



Twelve-year-old Carter Green was running through a river of snakes. He couldn't find the trail out of the swamp, and now he was slipping and stumbling through sticky black mud. As he got more and more lost, the sky was getting darker and darker.

Every ten yards or so, a huge snake would suddenly slither through the slime and nearly catch Carter's feet.

"*Nooo!*" Carter screamed as a bright black and gold snake popped its head out of the ooze and began snapping and hissing.

Making things even worse were the snakes' eyes. Most snakes have beady black eyes. But not these monsters. These snakes had glowing red eyes that grew larger as they chased Carter.

Carter ran as fast as he could, but his sneakers kept getting sucked into swamp mud. His mouth was dry, and his heart felt as if it was going to break his ribs; it was pounding so hard. An eerie chorus of strange hissing closed in on Carter. It kept getting louder and louder.

He glanced behind him in terror and could barely believe what he saw. Many of the snakes had risen up and were slithering along on just the tips of their tails. A solid wall of huge red eyes was barely a dozen feet behind him.

"You'll never leave . . . never leave," the snakes whispered in hisses. *"You're ours now!"*

As the snakes closed in, they began taking turns diving for Carter's feet.

Suddenly, Carter felt the heavy weight of a thick snake wrap around his ankle and begin to tug.

“Get off!” he shouted, kicking his foot wildly. His foot slid out of the snake’s grip with a slimy pop. But in an instant, another snake began shaking Carter’s other ankle.

“Never leeeeeeave!!”

Carter began slipping in the ooze and losing his balance. The snakes were totally surrounding him now. Their eyes glowed so brightly that they made him wince.

“Help!” Carter shouted. “Anyone! Please!”

As he stared in horror at the largest snake wrapped around his ankle, it suddenly began changing form. It grew arms, and then a blurry face appeared. All at once, it stood upright, sighed loudly, and began . . . munching on a Pop-Tart?

Carter blinked. Then he opened his eyes. His nine-year-old-sister, Christine, stood at the foot of his bed shaking his ankle, trying to wake him up.

“What is your problem?” Christine asked between bites. “You look totally freaked out.”

“Uh . . . nothing,” Carter mumbled, squinting at the bright sunlight pouring through his window. “Just a dream about snakes or something.”

“Yuck,” Christine said. “Who dreams about snakes?”

“I didn’t say it was a good dream,” Carter said, stretching. “What are you doing in my room anyway?”

“Mom said to wake you up. We have to leave for Aunt Fay’s in an hour.”

Carter flopped back on his bed with a groan. Aunt Fay’s! Talk about a bad dream. “What a way to start the summer,” Carter grumbled. “Who wants to go stay with some old woman

out in the middle of nowhere?”

“It might not be that bad,” Christine said thoughtfully as she twirled a long strand of mousy brown hair around her finger. “I was looking at some maps, and it looks like there’s a lake or something really close to where Aunt Fay lives.”

Carter looked at his sister and shook his head. *What kind of 9-year-old checks out maps for fun?* he thought. *My crazy sister, that’s who.* She loved globes, maps, and especially star charts. Once, she actually drew a map of her bedroom, complete with a compass and key.

“Sitting by a lake with Aunt Fay for two weeks. Wow. That sounds like a real blast,” Carter said, rolling his eyes. He had a lot of important things he had been looking forward to this summer. He dreamed of playing baseball, hanging out with friends, and even checking out that girl who had just moved in with her family down the hall in their

apartment building. After all, he *was* almost 13.

Christine just shrugged and bit her thumbnail. She had begun biting her nails when she was only 6, the year Carter and Christine's parents had split up. For some reason, this habit always made Carter feel bad for her.

"Well, maybe it will be okay," Carter added. "As long as we don't have to stay cooped up all day with an old aunt we can't even remember meeting. Maybe she'll let us go to the lake alone."

"What makes you think she's so old?" Christine asked.

"Because she's Mom's aunt, which makes her our great aunt. Mom's already pretty old, so Aunt Fay must be totally ancient," Carter explained quietly.

"KIDS!" Their mother's impatient voice shouted down the hallway.

Carter shot a guilty look toward

his sister. Had their mother just heard him call her old? Christine giggled and stopped biting her nails.

“Let’s get going! Carter, come and eat some breakfast. I told your aunt we’d be there by noon, and it’s a three-hour drive from Atlanta.”

“Three hours from here,” Carter muttered to himself as he dragged into the kitchen. “That’s what I call out in the sticks.”

“How do you say the name of this lake?” Christine asked her mother, pointing to a blue area on her map of Georgia. “Can we go swimming in it?”

Their mother frowned and shook her head.

“Sweetie, that’s not a lake; it’s a swamp. You don’t want to go anywhere near that.”

Carter nearly choked on his cereal. A *swamp*?

A cold chill ran down Carter's spine. Suddenly, he had a bad feeling about this summer—a *really* bad feeling.