

IT'S JUST A RATTLESNAKE
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I reckon I should warn you right off that if your loins suffer an odd tightening sensation when you come up against something that's not everyday ordinary, like snakes, especially rattlesnakes with black blood and yellow venom, then you might want to turn back and not tag along with me in this story. Because, after thinking on it for a while, I need to tell exactly how it was with Farley Nuttmann and the snake he came up against.

Now don't get the idea that I'm aching to give an account of what took place because I'm glad it happened. What I will confess to is being glad I was there to see it, since it was bound to happen anyway, instead of hearing about it from someone else. In which case I'd be a bit skeptical.

All right then, I reckon you're in for the story:

It was Friday night and five dollars for all the ribs you can eat at Curley's BBQ. I was seated at a redwood picnic table in the pavilion out back, cooling down my belly with a bottle of Lone Star, when the Bell twins, Luella and Edwina, sashayed over and asked me to take them rattlesnake hunting. This was not as strange a request as you might be thinking. I take a full-time paycheck working as an electrical lineworker for the utility company (started right out of high school last year, a year ahead of the dark-haired twins), but I am a bona fide rattlesnake hunter--Jim Ann Collins, certified and licensed by the state of Texas to breed, hunt, and sell rattlesnakes.

My snake-handling days began when I turned twelve and was finally allowed to help my father and two older brothers clear our spread of near a hundred rattlers a season. I still take a ton of snakes from our land, but these days I harvest most of my rattlers when landowners hire me to clear snakes off their property to protect their livestock. That's usually in late winter and early spring, like it was then, when snakes are all balled up in dens. I sell my snakes to meat packers (rattler meat's a delicacy to some folks), and to laboratories that milk them for their venom. And I always unload a bunch in small towns right here in Texas and sometimes up in Oklahoma and Kansas, where they hold annual rattlesnake roundups that attract townies looking to catch their own rattlers.

I quit running organized hunting parties of tourists to the dry creek beds and canyons outside town, but I still work the shows now and then. I might lend a hand weighing and measuring snakes, maybe supervise a lively rattlesnake race or bagging competition, or even do some skinning. But I never entertained the idea of daredevilism in the snake pits like some of my friends do. There's a bond between us snake hunters, but I'll tell you like I tell them: You have to be a little apart from the rest of the world to dangle nervous snakes from your mouth. And I don't see any sense in sliding out of a sleeping bag wriggling with warm rattlers, or posing with a baby

striker coiled on my head with all those digital and throwaway cameras flashing away.

No sir, none of that for me. I enjoy catching rattlesnakes and don't mind keeping them boxed under a hay blanket in our barn for a few months, but I'm always pleased as heck to turn them over to someone else and take my money to the bank.

Right about now you're most likely wondering the same thing most people do when they first hear I'm a rattlesnake hunter: Has Jim Ann Collins ever been snakebit? Nope. I am not on the rolls of the Sunken Fang Society, though I'm aware that each time I handle a viper I am one mistake away from membership. Hearing that, you might be wondering why I do it. Well, I do like the extra cash, and, yeah, I will admit to liking the excitement. But like most folks around here, I'm not too fond of rattlers, and I figure snagging them for ranchers and farmers who don't have a mind to fool with these vipers is a right thing to do.

One such person was the twins' uncle, Dr. Herman Nuttmann. He owns a horse ranch some twenty miles west of town. I'd been working out at his place evenings over the last two weeks. I had already hauled away more than a dozen good sized rattlers from the crawl space under the main house, which is my least favorite place to catch rattlers. You have to belly in with a flashlight, being darn sure you check the overhead shadows every foot of the way so you don't leave one behind you, and drag them out one at a time. But I was done with the house and I was preparing to take a look farther out on the property where Dr. Nuttmann suspected there were dens in some of his border pastures. It turned out that the twins knew all about this and wanted to tag along.

I reminded these gals that rattlesnake festivals would be starting up soon and they could go rattlesnake hunting then.

"We know that, Jim Ann," said Luella. I knew it was Luella by the little nick on her chin. I don't know how she got it; it's always been there. "I was Miss Rattler last year, remember?" It might not sound like such a great title, but most roundups have contests and give away a fair amount of scholarship money. Gals from all over enter these pageants, though I never had the urge to (five-foot nine, tin-eared, and never had an urge to twirl a baton). "And this year my little sister" (four minutes apart) "is going to get that tiara--"

"Now hold on a second," I said, and looked to Edwina. "Seems I remember *you* winning--" Her high cheeks took on the color of the faded redwood table, and then I did remember. Edwina's guitar chords and vocal cords were created in heaven and she was knockdown beautiful, her long hair as blue-black as an eagle's feather, her large eyes a diamond blue. But

she could not perform the other duties of a Rattler Queen. She relinquished her title and became runner-up to Luella, who can make her fiddle sing lyrics, and who had no problem gutting a rattlesnake, ripping off its skin and then circling the pit for the audience with the still-beating heart in her palm. An alternate duty of the Rattler Queen is milking a snake, which Edwina was also not prepared to attempt at the time.

