucy couldn't help explaining twice how she had paralysed the Bull Commander with her tigerish roar, saving Ricardo and Rahel.

Janella sat up.

'So that's what you did to Blake today!' she said accusingly.

'Kind of, but I held back. I could have gone further,' Lucy said darkly. She collapsed on the tiger rug, too exhausted to explain further. But there was something she had to know.

'You don't think I'm crazy, do you?'

'I always thought you were crazy,' Janella said helpfully, lying across the carpet horse.

'Thanks! But seriously, do you think I'm nuts?'

Janella held her gaze candidly. 'If you had asked me before I went for a ride on Dark Star here, I would have said you were absolutely nuts. But that ride was freaky! So, if you're crazy, so am I. That carpet does something weird to your brain.'