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“Are you ready yet?” I called out down the hall. My sister, Jillian, was still in her room. We had planned on going for a hike in the woods, but she couldn’t decide what shirt to wear. She kept changing from one to another. If she kept it up, we’d never get out of the house.

“Just a second, Jason,” she said, her voice muffled from behind her closed bedroom door.

“You said that ten minutes ago,” I said impatiently. “Make up your mind.”

“Hold your horses,” Jillian replied.

I sighed. “I’ll be on the back porch. We don’t have all day, you know.”

“No, you don’t,” Mom called out from her office. “Make sure you’re home by noon.”

Mom works out of our house in what used to be a guest bedroom. When she started her own business, she turned it into an office. And she stays pretty busy because her phone is always ringing, and she's always tapping away at her computer.

I strode across the living room to her office door. Mom sat at her desk, in front of a computer monitor. She had a telephone headset on, so she could talk to customers while leaving her hands free to type.

“We will, Mom,” I said.

Mom smiled. “And stay out of the mud today,” she warned.

I smiled meekly and rolled my eyes. The last time I'd gone hiking, it was after a heavy rain. I wound up getting all muddy near a small pond while trying to catch frogs. Mom wasn't very happy when I got home, all soaked and dirty like I was.

Jillian came out of her bedroom. She wore blue jeans and a bright red T-shirt, the color of a fire extinguisher. It had a multi-colored sequined unicorn on the front.

“That's the same shirt you had on ten minutes ago,” I said.

“I decided I liked it best,” she said smartly.

I frowned and shook my head. “See ya, Mom,” I

said, backing away from her office door.

“Bye, Mom,” Jillian said.

“Have fun,” Mom replied, just as her phone rang. “Don’t forget: be home for lunch.”

“We will,” I said.

Jillian and I walked across the living room, through the kitchen, and out the back door, where we were plastered by a wave of heat. We live in Paducah, Kentucky, which is a city on the western side of the state. It was July, which is a month that gets pretty hot in Kentucky. Just to the north of us is the Ohio River and the state of Illinois. It’s kind of weird to think that if we drove just a few miles, we would be in an entirely different state.

And where we live is really cool. There are several other homes on Creekview Drive, and behind our house is a big forest. Jillian and I built a bunch of forts in the woods. Once in a while, Katrina Holland joins us. She lives a few houses away, and she and my sister are best friends.

There’s an old story that somewhere in the woods behind our house is an old, forgotten graveyard. It’s supposed to be overgrown with trees and weeds, and it’s hard to find. In fact, no one has found it for years. There is only one picture of it, and it hangs at the Paducah Historical Museum. Jillian and I have looked for the graveyard a lot, but we’ve never found it. Still, there’s always a chance we

might, so we go exploring often. That, of course, was our reason for our hike today: we've always wanted to find the graveyard.

But so far? No luck. There are trails that crisscross through the woods, but we've never found the graveyard. And we don't always follow the trails. Sometimes, we head into the woods to explore on our own. We've been all over the forest, but we still haven't found any sign of the old graveyard.

But what's really cool is that on our hikes, we see all sorts of animals we don't see in the city. Opossums, raccoons, deer, skunks, squirrels, rabbits, and all kinds of birds. The forest behind our house is like one gigantic park, just for us. Lots of animals . . . but no graveyard. At least, not that we could find.

Today, however, we were going to find something that should never have existed. Certainly not in Kentucky, or even in the United States, for that matter.

We strode across the backyard and onto the trail that led into the woods. Above, the sun hung like a lemony ball of fire in front of a blue curtain. It was a hot day already; it was only going to get hotter.

We had hiked for about five minutes along the trail when Jillian suddenly stopped. She was looking ahead, trying to peer through the dense foliage. The terrain around

us was thick with trees and shrubs.

“What?” I asked, wiping a thin film of sweat from my forehead. “What did you see? A deer?”

“No,” she said. “It was smaller.” She pointed. “It’s in that tree, right over there. But it’s not a bird. Something moved, but I don’t know what it is.”

I tilted my head to the side, trying to see what she had spotted. I didn’t see anything besides trees and branches.

“Probably just a squirrel,” I said. “Let’s keep going.”