"I even won Most Talented." Edwina shook her head at her sister. "But when it came time for me to skin that rattler . . . well, I don't know. I was fine when Cliff Purdy chopped off that six-footer's head with that old machete of his and strung it up for me. But when I ran that buck knife up that rattler's vent and all that blood started running down my arm, I just upped everything I ate that day--"

I rocked back and laughed. "All over his genuine snakeskin boots."

--before I could get out of the pit and away from all those folks watching me."

"Yeah, I heard about your skinning debut. I was working the big Sweetwater roundup that day," I said, still laughing, "and I sure am sorry I missed your performance."

Edwina love-slapped my hand. "Jim Ann Collins, it was not funny."

"Yeah, it was," I said, and then Edwina laughed, too. "Well, maybe it was . . . just a little," she said. "But I intend to win the title again this year--and keep it this time."

"I sure hope you do," I said, "but you're still looking at dealing with a rattler and skinning it . . . or milking it."

Edwina shivered hunched shoulders and made a face. Luella said, "That's why we want you to take us snake hunting, so you can help Edwina hone her skills handling the critters," and I didn't ask Luella why she wanted to go; I can't remember but a few times in my life when I've seen the twins apart.

"I don't know, Luella," I said right away, shaking my head. "I'd have to clear it with your uncle and all . . . and it's been a spell since I've taken anyone along on a hunt."

Luella slid along the bench to sit on my right. "We already asked Uncle Herm--"

Edwina glided down the opposite side to hem me in. "--and he said he thought it would be a good idea if we tagged along."

I took a swig of my beer. "He did?"

"Uh-huh. He said we could show you where the dens are at."

"He told you that?" I said, maneuvering to get up, knowing the twins were blowing smoke, though at the time I didn't know just how much. Their uncle had showed me the site the day he hired me. "Still--"

"Uh-uh-uh," said Luella. "We're not moving an inch, Jim Ann, until you say you'll take us."

I'd had my limit of two long-neck bottles of beer and did have to make a call, and there was no real reason not to take the twins along. I'd only given up heading hunting parties of strangers. "Okay. But I want to see you wearing high boots and chaps--no, I mean it--and you have to do what I say out there.

"And I don't want to see anyone out there with a gun . . . Luella."

There's no need to be out with the dawn like a fisherman when you hunt early spring rattlesnakes, so I didn't head out to meet the twins till late morning. An overnight rain had left the sky as one big seamless cloud from the panhandle to the gulf, and though the rain was much needed that year, I was glad it had let up. Water and rattlesnakes are a troublesome mix. Rain gets them all jittery, and you'll never find a wet rattle that works. A viper might be dancing a samba but if it's tail is wet it won't make a sound. So whatever or *whoever* the snake is warning is clean out of luck.

The Nuttmann horse ranch is a real pretty place with soft green, hilly pastures covered with live oaks and good coastal Bermuda grass for the quarter horses and paints Dr. Nuttmann and his wife raise. It's near three hundred acres and I had to drive past a good portion of it's white four-rail fence facing route 81 before turning into the curved drive. Half way up I could see the twins' red Bronco parked off the drive near the house, a white, green-shuttered ranch whose lawn slopes down to a roping arena large enough to hold a small rodeo. Four or five horses in an open corral below the main barn and foaling pen flicked their tails at me but continued grazing, while a frisky bay colt with springs for legs bounced along the fence to race me for as far as he could.

Dr. Nuttmann, a big, soft-spoken man who I have never seen without a string tie trailing out of a fancy bolo (Zuni silver and turquoise shined out from the open neck of his barn coat that morning), walked out of the pen to meet me as I climbed out of my pickup.

"How are you today, Miss Collins?" He's been calling me Miss Collins ever since my grammar school days and I was in his son Farley's class. "Ready to wrangle some more rattlers."

"Ready to get to it, Dr. Nuttmann,"

"And no gas?" he said. Some snake hunters pump gasoline into rock dens to draw rattlers out. Once that gasoline seeps into the soil nothing else can live there. When Dr. Nuttmann called me for the job the first thing he asked was how I intended to lure the snakes out of their dens.

