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The Snake Boy

It was the last day of term, and the atmosphere in the classroom was manic as we waited for our Biology teacher to show up. I was expecting a quiz, or maybe a natural history film. What I wasn't expecting was a boy with a snake.

When the door opened, it wasn't our Biology teacher who came in, but Mr Bull, the Headteacher. Following behind him was a tall, suntanned boy of about my own age. He was carrying a large, clear plastic box that contained something brightly coloured.

"Good morning, students," Mr Bull said. "Today, as a treat, you are going to have the chance to learn about and examine a living creature."

"Woo hoo!" a boy at the back of the class called out.

Mr Bull glared at him. "Any trouble, and you will all lose this unique opportunity!" He continued to glare at us until everybody was silent, then turned to the boy with the box. "This is Jake, who has kindly consented to bring his pet snake into class and to talk to us about the life cycle of these fascinating creatures."

The minute he mentioned the word 'snake', my heart missed a beat, and I felt an uncomfortable sensation in

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my stomach. I'm not a great fan of snakes. Ever since the day I only just avoided being bitten by an adder hidden in some long grass, I've done my best to steer clear of them. Now I was going to have to face my worst fear in front of an entire classroom of kids.

Jake undid the case and gently lifted out the snake. It was long and sinuous, with a pattern of brown and black diamond shapes running down its back. Holding it carefully just behind its head with one hand, and grasping the tail end with the other hand, he draped it around his neck like a huge, multi-coloured necklace. "This is Queenie," he said. "She's a North American corn snake." As all the other kids clustered around the desk trying to get a closer look, he started to talk about the snake's natural habitat, the food it liked to eat, and its reproductive cycle. I hung around at the back of the group, trying my best to look inconspicuous.

It didn't work. Mr Bull frowned at me. "Alexander! Pay attention! Come to the front, so you can see what is going on." I pinned a smile on my face and moved closer to the boy with the snake. He gave me an ironic grin, as if he could sense my fear. I looked away hurriedly, and tried to catch my sister Donna's eye, but she was so fascinated by the snake that she didn't notice. As the boy stopped talking, she stuck her hand up. "Please sir, can I touch the snake?"

Jake glanced at Mr Bull, who nodded. Donna moved closer and laid her hand on the scaly body. "Ooh! I thought it would be cold and slimy, but it's not."

Lots of other kids wanted to handle the snake. Not me. I was counting the minutes until the lesson ended.

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At last the bell rang, and Jake put the snake back in her box. As the other kids began to leave the room, Donna hung back, talking to Jake. I left her to it.

She caught up with me in the yard ten minutes later. “That was the best Biology lesson we’ve ever had! Why did you disappear like that?” Before I could reply, she hurried on. “Guess what? He’s invited us round to his home after school so I can have another go at handling Queenie. You can have a go too. Won’t that be great?”

Donna seemed to have forgotten I was afraid of snakes, and I wasn’t going to remind her. “Fine. But we’d better let Nan know where we’re going.”

A few months earlier, when we had been investigating the case of the haunted priory, we hadn’t come home when we were supposed to, and Nan had filed a Missing Persons report with the police. That had got us into no end of trouble, and there was no way I wanted that to happen again. I rather hoped Nan would say ‘No’, so I could avoid the snake, but she just texted HOME BY 6PM, OK?

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After school had finally broken up, and we had said goodbye to all our friends, we found Jake waiting for us outside the school gates, carrying the box containing his snake. He told us he lived in Acacia Avenue, which was in the old part of town near the harbour. As we started to walk in that direction, Donna asked him, “Why did you call your snake Queenie?”

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“Because she moves in a sort of slow, dignified way, like a queen.”

I was more interested in Jake than I was in the snake. I had been trying to identify his accent. Finally, it came to me. “You’re Australian, aren’t you?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Well, aren’t you clever? Yes, I was born in Sydney.”

Donna ignored the sarcasm. “Did you bring Queenie with you from Australia?”

He shook his head. “Dad’s a musician. We had to move around a lot because of his work, so I wasn’t allowed a pet, but he promised I could have a snake when we came over here and found somewhere to live.”

“So how come you moved to Britain?”

“Dad thought he could find more work here than in Australia. Then in London he met Tom, who told him about a really well-paid job on a cruise ship. So now he and Tom are working on the ship, and I’m staying with Tom’s family in Holcombe Bay.”