We continued on. Branches and tall grass licked at our pant legs like snake tongues. A mosquito buzzed by my ear, and I swatted it away. A small bird chirped and flitted by, lighting on a branch where it continued to chirp.

And when we reached the tree Jillian had pointed to, we heard a noise. It startled us, and we stopped walking and looked up.

Jillian shrieked.

I gasped and jumped back. I looked up . . . and into the face of a monster.



Now, when I say monster, I mean *monster*. Not a monster like Godzilla or anything. What we were seeing was much smaller.

But it was a monster . . . of some sort.

He was about eighteen inches long, and, most obviously, some type of lizard. His skin was leathery, speckled with green, brown, and black markings. His eyes were menacing and sinister, with black pupils ringed with gold. His claws were long and curled, and they looked razor-sharp.

And he was hissing at us! His mouth was open, and we could see his teeth—tiny, but very, very sharp—and a

tongue that lashed out like a whip.

Jillian took another step back. “What in the world is that?” she asked.

“It’s what you look like in the morning,” I replied.

“It’s what you look like all the time,” Jillian snapped back. “But really . . . what *is* that thing?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “Some sort of lizard, I guess.”

“We don’t have lizards that big around here,” she said. “All we have are those little tiny ones that jet around like little rockets with four legs.”

“And those other striped ones,” I replied. “I think they’re called ‘skinks.’”

We continued staring at the monster-lizard in the tree. Although we were much bigger than he was, he didn’t seem the least bit afraid of us. In fact, he looked like he was mad, like he was protecting his tree. He certainly didn’t look like he was going to run from us like most lizards did.

“It must be some sort of rare, endangered species,” Jillian said. “I wish we had a camera.”

“Maybe he was someone’s pet that got away,” I said.

“Or,” Jillian said, “maybe he escaped from a zoo. Lots of zoos have lizards.”

“Or even a pet store,” I replied. “We should check the pet stores to see if any of them are missing a hissing

lizard.”

We were sure there was a logical explanation as to where the creature came from. A lost pet, a zoo, or a pet store seemed . . . well . . . logical.

The truth of the matter was far stranger—and scarier—than we could have ever imagined.



We stared at the strange lizard as he watched us from the tree. Actually, watched isn't the right word. It seemed like he was threatening us more than anything. He was only about as long as my arm, but he looked like he could prove he was mighty, too. Even though we were a lot bigger than he was, I didn't think it would be a good idea to pick a fight with him.

"Let's leave him alone," I said. "We can go to the library and see if we can find him in a book about Kentucky reptiles."

We backed away and made a wide circle around the tree. The lizard watched us warily, but he didn't come after

us.

As we hiked, I kept my eyes peeled. I really wanted to find that old, abandoned graveyard, but I couldn't get that silly monster-lizard out of my mind. In fact, that's how I thought of the creature: monster-lizard. He was so unlike any other lizard I'd ever seen. Certainly much bigger, except for the ones I'd seen on television and in zoos. When I was in first grade, we went on a field trip to a zoo, and I saw a Gila monster, which is the only venomous lizard that's native to the United States. They grow to be about two feet long. They can't move very fast, so they're not really a danger to humans, unless someone is intentionally trying to catch them. Then, they'll bite. However, they only live in the southeastern part of the United States, and there aren't very many of them left.

But what we'd seen in the tree wasn't a Gila monster, and it drove me crazy trying to think of what he could be. Certainly not a chameleon or a salamander or a skink.

Weird. Just plain weird.

I looked at my watch. "We should be getting back," I said to Jillian. "Mom wants us home for lunch."

"We'll just have to keep looking," Jillian said. "That old graveyard isn't going to go anywhere."

"Yeah, maybe," I replied. "I might come out after

lunch and look for it.”

But there was something I wanted to do first, before we went on another hike in search of the old graveyard. I was going to find out what that monster-lizard was. Then, maybe I could find him again and catch him.

Then again, maybe the thing was dangerous. If he was missing from a zoo or a pet store, there was a good chance he was from another country. Maybe the creature was venomous, like the Gila monster. Maybe he was vicious and mean and bit people.

And that’s exactly what I was thinking, hiking through the forest, on our way home . . . when a sharp pain pierced my lower leg!