"No gas," I assured him and slapped the side of the pump-style garden sprayer strapped near my truck's tailgate. The front half of my

pickup's bed is a honeycomb of homemade mesh snake cages. "What's mixed up in here is all organic and guaranteed to draw out the toughest viper," and I laid the hose over the edge and tapped the t-handle, releasing a small amount of the liquid.

"Gad!" Dr. Nuttmann jumped back, pulled off his white Stetson and waved it in front of himself. "Good God, Mr. Collins . . . what is that stuff?" he asked, still fanning the air with his hat.

"Well," I said, stepping away from the truck myself, "it starts out with soft cucumbers and forgotten eggs and ends up with orange skins, potato peels and a few little somethings I'd rather not mention."

"And it's all Natural? No ammonia or bleach or anything?"

"No, sir, none of that. My snakes might not come out as quick as ones doused with gasoline, but once they realize life in their den has changed there isn't one left inside."

"I don't wonder," he said. "It's a good thing you didn't use that stuff under the main house," he said as he turned to look up at the house. I looked with him and saw one of the twins come out onto the porch. She was too far away for me to tell which one, but I was glad to see the snake chaps over her green denim pants. She gave a quick wave, walked down the steps, climbed into the Bronco's shotgun seat.

"Looks like they're about ready," said Dr. Nuttmann when the other twin, carrying chaps under her arm, left the door open behind her, and skipped down the porch steps to the Bronco and cranked it up. Then there was Farley Nuttmann, closing the door. In three long strides he crossed the porch in leather snake boots that rode knee-high over his jeans, a canvas overnight bag slung over his shoulder.

The Bronco backed up fast and I could hear the gravel pinging the exhaust system like bullets. It had to be Luella behind the wheel.

When she parked opposite my truck, with me and Dr. Nuttmann between the two, she lowered her window and rested her elbow over the door. Dr. Nuttmann said, "You drive like you ride, Luella," shaking his head at her big smile, "and you've been thrown more times than anyone I know. I expect you to be a little more responsible out there today, missy."

"Don't worry, Uncle Herm, I'll be just like you said."

"Well, all right." Looking at me, he said, "Miss. Collins--" He hesitated, took a deep relaxing breath. "Excuse me a minute," and walked to meet Farley on his way to join us.

"What's going on?" I asked Luella.

"What do you mean?"

"It looks like Farley is thinking about coming with us."

"Oh," she said. "Farley's riding with you."

"Farley's riding with me," I said flatly, then removed my hat, turned it over and shook it a bit, peered in at its silk lining and poked around at it.

"What're you looking for?"

"A piece of my memory. Seems I forgot about someone telling me Farley was coming along."

Edwina laughed, but Luella said, "What the heck's the difference, Jim Ann?"

"The difference," I said, shoving my hat on the back of my head "is that Farley is scared to death of snakes."

"Says who?"

"Just about the whole county," I said, "if you ask. And a scared person is more likely to get bit."

"Farley's not afraid of snakes anymore," said Luella. "He's been taking therapy with our Uncle Julian. He's a child psychologist over in Austin."

I thought that was kind of funny because Farley was studying educational psychology at Texas University. In fact, just about everyone in his family, on both sides, works as one kind of a shrink or another. Herman Nuttmann is a clinical psychologist, and his wife Sarah is a psychiatrist. Together they operate the mental health clinic at Brower Hospital. The twins were planning a career in psychiatric social work.

I looked past Luella to Edwina and asked her, "Why is he coming along anyway?"

"It's part of his therapy," Edwina said. Then she told me how her Uncle Julian had Farley spend months studying pictures and films of snakes before he progressed to holding stuffed-animal snakes and rubber snakes. "Now my uncle has him in full exposure treatment," she added with some pride. "Farley's been fooling with live snakes, holding them and petting--"

"What . . . milk snakes and corn snakes?," I asked. Edwina nodded. "And now Farley figures he's ready to take up with rattlers?"

"Something like that," said Edwina.

"Tell the truth, Edwina. Do you really want to handle rattlers because of the pageant, or was all that a story just to get me to take Farley?"

"No, I wasn't lying. Farley heard we were going to ask you to take us snake hunting and he said he wanted to come along. Uncle Herm wasn't too happy about it, though. But Uncle Julian said Farley was ready."

