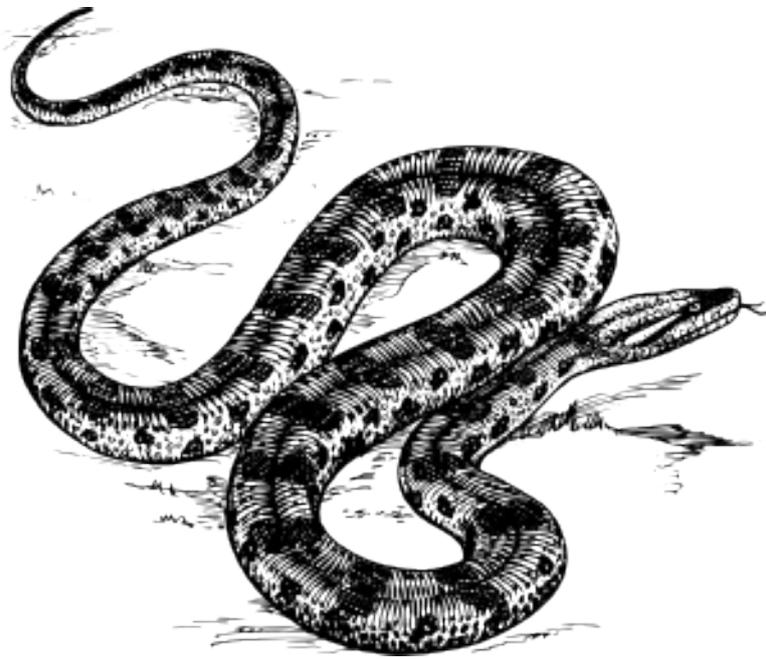


TAYA BAYLISS

SNAKE CHARMER



E.J. GORE

Also by E. J. Gore

Taya Bayliss – Treasure Hunter

Taya Bayliss – Dog Sitter

Taya Bayliss – Code Breaker

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Chapter 1

Taya Bayliss gripped the strap of her backpack so tightly that her knuckles showed white against the skin of her fingers. Mouth open in shock, she pressed a hand to her chest, her heart beating wildly.

'So much for the peace and quiet of the countryside,' she gasped. 'I've been here for less than five minutes and someone's already tried to kill me.'

She stepped back into the small bus shelter and dropped her backpack onto the bench.

'That was a bit close for comfort,' her friend and neighbor, Chris Comino, said as he joined her in the bus shelter. He stretched widely. 'Lucky I grabbed you in time. What were you doing out on the road anyway?'

'I just wanted to take a photo for Mum,' Taya replied. 'I wasn't expecting to be run down by a madman.' The events of the last few minutes ran like a movie through her mind.

She and Chris had stepped down from the bus and slung their backpacks over their shoulders. As the bus had pulled away, Taya had stepped out onto the road to take a photo with her phone. Chris had shouted 'Hey! Watch out!' His sharp wrench on her arm had made her jump back to the kerb with a squeal. As she did so, a shiny, black sedan, horn blaring, had roared past them creating a momentary whirlwind of dust and leaves. Startled birds squawked and screeched in the nearby trees.

Taya watched now as the car disappeared over the crest of the hill.

'That's Busy Ben driving like a maniac as usual. He's always in a rush. Must be some sort of crisis at the church.' Chris shook his head. 'Wow, that is such a cool car.'

'Cool car, mad driver. Totally mad. He could have killed me,' Taya muttered, her heart-rate gradually returning to normal. 'Does he think he is a racing-car driver?'

Chris nodded. 'He is the caretaker at the local church. Father Mackie is getting old, so Ben is there to help him. He plays the organ too. He and my Uncle George were best friends when they were growing up. They were always getting into scrapes together, according to my Grandpa.'

'Your grandparents know we're coming today, right? They are okay with having our party here, aren't they?' Taya asked.

'Yes, yes, stop worrying. They're expecting us - Friday at 11.30. Everything will be fine. Mmm - smell that country air. I know we're only twenty minutes out of the city, but the air is definitely fresher, don't you think?'

'I thought they would be here to meet us,' Taya continued, pushing her blonde hair back from her forehead as she shaded her eyes against the bright sun.

'No need to.' Chris shouldered his bag and grinned at her. 'We can walk now. That's the house right over there.'

The Comino farmhouse was a single level, ranch style house with wide verandahs at the front and back. A low stone wall ran across the front of the property and a pebbled path led visitors to the verandah steps. The house had been renovated and added to over the years, but its original 1880s shape was still evident. At some stage, it had been raised up about a metre from the ground on concrete stumps. This allowed for cooling airflow and also provided a level of safety in case the nearby creek flooded during the wet season.