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The pain in my lower leg surprised me so much that I stumbled forward and nearly fell. I was sure the creature we'd seen in the tree had attacked me. I turned and scrambled away, ready to face the charging lizard . . . and got the surprise of my life.

“Gotcha!” Katrina Holland said as she got up from her hiding place. She had been crouching behind a tree, beneath a tree branch, waiting for us.

“You!” I exclaimed. “I’ll get you back for that!”

“Fat chance,” Katrina said with a smile as wide as the Ohio River. “You should have seen your face! You looked like you were doomed!”

That's a word Katrina is always saying: doomed. Whenever something goes wrong, or is about to go wrong, she uses that word.

Doomed.

And she says it all the time.

"How did you know we were coming?" I asked. I was a little mad, but I had to admit: she'd scared me good. In that sense, it was kind of funny, thinking I'd been attacked by a monster-lizard. I certainly hadn't expected anyone to be hiding behind a tree in the woods.

"Your mom told me you went for a hike," Katrina said, getting to her feet. She had leaves tangled in her black hair, and she pulled them out and let them fall to the ground. "I didn't know if I'd find you or not, but I thought I'd give it a try. Did you find the old graveyard?"

Jillian and I shook our heads. "Not today," my sister said. "I'm beginning to think this whole thing is just a wild goose chase."

"It's out there somewhere," Katrina said, placing her hands on her hips and looking into the forest. "My dad said he found it when he was little. But that was a long time ago, and he doesn't remember where he found it."

"We did find something pretty strange," I said. "A lizard of some sort."

"Big deal," Katrina said with a shrug. "There are

lizards all over the place. I saw one on my back porch this morning.”

I shook my head. “Not like this one. This one was a lot bigger than the ones we usually see.” I explained to Katrina what it looked like, and I spread my hands out to show her how big the creature was. She listened intently, puzzled.

“I’ve never seen a lizard like that around here before,” she said.

We followed the trail home. It was just before noon when we got back, and the three of us were sweating in the late morning sun. Katrina and Jillian made plans to meet after lunch. Katrina’s family has a pool in their backyard, and she and Jillian were going to hang out there for a while and cool off in the water.

“You can come, too,” Katrina said to me.

I shook my head. “No thanks. I’m going to see if I can find out more about that lizard we found.”

During lunch, Jillian and I described the lizard to Mom. She said she’d never seen anything like that before. Not in Kentucky, anyway.

“It was really bizarre looking,” Jillian said. “He hissed at us.”

“Very strange,” Mom said.

Jillian finished her sandwich. “I’m going to put on

my swimsuit and go to Katrina's," she said. "We're going to hang out by the pool."

"It's a good day for that," Mom said. "It's going to be hot this afternoon. Thank goodness we have air conditioning."

Jillian got up and went to her room, and I continued telling Mom about the lizard.

"Why don't you use the computer in my office and see if you can find him on the Internet?" she said.

My eyes widened. "That's a great idea!" I replied.

I finished my sandwich, gulped down a glass of lemonade, and hurried into her office.

"Don't touch anything but the computer," Mom called out from the kitchen.

"I won't," I hollered back as I sat at her desk. Mom is a neat freak, and she can't stand it if one thing is out of place . . . especially in her office.

I heard Jillian's bedroom door open. "See ya later, Mom," she said.

"Have fun," Mom replied. Then, I heard the front door open and close.

Seated in front of Mom's computer, I went to a search engine and typed in the words 'lizard,' and 'Kentucky.' Tons of sites came up. I browsed the images, but I didn't see any lizard that looked like the one we saw in

the forest. The ones in the pictures were smaller, maybe five or six inches long. I recognized a few of them, as I'd seen them before.

So, I tried another search, this time simply typing in the word 'lizard.' Twenty-one million, nine hundred results were returned! I'd be searching through pictures for hours, if not days!

I quickly scanned the first few pages of images, but I didn't see any lizard that looked like the one we'd spotted. I was about to give up, but I clicked on one more page.

And there it was!

I pulled my hands away from the computer keyboard, and stared. I was looking at the exact lizard that we'd found in the tree. It was unmistakable. I was stunned . . . especially when I saw what kind of lizard it was.

"Mom!" I called out excitedly. My eyes never left the image on the screen. *"Mom! Come here! You've got to see this!"*

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