I looked up to where Farley and his father were talking and I couldn't tell if Dr. Nuttmann was convinced or not. He was doing most of

the talking, his tone low, and Farley, arms folded, stood looking down more at the gravel than his father, and nodding now and then.

I turned back to the twins. "Not even a little bit afraid?"

"How should I know," said Luella, rolling her eyes. Edwina leaned across from the passenger seat and said flat out like a challenge: "But Farley sure as heck isn't afraid of anything else, is he, Jim Ann?"

"That's for sure," I said without hesitation.

And it was true. Farley was a daredevil kind of kid, on his bike or on his horse, always looking to go faster or climb higher. He was jumping bulls and breaking bones while the rest of the boys--and me--were still muttin bustin, and there was a time when he was a lot less afraid of a rattler than a normal person.

Farley never hunted them with me, but I remember the time he rode out to Stoney Canyon with Billy Osborne and some others. Billy's horse had practically stepped on a rattlesnake. It all happened too fast for Billy to keep his horse's head up and it got bit on its nose. Farley saw it happen and before that rattler could strike a second time he took hold of its tail and snapped that diamondback like a whip over a rock's edge until it's head was nearly severed. But the horse was still bit, and everyone knows a horse that's face-bit won't last too long if something isn't done soon.

Leaving the rattler for dead, Farley helped Billy quiet that jughead of a horse. But keeping the horse still in itself would not keep the horse alive long enough for a vet to get there. (All that cutting and sucking you read about won't work.) The horse's face would swell up and it's nostrils would close up tighter than that rattler's ass. And a horse can't breathe through its mouth, which would start foaming in no time. Pretty soon that horse would begin to suffocate. No one would be able to hold it back then. It's eyes would get wild and totally round and white like death moons--there's nothing scarier to me than the face of a frightened horse--and it would run in a panic. It wouldn't even be able to whinny out its fear when it'd fall and pump its legs like a capsized beetle, looking like some kind of sideshow freak with it's face all bloated and twisted.

But not that day. There was always something dumped out there on the range and Farley remembered seeing a washing machine or clothes dryer, along with a selection of broken chairs and rusted bedsprings, in a gully not too far from the trail. It turned out to be an old Maytag washer. It still had the hoses. They were dry but whole enough to cut and slip into the horse's nostrils. The swelling locked them in place so the horse could breathe until the vet showed up with one of the other boys who had ridden out to the highway for help.

While Billy guided the horse up the ramp to the vet's trailer, Farley took his jackknife to that snake's tail with the intention of scalping its rattles for his friend. He didn't get to draw blood before that snake got ahold of his wrist and just pumped all the venom it could before Farley hit it's mouth with the knife's handle, breaking the fangs. That was when Farley acquired his fear of snakes, and learned how a rattler can strike reflectively for a good long time after you figure it's dead. Even a completely severed head can strike and kill a man for a good hour after decapitation. I heard that on the ride to town Farley kept telling the vet over and over again, "But I killed it. It was dead, I tell ya. I killed it. . . ."

Dr. Nuttmann was doing the listening now. He shook his head, threw his hands up, then patted Farley once on his back as he walked toward me.

"Hey, Jim Ann."

"Hey yourself, Farley," I said. Farley slipped the carryall off his shoulder to put in the back of my pickup, but then stepped back a pace. "Go ahead . . . the cages are empty, Farley."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks." He dropped the bag up against the tailgate, far from the cages. "But they won't be for long," he said, his voice a bit louder than usual, and then climbed into the cab.

"Hey!" Luella shouted, "Are we going or not?"

I looked in at Farley and before I could say anything, he told me, "I'm good, Jim Ann," and absently rubbed a big hand over his right forearm, "if that's what you're wondering." I hadn't seen it in a while, but his right forearm had a ten-inch scar, a white puckered valley where the surgeons had scraped away the flesh that the rattler's venom had turned into black mush.

"Okay then," I said, climbing in behind the wheel. "Let's go snake hunting."

We followed the girls along the fence line on a smooth ribbon of blacktop, rumbled over a cattle guard or two and then through a rutted red-dog boundary track until there was no road at all. The twins stopped outside a small cottonwood grove shading a creek bed, and we pulled up behind them.

I climbed out of the truck and looked over at the steep, twenty-foot-high hill opposite us and knew that was the place. The steep slope was shot through with armadillo holes and ragged with limestone outcroppings and scrub brush rooted in the soil between the two, all of it facing south.

"This is where Uncle Herm's neighbors said that if they saw one rattler sunning itself they saw twenty when we had that warm spell a week ago," Edwina said.