As they crossed the verandah to the front door, Taya read the name *Castlebar* on a wooden plaque attached to the wall. She ran her hand over the letters.

'That was the name of the town in Ireland where the guy who originally built this place was born,' Chris said as he tapped on the door.

Taya's mind immediately filled with questions about the house and the man who had built it. She had no time to ask them, however, as the door flew open and she was folded into a warm hug from Mrs Comino.

'Taya, darling, I haven't seen you for so long. Haven't you grown tall? How is your mother? Is she still drawing her wonderful pictures? And your father? I suppose he is very busy with his scientific research. Come in. Come in. Put your bag down here.'

'Geez, Gran, take a breath,' Chris said, as his grandmother ushered them into the house. Mrs Comino raised an eyebrow at her grandson. "Christos, you need a haircut. Come, give your Yia-Yia a hug.'

There was no arguing with this request. Chris wrapped his arms around his grandmother and kissed her on the forehead. At almost thirteen, he was already more than a head taller than she was. He rested his chin on the top of her head and pulled a face as she squeezed him tightly. 'You are still the most handsome boy I know,' Mrs Comino said into his shoulder. Taya bit her lip and tried not to laugh as her friend's face grew red with embarrassment.

'Now then, go wash your hands and we will have lunch,' Mrs Comino ordered.

A few minutes later, hands and faces washed clean, Taya and Chris were seated at the wide kitchen table. Lunch consisted of thick slices of freshly baked crusty bread, bowls of crisp salad leaves, tomatoes, cheese and the remains of a roasted leg of lamb. The children set about making themselves sandwiches.

'Thanks for having us for the long weekend, Yia-Yia,' Chris said between bites. 'We are really excited about having the party here.'

'Oh, Christos, I am happy for you and Taya to celebrate your birthdays here. We have the barn, the creek and the walled garden. You should be able to find lots of ways to entertain your guests.'

She turned to her husband, 'Dion, where are the party lights?'

Chris' grandfather looked up from his newspaper. 'Who's having a party?'

'Chris and Taya are having a birthday party. Their birthdays are only a few days apart, so they are having one big celebration. All their friends are coming in three weeks time. I told you this yesterday. You never listen to me, old man.'

Mr Comino nodded. 'I listen to the important things,' he said. 'Christos, you need to climb up into the roof space. If we still have party lights, that's where they will be.'

He winked at the children and returned his attention to the daily news.

'These tomatoes are delicious, Mrs Comino.' Taya said, wiping juice from her lips with a napkin. 'Even better than the ones from your Dad's shop,' she continued, nodding at Chris.

'They are straight from our own vegetable garden, Taya, as fresh as you can get. You must call me Yia-Yia, like Chris does, and Dion, you call him Papou.'

The telephone on the kitchen wall began to ring. Mrs Comino pushed away from the table to answer it, patting Taya on the shoulder as she passed.

'George!' she greeted the caller. 'How are you?'

Chris nudged Taya. 'Dodgy Uncle George,' he whispered. 'Calling from jail.'

Taya's eyes widened with surprise as she turned her head to look at Chris. He nodded and grinned. 'Tell you later.'

Taya munched her sandwich thoughtfully. Mrs Comino was assuring Dodgy Uncle George that everything was fine, and that she and her husband were well. Mr Comino turned the pages of his newspaper, apparently not interested in hearing any news of his son.