It didn’t take us long to reach Acacia Avenue, which was full of big old houses with signs outside saying ‘Bed & Breakfast’. Jake’s home, Acacia Villa, was much larger than the other houses and seemed to be divided in two. No 1, where Jake lived, looked well cared for, but the other half, No 3, was boarded up.

Ignoring the front door, Jake led us round the side of the house, past an ancient garage, until we reached a paved patio.

Ahead of us was a long, sloping garden. A flight of stone steps led from the patio to an overgrown lawn, in

the centre of which stood a massive tree. Jake ran down the steps and stopped, staring up at the tree. "Miles!" he called out. "You up there?"

A boy's head appeared from among the branches, followed a moment later by a girl's head. Donna gasped. "Wow! It's a tree house! Wouldn't it be great if we had a tree house like that at home, Alex?"

The girl didn't look pleased to see us. "Who are they?" she asked Jake. Jake ignored her. "Let down the rope ladder, Miles. We're coming up." Dropping the box containing the snake on the grass, he grabbed hold of the rope ladder Miles had thrown down and began to climb quickly up into the tree house. We dumped our school bags on the ground and followed after him.

Inside we found the boy, who looked about seven or eight, and the girl who was plainly his older sister, because she had the same long straight nose and sandy-coloured hair. They introduced themselves as Miles and Billie. Miles seemed friendly enough, but Billie continued to frown at us. She definitely wasn't happy about us being there. Donna, who was trying hard to be friendly, smiled at Billie and said: "I love your tree house. Did you build it yourselves?"

Billie relaxed a little. She nodded. "We built it last summer. Dad did the difficult bits, but we helped, didn't we, Miles? The floor is old railway sleepers, and we made the walls from pieces of wood we found in a skip. The roof is made of small branches from trees in the Jungle, all woven together."

"The Jungle?"

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Miles pointed through an opening in the back of the tree house, which overlooked the far end of the garden. Another flight of steps led to a lower level, which was filled with a tangled mass of small trees and huge bramble bushes. It was obvious how it got its name.

Donna was peering out of another opening which faced the back of the three-storeyed house. On the top floor something that looked like a conservatory folded itself around the corner of the house. "What's that?" she asked, pointing.

"That's Mum's studio," Billie said. "She's an artist. We have the top two floors of the house and our landlord, Mr Pascoe, has the ground floor flat."

The third opening of the tree house overlooked the unoccupied half of the house, which had shuttered windows and a huge overgrown garden. It was separated from No 1 by a dilapidated wooden fence. "Who lives there?" I asked.

"Nobody. It's been empty for years."

Just then, a voice called from down below. "Ahoy there! Anyone at home?"

I peered down. Standing underneath the tree was an elderly man. He seemed to be feeling the heat, because he was fanning his face with a straw hat that looked almost as old as he did.

Billie stuck her head out of the doorway. "Hello, Mr Pascoe," she said.

He smiled up at her. "Hello, Billie. How would you like to celebrate breaking up for the summer by joining me on a picnic?"

“Yes, please!” Billie cried, and began to scramble down the ladder. The rest of us followed as fast as we could. When he saw us, the old man raised his eyebrows. “Who are your friends?”

“This is Donna and Alex,” Jake replied. “Can they come too?”

Mr Pascoe smiled. “Of course. You can all help me harvest the last of the strawberries from my allotment.”

While Jake put Queenie back in her tank indoors, we helped the old man gather together everything we needed for the picnic. I couldn’t believe my luck. Thanks to Mr Pascoe, it looked as if I would be able to avoid another close encounter with the snake.

Before long we were following the old man out of the front gate, and down a footpath that ran alongside the garden of Acacia Villa towards the allotments. Mr Pascoe carried the picnic basket, Donna clutched a big old-fashioned whistling kettle and Jake had a backpack containing a tartan blanket. Billie, Miles and I followed behind.

As the path turned a corner, Mr Pascoe almost collided with two men who were standing still, staring back the way we had come. One was big, with muscles that rippled under his T-shirt, and dirty blond hair tied black in a ponytail. The other was shorter, with a shaven head and heavily tattooed arms. They didn’t look much like gardeners to me, and I wondered what they were doing there. Silently, they moved aside for us to pass. When I glanced behind us a few moments later, they had disappeared.