"Well, if I've ever seen rattler heaven this is it," I said. "We might as well start right over there," I told the twins, pointing to the center of the hill directly in line with our vehicles. Normally I would have gone down to the eastern tip of the hill and worked my way back. But with Farley and his cousins being there I figured I'd go ahead and conjure up a few rattlers to satisfy the twins and give Farley the chance to do his therapy thing, whatever that was going to be, and then get back to this hill later. I'd never get it all cleaned out in one day anyway.

I hoisted a snake cage out of the truck and stood a pair of forty-inch snake tongs and a snake hook inside it. "Take this and set it up at the base of the hill. Put a good size rock in there so it won't tip." I told the twins. "Easy though, so you don't crack the bottom."

Farley had lowered the tailgate and was sitting on it, the duffle bag opened beside him. "I'll be set in a minute."

"Okay," I said as I unhooked the pump loaded with my snake-caller concoction.

"Hey, Jim Ann," Farley asked, "mind if I use your spade?"

"Go ahead. But we won't need to do any digging to get the rattlers out," I said and carried the pump to where the twins were waiting.

When Farley joined us, the shovel over his shoulder like a parade rifle, he was covered in protective gear: bubblelike snake chaps over his snake-proof boots from ankle to thigh, forearm protectors, which were a combination glove and kevlar sleeve, a bull rider's vest, and a clear facemask, the kind that flips up like a welder's mask.

Now I have had occasion to use similar equipment. When I take snakes out of crawl spaces, like I did with Doc Nuttmann's house snakes, I use protective gauntlets and a mask. Out here in the brush I wear protective chaps, like today, though I never used a bull rider's vest. And I never did have a situation where I had to wear all of it at the same time. I'm Farley's friend and all, but I can't help myself now from revealing how he looked that day. I know he's going to get a ribbing.

Anyway, I didn't say anything about his getup then. The twins didn't either. But as much as they loved their cousin, they were looking off to swallow twin laughs. I figure Farley sensed this because, true to Farley, he just blurted out, "You can go ahead and laugh if you want. (Still, the twins held it in.) I need all this gear," he said, looking down at his outfit and waving a big hand over himself, "to get me started."

"Well, all right then," I said. "Let's call out some rattlers."

I took a flashlight and got lucky with the first small cave I shined it into. I could see snakes in there, hibernating, quiet. If I didn't disturb them they'd come out on their own in several hours to sun themselves on warm

rocks before going back in to ball up again. I rested the two gallon pump against my right leg, slid the long spray nozzle between the rocks to one side and sprayed a half dozen pumps worth.

When I turned to get back down, Luella was standing only a few feet away. Edwina was halfway back to the trucks, but watching me. Farley was working his way along the base of the hill, turning over rocks with the shovel. If this wasn't his property and this was a tourist snake hunt I would've told to quit it.

Instead, I told Edwina, "You'll never handle a rattler from over there."

"I know that. I'm waiting for them to come out."

"All right. They'll be out any minute now. But they won't be coming out fast," I said. "I'll get the first ones and then help you get one."

Snakes slithered slowly out of the cave, one by one. Cold, the way I like them. I gently set my tongs several inches behind the first one's head and lifted it towards the bucket. Those rattles had already started buzzing--you never get used to the sound--and kept on after I dropped it into the cage. A second snake headed downhill for the flat ground, not as slow as the other one, but I took it just as easily.

"That's all there is to it," I told my friends. "C'mon Edwina. If you're going to handle a rattler, now's the time to do it. It won't get any easier than this. They'll be a lot friskier when it warms up."

"Luella first," she said, then she looked to where her cousin was poking the shovel's handle into the cleft of a rock. She hollered out, "How about you, Farley. Want to use the tongs?"

"That's okay. I'm good," he said and began working out some brush near a big chunk of rock. Luella grabbed the tongs out of my hand--I swear her eyes were gleaming--and I had to put a hand on the tongs to keep her from shoving them right into the opening. "Hold on, Luella. Let 'em come to you." The third snake appeared and as she reached for it I told her, "And don't squeeze the daylights of it. That spine is pretty delicate."

"Hah!" she yelled with delight as the three-foot snake buzzed and twisted to get free of the tongs. "I like this," and she dropped the snake in with the others. She caught another snake, and another. The snake cage was buzzing louder than a forest of dog-day cicadas.

Edwina was ready then. She managed two snakes of her own--"ohmigod ohmigod"--she said each time, and her hands shook a bit until she released them into the cage. "Can I skin one of them?" she was asking me when her third rattler, over four-foot and feisty as heck, was slipping out of her tongs.