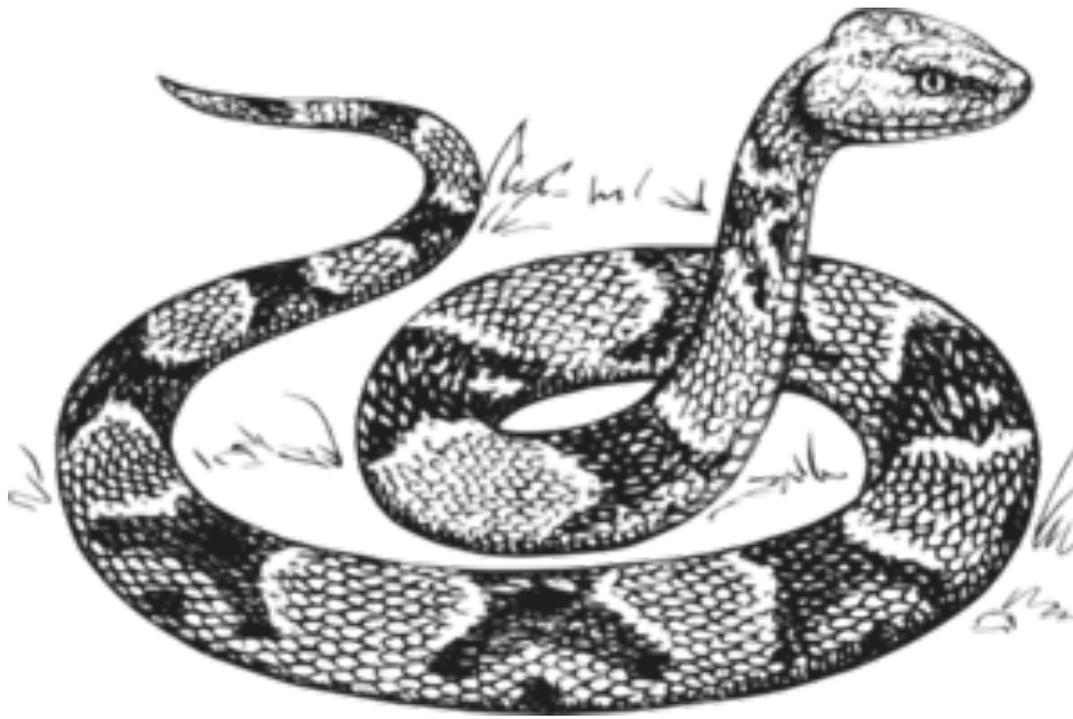
'Christos,' he said suddenly. 'Do you want me to make a Pin the Tail on the Donkey game for your party?'

Chris stood to carry his plate and Taya's to the sink. 'Papou, I am going to be thirteen and Taya is turning twelve, so I think we are a bit old for Pin the Tail on the Donkey. Thanks for the offer, but I think we are just going to swim in the creek, play some music and have a barbecue. We will probably have a water balloon fight too. That's always fun.'

Mr Comino chuckled and shrugged his shoulders.

'George is doing very well,' Mrs Comino said, returning to the table. 'He says he may be eligible for an early release next month.'

Mr Comino snorted without looking up from his newspaper. 'He's said that before. I'll believe it when it happens.' He lifted his head and smiled at the children. 'You two be careful up there when you are searching for the party lights. Oh, and Christos, I think Fifi is awake again, so keep your eyes open.'



Chapter 2

Chris led the way along the corridor, past the bedrooms, to a flight of stairs.

'Taa daa, the attic stairs,' he announced. 'I'll go up. You wait here.'

'No way. I'm coming too,' Taya said, following him up the stairs. 'This is so cool. Attics are always full of interesting things. You aren't going to have all the fun and leave me out.'

'Okay, well, just move slowly and carefully. If Fifi is here, I don't want to frighten her.'

'Oh yeah, I was going to ask you about that? Who is Fifi?'

Chris opened the door at the top of the stairs and flicked on a light that revealed the extent of the roof space. In the middle, where they were standing, it was high enough for a man to stand upright, but sloped away as it stretched out to the edges of the house. Three old wardrobes and two chests of drawers were pushed back as far as they would go, creating the impression of being in a room. There were boxes and suitcases stacked in piles around the space and even a grandfather clock.

'Fifi,' Chris said, as he began sifting through the boxes, 'is a carpet python. She lives up here.'

Taya froze, her eyes darting around the roof space.

'A snake!' she whispered. 'And you call it Fifi. Who calls a snake Fifi?'

'You don't have to whisper,' Chris chuckled. 'Just don't go charging about like a mad thing. It's my fault she's called Fifi. You see, the Greek word for snake is *fithi* but, when I was little, I couldn't say that. It came out as *fifi*. So she became Fifi.' He looked over at Taya and shrugged. 'Simple.'

'Is it here?' Taya hadn't moved. She wasn't sure how she felt about snakes as house pets. She knew that carpet pythons were not poisonous but, for some reason, the very word 'snake' sent shivers down her spine.

'Fifi is not an it,' Chris sounded offended. 'Fifi is a she - or at least we think she is. We sometimes find eggs or the remains of eggs, so it is a reasonable assumption. Oh, relax, Taybay. She won't hurt you. Wow! Check it out, an ancient Monopoly game.'

'Stop calling me that,' Taya said, forcing herself to relax a little. She moved to stand beside Chris, who was examining his find. 'The box is bigger than the modern ones.'

'Okay, I won't call you Taybay if you don't call me Chrisco,' he said. They knocked knuckles in a ritual of agreement.

