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1

“See anything yet?” I called out.

“Nothing yet,” I heard a voice in the woods reply. The voice belonged to my friend Stephen Kottler. We were hunting for garter snakes in the woods near our house. So far, we hadn’t found anything, and I was about to give up.

My name is Ryan Brindley, and I live in Maple Glen. It’s a city in Pennsylvania, not far from Philadelphia. We used to live in Missouri, but we moved here a few years ago when Mom changed jobs. I really like it here. There are lots of forests and trees, but best of all . . . garter

snakes. Garter snakes are my favorite kind of snake. First of all, you can find them just about anywhere. They are black with a yellow stripe down their back, and they have a creamy yellow belly. Plus, they're pretty much harmless. Oh, I caught a lot of garter snakes when I lived in Missouri but I catch more here.

We don't really do anything with the snakes, either. I used to think that it would be cool to have one as a pet, but you can't keep a wild snake. I think it's more fun just to catch a snake and watch it for a while and then let it go.

My friend Stephen loves to catch snakes, too, and so does our friend Heather Lewis. I used to think that girls didn't like snakes, but Heather does, and she's good at catching them, too. Today, she had soccer practice, so she couldn't be with us.

And normally, we all have a lot of fun.

Normally.

But today, we would discover something that would turn our entire city upside down.

"Let's hunt in the swamp," I suggested, and pretty soon I saw Stephen appear from the

woods. His blonde hair shone in the afternoon sun, and his face was damp with sweat.

“Yeah, let’s try the swamp,” he agreed. “I haven’t seen a single snake.”

The swamp isn’t far from where we live. It’s dense and thick, and it’s hard to walk through.

We had just entered the swamp. I was right behind Stephen when suddenly, he stopped.

“Shhh,” he said. “I thought I heard something.”

Quietly, I stepped up to his side. We listened. All we could hear were a few birds chirping, and the sound of a small airplane way up in the sky.

And suddenly—

We heard it.

The crackling, swishing sounds that a snake makes as it moves through brush and branches.

But this sound was different, somehow. It sounded . . .

Heavier.

Bigger.

If it was a snake, it was a big one.

My heart pounded. “I think it’s over there somewhere,” I said, raising my arm to point.

Carefully, we took a few steps forward.
“There!” Stephen pointed. “I saw something move!”

We sprang, unaware that what we were about to find
wasn't just some ordinary garter snake.

Now, I'm not afraid of snakes.
Period.
But what I saw that day was horrifying.

2

My heart stopped. Well, not really . . . but that's what it felt like. Stephen screamed. I thought for a moment he was going to pass out.

It was a snake, all right . . . but it was like no snake I had ever seen in my life.

First of all, it was big. Longer than a car. It had splotches of different colors—green, gray, brown, and black.

And it was as big around as a football. We couldn't move. We scarcely dared to breathe. Much less do something. There was no

way we were going to even think about catching this snake.

And besides . . . it's not smart to catch just any snake you see. Some of them bite, but I've found that if you leave them alone, they'll leave you alone. So it's not a good idea to just catch any snake that you come across. That's just asking for trouble.

“What . . . what kind of snake is that?” Stephen gulped

“It looks like some kind of boa constrictor,” I answered quietly. “But I can't be sure.”

“But there aren't any boa constrictors in Maple Glen, let alone Pennsylvania!” Stephen said.

The snake wasn't doing much, and it didn't seem to pay much attention to us. Finally, after a few more moments, it slowly slithered off into the swamp. The snake was gone.

“That was too cool!” I shouted after the snake had disappeared.

“That was awesome!” Stephen cried. “I've never seen a snake that big in my life!”

It was really kind of cool to see a snake like that, so close to home.

But something really bothered me.

That snake, whatever it was, wasn't from Pennsylvania. True, there are several kinds of snakes in our state—but none that grow to the size of the snake we'd seen in the swamp.

Later, when I got home, I looked through all of my snake books. I have lots of books on snakes, and I read all about them all the time. I tried to find the name of the snake we'd spotted, but I couldn't find this snake in any of my books. I found a lot that looked like it, but I couldn't find the exact snake.

So I decided that I would go back into the swamp and see if I could find the snake again. I knew that Stephen would want to go, too.

I went to bed and fell asleep, not knowing that the very next day would lead to a discovery—a discovery that everyone in Maple Glen and even the entire state of Pennsylvania would never forget.

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I got up early the next morning, and made preparations. I placed a couple of my snake books in my backpack, along with a first-aid kit, a ball of string, some mosquito repellent and a compass—just in case we got lost in the swamp.

Then I rode my bike over to Stephen's house. He only lives a few blocks away.

Stephen was waiting in the garage. He had a backpack too, but he was also carrying bottles of water and sandwiches that his mom had made for us.

“All set?” I asked.

“Let’s go snake hunting!” he said excitedly.