"Hang on to 'im, little sister," Luella said. "Don't let him best you--"

The snake was free. It hit the ground with a thump. "ohmigod . . . Jim Ann, what do I do?"

"Just go ahead and get ahold of him again." I had my snake hook ready just in case the rattler looked like it was going to coil. I had forgotten about Farley so me and my heart jumped the same time Edwina did-- "Damn!" came from me, a squeal from Edwina, and "Ooo wee!" from Luella--when suddenly the shovel's tongue sliced down between us and through the rattlers neck with a crunchy-gritty noise.

"Darn it, Farley" I said. "Make some noise when you come up behind a person with rattlers around."

Farley sniffed under the facemask and let out a long breath. "I sure like this exposure therapy," he said. "That felt real good." He twisted the shovel beneath the snake's severed head. Its tongue flickered and its eyes raced. Then its fangs scrapped against the steel, releasing a yellowish stream of venom that mixed with the red dirt and ran in orangy rivulets to the point. With a flip and a pat of the shovel's flat side, Farley safely buried it. Then he hunkered down to pick up the twisting, bleeding body. "You can skin this one," Farley said to Edwina, holding it up to her. "Go on . . . take it."

Luella said, "C'mon, little sister. There's a knife in the truck." Edwina took the headless snake and held onto it as it kept lashing its tail. Her face contorted into a few unflattering shapes as she headed for the closest cottonwood.

Farley headed back to tearing up the base of the hill and I lugged my sprayer a little ways up the hill to a real promising outcropping. I was backing up a bit after a few quick sprays when I saw something move out of the corner of my eye. It was high up, and when I turned I guess I knew it wasn't Farley, who was bent over the shovel, wedging it alongside a piece of split limestone. It was a rattler slipping out of a crevice some seven, eight feet above him. And the way it was coming out, I could see it would most likely fall right on his exposed neck. It all happened real quick, my brain registering it all--the distance from me to the snake, the snake getting farther out the hole, no chance of Farley looking up to see it on his own . . .

Shouting out, "Farley! Jump to your right!" was all I could do. I was still hollering "Now! Get away!" when Farley had already moved, tripping in the right direction to keep the snake from landing on top of him when it fell out and down the hill.

But Farley was on his back and the snake was draped over his boots. It's rattles were singing a fierce warning song like I never heard before or since. The rattler would never penetrate the boots or the chaps

but Farley was unprotected from his groin to his waist. "Aaagh!" Farley shouted and tried kicking the snake away as I sidled down the hill to get to flat ground and to the snake. The snake came off the boots but lay on the ground between them and started to coil. It was going to strike. I knew that for sure, so there was no sense in telling Farley to lie still.

It happened fast. Once that snake had coiled and raised itself up it was only a matter of where it would strike. Now, you can't see a rattler hit. It's just too fast to be followed by the human eye. So it had to be pure luck that when it lashed out at Farley's unprotected area Farley had pulled off his face mask and let it drop between his legs. The snake hit it, and then again, it's venom streaking the Plexiglas and splashing onto Farley.

The third strike momentarily caught the fangs in the Velcro strap and Farley was up and out of the snake's strike range.

"Goddamn!" Farley shouted. "Damn that devil to hell!" Farley picked up a rock and tossed it, missed, and the rattler was backing up, but not running away. Rattlers, like most snakes, just want to be left alone, but once disturbed a rattlesnake gets real defensive. Some folks will tell you that individual rattlesnakes have different temperaments. And that's true to some degree. But it's been my experience that there are two temperaments--mean and meaner. Now this snake was also something else . . . defiant. Even though it could get away at this point, it wasn't going to.

Once I realized Farley would be all right, I grabbed my snake hook and tongs and began pacing around the snake towards Farley. The snake sensed the movement and turned its attention to me, measuring its strike range. It followed my every move, its head slowly swaying, signaling with intermittent rattles. Scattered behind it lay the remains of snakes that had exposed themselves to Farley's therapy. There were as many as half a dozen decapitated snakes, bloody stumps twitching like giant dug-up worms, though not strongly enough to play their rattles.

The twins came running over, yelling in unison, "Hey, what's going on?"

Both twins had blood on their hands, but Edwina was holding a buck knife in her left and a fresh snake's skin in her right. She had managed to skin a snake. "Farley, you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. Just had one heck of a scare . . . say, what's wrong with that snake?"

We were all standing together now, the snake still coiled high, begging one of us to get close enough. "Wrong?" I asked.

"Yeah, it looks different somehow."