'It's all taped up.' Chris shook the box. 'They must have lost the pieces. There's no rattling. Oh look, it belonged to Uncle George. He's scribbled all over it.'

Taya ran her finger over the '*George Comino*' scrawled on the box in childish handwriting.

'Tell me about him,' she said. 'Why is he in jail?'

Chris sat on one of the storage boxes and pushed his hair back out of his face.

'Dodgy Uncle George,' he chuckled. 'Where do I begin? He is my Dad's younger brother. He started getting into trouble when he was at school, stealing stuff, fighting, that sort of thing. He was expelled from the local high school. Grandpa used to drive him all the way over to Makerston High so he could finish his schooling there. Then he worked here on the farm for a while. He was really enthusiastic about growing quality vegetables. He was researching growing methods. He was taking the produce to the markets and running the stall there.'

Everything seemed to be fine until Grandpa had a close look at the accounts.'

'And there was money missing?' Taya offered.

'No. Just the opposite, in fact. There was hundreds more than there should have been. George had been doing some extra trading. He had been growing some special plants amongst the tomatoes.'

Taya's mouth dropped open. 'Drugs?' she breathed.

'Yup. He was doing a roaring trade and putting the proceeds into my grandfather's account. Grandpa could have been in major trouble. He asked George about the money and told him that he was going to call the police. Grandma begged him not to. Grandpa donated the money to charity and made Uncle George destroy all his plants. Then, last year, George found a job at a real estate company. He was found guilty of stealing money that people paid him as deposits on apartments or houses, money that should have been going into the real estate company's account. Plus - at around about the same time, the O'Malley cross was stolen from the church. It's never been found, but most people in the area think he took that too. Dodgy Uncle George, he's our family's black sheep.'

Chris stood up, placed the Monopoly game on top of a chest of drawers and dusted his hands on his jeans.

'Right then, I'll look in the wardrobes. You check these drawers. If you find the party lights or the O'Malley cross, let me know.'

Taya's eyes lit up with excitement. She jumped to her feet. 'Do you think it might really be up here? Who was this O'Malley guy?'

'No, you goose, of course not.' Chris snorted with laughter. 'There was an O'Malley and he did own this house, but as far as the cross goes, I really don't think it would be here even if Uncle George did take it.'

'But, you can't be sure, can you? Have you ever looked?' Taya persisted as she investigated one of the chests of drawers. There were no strings of party lights, only bunches of dried flowers, old photograph albums and an assortment of postcards.

'Believe me, if that cross was here, the police would have found it last year. They searched this place top to bottom when it went missing. Hmm, no party lights.'

'How cool would it be to find it though, and prove everyone wrong?' Taya chuckled.

'It isn't here. How many times do I have to tell you? Why does everything have to be a mystery with you? Come and hold these boxes steady so I can have a look up here.'

Chris had stacked one box on top of another and had clambered up onto them, so that he could lift down boxes and a plastic crate from the top of a wardrobe.

'Be careful up there. That thing only has three good legs,' Taya chuckled as she watched her friend.

'It's okay. There's a brick under the other corner. It's perfectly safe.' Chris sighed and pushed his hair back off his forehead again.

'Gosh, there's a lot of junk up here. There's got to be a hundred years' worth of stuff. I feel like Howard Carter digging around in King Tut's tomb. I wouldn't be surprised if there is a sarcophagus or two buried under these boxes. How am I supposed to find party lights amongst all this?' He waved an impatient hand.

'Here, you look through this one,' he said, as he passed a cardboard box down to Taya. He slid another box forward. The resultant avalanche of dust cascaded over Taya making her sneeze several times.

'Gotta love attics,' she snuffled. 'So many treasures, so much dust. Aa-choo!' She sat on the floor and opened the cardboard box.

'Just keep...!' The sentence was completed with a shriek of terror.

Startled, Chris lost his balance and fell forward against the old wardrobe. He grabbed at it for support. There was an ominous scraping sound as the wardrobe shifted slightly. Its damaged corner slipped off the brick. The wardrobe tipped and toppled forward, taking Chris with it as it fell. Its doors flew open sending books, file folders and boxes showering across the room. The crash reverberated around the confined space as even more dust exploded into the air. Chris found himself sprawled against a chest of drawers.

He sat up slowly and stretched carefully. One of his legs was caught under the fallen wardrobe.

'Taya? Taya, are you okay? I can't see you.' The dust was stinging his eyes. 'Taya, where are you? Answer me!'

What happens next? Where is the snake? Is Taya okay?

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