Our plan was to ride down to a small park that bordered on the edge of the swamp. From there, we could enter the swamp quickly without having to hike through the forest. Plus, we would ride right past Heather Lewis’ house. I was sure she would want to go with us today!

We stopped at her house and rang the doorbell. The door opened, and her mother appeared.

“Hi Mrs. Lewis,” I said. “Is Heather around?”

“I’m afraid she’s visiting her grandparents,” Mrs. Lewis said. “But she’ll be home later. I’ll let her know you stopped by.”

“Wait until she finds out what she missed!” Stephen said as we hopped on our bikes and rode out of the driveway.

“I sure hope we see that monster snake again,” I said.

We rode down the block. In no time at all, we were at the park. We locked our bikes up around a tree.

“Time to find us a snake,” I said as we entered the swamp.

“A giant snake!” Stephen chimed in.

“With huge teeth!” I exclaimed.

“And dark, beady eyes!” Stephen said.

We were excited, for sure.

But after hours and hours of scouring the swamp, we hadn't seen any evidence of the enormous snake. I caught one garter snake, and I let him go after a few minutes.

But that was all.

At noon, we decided to split up. We'd have a better chance finding the snake if we could each cover a little more ground. Every few minutes we would call out, just to make sure that we didn't get too far away from each other.

Branches scratched at my face. My muscles ached. Mosquitos nipped at my arm, even though I had bug spray on.

Man, I thought. There is no way we're going to find that thing.

I was bummed. I was really hoping that we'd see the snake again, but I knew that our chances were slim.

And suddenly. . . .

“HOLY COW!”

Stephen's voice pierced the swamp. "Are you okay?" I called out frantically.

"Ryan! Get over here! You've got to see this!"

"Is it the snake?" I yelled back. I was already headed in his direction, sweeping branches and brush out of my way.

"You're not going to believe this!" Stephen shouted. "You're going to freak out!" And when I arrived at his side, I gasped. Stephen was wrong. When I saw what he'd found, I didn't just

freak out. I went bananas.

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Stephen had found a snake skin.

Not just any snake skin.

An enormous snake skin.

You see, every once in a while, a snake will shed its skin. It rubs up against branches and brush, and the old skin gets caught. Then it kind of wriggles out, leaving behind a skin that is thin, like plastic. The shed skin is usually a creamy, light-brown color. It dries and becomes very brittle, but what it looks like, really, is the ghost of the snake. You can see the texture of scales on

the skin and everything. I've found a few snake skins over the summer.

But none like this one.

Stephen and I just stared. The snake skin that we'd found must have been from the snake we saw the day before, because the skin was huge.

"I can't believe it!" Stephen whispered.

"Man, Heather is going to be sorry she missed finding this!" I said.

But we also knew something else:

The snake, wherever it was, might be dangerous.

"We have to tell someone," I said.

"Who?" Stephen replied. "The police?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "We have to tell someone who knows about snakes. Someone who might know what kind of snake it is."

"But who?" Stephen said, as he scratched his head.

We thought and thought about it. The entire time, we didn't take our eyes off the giant snake skin.

All of a sudden, I knew who we could talk to.

“The pet store!” I exclaimed. “They have all kinds of different animals, including snakes! I’ll bet the guy who runs the pet store would know what kind of snake this is!”

“Good idea!” Stephen replied. “But how are we going to get this skin out of here?”

“We’re not,” I said. “We’ll leave it here. We’ll bring the owner of the pet store out here to see it.”

“Suppose we can’t find it again?” Stephen asked.

“I’ve already got that one figured out,” I said, as I slipped my backpack off. I unzipped it and pulled out the ball of string. “See? I’ll tie this string onto this branch—”

As I spoke, I wound the string around a small sapling.

“—And I’ll just let it out as we walk back. When we come back, all we have to do is follow the string. It’ll lead us right to the snake skin!”

“Ryan, you’re a genius!” Stephen shouted, and he raised his hand in the air. I slapped it and then bowed.

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“Yes, I am, aren’t I?” I said with a smirk. “Come on. If we hurry, we can get to the pet store before it closes.”

We backtracked through the swamp. All the while, I was letting out string so that we could follow it right back to the snake skin.

And I couldn’t wait to tell the pet store owner! I was sure he’d be excited to see it.

Going back through the swamp was even more difficult than it was coming in. I had to go slower to let out the string. In many places the brush was so thick that I couldn’t even see my shoes. Still, we pressed on, pushing branches and limbs out of our way as we moved forward.

We were almost out of the swamp. I was excited about going to the pet store and telling the owner about what we had found. He would know more about the snake skin, I was sure.

And so, I wasn’t really paying attention to where I was walking. I was thinking about giant snakes and snake skins and—

Suddenly, I felt two sharp pains in my lower leg. It hurt! I screamed and tried to get away, but it was already too late. . . .