It sure was a good size viper, around five feet I figured, but no record breaker. Then I saw what was troubling Farley. It was the head.

Diamondbacks are all head because their flat heads are twice as big as their necks. But this rattler's head was a bit bigger than usual. Not *e-normous*, mind you, but broader and jowlier enough so that you'd notice it was a might different. I don't know if it had anything to with the snakes behavior or not. I figure I will never know, but this critter's wedge shape was more coffin-shaped than any rattler I've ever seen.

My plan was to get this rattler to strike the end of my tongs, then snag him before he could coil again and drop him in with the others. But I was going to keep him separate at the barn and show him off at the roundups. But Farley had other ideas. He picked up the spade and flipped dirt at the rattler like a ground squirrel might do to tease it.

"You itching to fang me," Farley said to the snake. "Well, your biting days are through." He waved the shovel's blade in front of the rattler, getting it to strike. And that was no problem. That snake was dripping with venom and never once hit with a dry bite as far as I could tell. I figured Farley was going to behead this one too, so I told him, "Don't take his heads off, Farley. I want to show this one around."

Farley, not taking his eyes off the snake, still waving the shovel at it, told me, "No sir, I'm not cutting this head off. He's going to live . . . for a while anyway. But he's done fanging anything. Hear that, Snake-o. Jim Ann's gonna show you around"--he poked and teased, and the snake rattled and hissed, body high, striking from half-coils even--"and then I'm gonna defang you and feed you little pinkies . . ."

The snake retreated, holding its fighting stance--jaws wide, head swaying for a strike, rattles roaring. Then it turned suddenly, dropped to its belly and slithered toward an Armadillo hole. Farley was right behind him, but he didn't use the shovel this time. He pulled off his gloves and grabbed the snake's tail barehanded. "Oh, no you don't." He pulled the snake back from the entrance. "You're not going anywhere but a cage."

A rattlesnake is deaf. No rattler every heard a sound, never heard its own rattle warning, so you can understand my surprise when that snake acted like it understood what Farley was telling it. The snake turned fast and Farley yanked his hand away, taking one of the rattles with it. The rattler rose up higher than I've ever seen, seeming to practically stand on its tail, and let out a sound I've never heard come from any living thing. No matter how riled up a rattlesnake might get, it can't give out nothing more than a hiss, but I swear this snake kind of screamed. It was a raspy, agonizing hissing-choking scream that made the hair on the back of my head get stiff as wire. And then this rattler, with its mouth stretched wide for a strike and drops of venom clinging like teardrops to the tips of its

fangs, turned and struck itself, sank its fangs into its own body. There was a murmur or something from someone--I don't know; maybe it was me.

Edwina gasped, "Oh my God," as the snake flipped and twisted towards her.

"What the hell--" I said.

"What's it doing, Jim Ann?"

"I'm not sure, Farley."

"Jeez," said Luella, "that critter's trying to kill itself."

"Shoot," I said, "that could be. I've heard stories about rattlers committing suicide . . ."

"No, it can't," Edwina cried. "Jim Ann. . . don't let him do it."

". . . but I never knew anyone who actually saw it happen."

"That's crazy. It can't kil--" Farley's voice cracked. "It . . . it doesn't know it's alive. It can't--"

"Will you look at that," Luella said. "That is just something to see."

And it *was* something to see, one of those things I'll remember all my life, the way that rattlesnake hung onto itself, writhed and lashed over the ground with the pain it was inflicting on itself, fighting to die, tearing and poisoning itself to death. It was something to see, all right, and yet it gave me a turn to see it. It gave me pause, though not like it did Edwina. Or Farley.

"Please, Jim Ann," Edwina begged as I worked at getting my snake hook under that ever-moving snake. "Stop him."

"I got it," I said finally, slipping the hook further under the rattlers jaw and yanking at it. The whole snake came some two feet off the ground before the fangs slipped out and the snake fell. But I can't say it was my yanking or the rattlers own will that did it. Black blood bubbled out over its scales, stained its mouth green, and I knew that this snake had struck and poisoned its own liver. But injured as it was the snake regained a striking coil.

"Somebody kill it," Edwina choked, throwing the knife but missing by a mile.

"I'm doing my best, Edwina. Calm down," but Farley's voice was jittery, too. He swung the shovel at it. The snake weaved, causing Farley to miss, and then, rattles clashing, tucked its head back and struck at Farley in the backswing. Missing, the snake backed away and attacked itself again. With a bubbly hiss it buried its fangs into it's own center.

Edwina shouted, "It's not right," and ran away, though I didn't look to see where she had gone.

The rattler locked its fangs through its spine, I reckon, because I could not shake it loose this time, and its throbbing vibrated up the hook's

handle as it pumped its venom glands dry. It shook so much then that it flipped off the snake hook, its death grip unbroken.

"Don't, Jim Ann," said Farley as I tried to get ahold of it again. "Let it be." When he put his hand on my arm I could feel he was trembling as much as the snake.

The rattler's body beneath where its fangs were buried tightened into a ridged convulsion of muscles. Its tail whipped back and forth and the rattles whirred as the snake rolled and flipped onto its back and then back onto its belly over and over again, never letting go of itself.

"Stop it!" It was Edwina. She was holding the Winchester I keep in my truck. She fired twice at the twisting rattler from the hip and missed. "Quit it, Edwina," I shouted after a fourth round ricocheted up the hill.

Luella was there then. "Hold your fire, little sister," and the rifle fired in the air as she pulled it up and away from her. "What's got into you?"

"It's not natural for an animal to kill itself. Shoot it, Luella. At least if we kill it . . ."

"No need," I said, seeing the snake was barely moving now. I watched with the others as it quivered once more before laying very still.

There was silence, a weighing of things, I reckon. Farley had hung onto to my arm all that time, and when I eased his hand away and he looked at me, there was a painful look of disbelief in his eyes. "I never realized . . ." He laughed a short, hysterical laugh. "A snake being aware--"

"Aware my boot, Farley!" said Luella. "What's the matter with you?"

"You saw what it did," Edwina said when Farley didn't answer.

"I saw one heck of an angry rattlesnake end up fanging itself because it had the daylights teased out of it."

"I don't ever want to see another one die," said Edwina. "Not like that."

"That's just silly talk, little sister. Isn't it, Jim Ann?"

"Well . . ." I caught that quick lift of Luella's eyebrows, the soft nod when she glanced from me to Edwina, whose face was drawn up in worry, and then back to me.

"Shoot," Luella added when I wasn't quick enough, "Rattles do that all the time, don't they, Jim Ann?"

"Well, I have seen them bite each other sometimes when they're all caged up," I said truthfully. Next thing I did was lie: "Most times they bite themselves."

"You see," said Luella. "That critter is like any other good-for-nothing rattler." She headed for the dead snake, picked up the knife on the way. "C'mon, let's skin this one."

"No," Farley said. "No one's skinning this snake." Holding onto the spade with one hand, he bent down and lifted the snake by the loop formed by the curved neck. "No skinning," he said again. He headed toward the west end of the hill.

He stopped when Luella walked in front of him. "Did you forget why you're out here?" Farley did not answer, and Luella held the knife out to him. "Just go ahead and skin it, Farley. Take its rattles and hang them on your belt."

Farley shook his head. "That won't change anything," he said, brushing past his cousin. Luella called after him, "There's nothing that needs changing, Farley. For God's sake, it's just a rattlesnake--a plain old rattlesnake."

Farley carried the snake to the hill and gently laid it off to one side. He set to work uprooting stones to reach softer earth for grave digging.

Luella managed to convince her "little sister" to go ahead and enter the rattlesnake pageant that year. Edwina won . . . again, and again she could not skin a snake, though for reasons different than the last time. She showed up with Luella at the barn a few days before the pageant and coaxed me into teaching her how to milk a rattler's venom. That's how she got to keep her Miss Rattler title that year, tiara and all.

The grave Farley dug for that rattler is still there. You can't miss the curved line of stones Farley set in the snake's death-shape. The same Farley who as a boy pulled rattlers by their tails, lived for years being scared to death of them and ended up with the idea that rattlesnakes might be something more than natural-born killers. The next semester at college he dropped his educational psychology major, and now he's working on his master's in animal psychology.

Farley has no problem handling rattlesnakes now, but he never mentions *that* rattler. Truth is, I believe none of us has until today. He's gone hunting with me a few times since then, but mostly I see him when he comes here to pick out one of my rattlers to fool with. For study, he says, but the rattlesnake never sees the inside of a laboratory. Farley dresses in the getup he wore that day, bubble protectors and all, and hauls the snake by the neck out back of the barn, where he sets up a camcorder. Each time he teases the snake with a spade to exhaustion--his and the snake's. He's looking to witness another viper kill itself, I reckon, so he can figure out if

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Chris Markham

suicide's a natural part of a rattlesnake's behavior, and to know for sure if the rattler he teased to death was something more--or nothing more--than just a plain old rattlesnake.

The End

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