

KING MATILDA

John Boston

The first time Brad Strozak saw the snake, he was in the coatroom of Boulanges Eatery. An eatery is not a restaurant. It's the kind of place that charges twenty dollars for a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. For a mere five dollars more, they will cut the crusts off. They can get away with these ridiculous prices because all of the movers and shakers in the city want to be seen eating there. Brad wanted to impress her. He had only been seeing her for a month. That's like 29 days more than he usually keeps them around. He had a fiancé. They were soon to be married. In his mind, these little side ventures of his were completely justified because the ink was dry on the marriage certificate.....*that was pretty much the end of any fun he was ever going to have for the rest of his life....forever.*

She was a side piece. He had a few side pieces and other pieces laying around. To Brad, women were nothing but trophies and Brad was a trophy hunter.

He loved his fiancé, but he loved being with other women even more. Her father was his boss, that's how they met. He knew he had to be careful. One text or photo and things could end up pear-shaped for him.

He made lots of money. He was good at what he did, which was a day trader for a hedge fund. He drove a Porsche. He had tailor-made suits. He bought two hundred bottles of wine. He was good to himself. Life had been good to him.

Brad was a winner.

Cause winners win and losers lose. It was really that simple. No girl worth a shit would want to be with a loser. Why would they? The women just came to him like ants to a broken bottle of honey. What was he supposed to do? Just tell the young lady to move along? That could crush her. He may be a gigolo, but he still had his manners. His mother had raised him to be a gentleman at all times, regardless of the circumstances....and a gentleman he would be.

He simply got tired of waiting for the girl to find his jacket, so he just went in to get it himself. That's when he saw it. He must have jumped back five feet. How in the hell did a large snake find its way into the coatroom? He walked over to the hostess and gave her the stink eye.

"Can I help you?" she asked, smiling.

"There is a snake in the coatroom.....like a real snake. Thing's huge. Could be poisonous too."

"Oh my," she said and immediately called someone higher up the eatery food chain. A well-dressed middle eastern looking man immediately came up to them. The young lady wasn't quite sure what to say.

"He says there's a snake in the coatroom."

"What were you doing in the coatroom?"

"I got tired of waiting. What kind of an operation are you guys running here?"

The man darted over to the coatroom and turned on all of the lights. He moved the few coats that were hanging up and one umbrella. There was no sign of a snake.

"Where is it?"

"I don't know, but it was in here. Maybe it crawled back into the wall."

"You mean slithered?"

"Yeah, whatever. I just thought you should be aware."

"I appreciate that, but I don't see any snakes in here. It's the middle of February. Shouldn't snakes be hibernating?" he asked.

"I guess. Hope you find it. It was big and black."

"Are you sure you just didn't mistake something else for it? The lights were off when we came in."

"No, it was definitely a snake. You don't mistake something like that."

"Well, it's not here now. Excuse me," he said and walked back to the hostess. Brad gathered their belongings and walked back over to the table. Jennifer was clearly annoyed.

"Did you get lost?"

"Hardly. I thought I saw a snake in the coatroom."

"A snake? How would a snake get into the coatroom?"

"Never mind. You want to go back to my place?"

Jennifer said nothing as they got into his Porsche. Brad knew she was upset about something. Maybe if he got her talking, it might loosen things up a bit. Their relationship so far had been sex, then some small talk, sleep, then going to breakfast, then goodbye, then doing the same thing all over again. For him, it was a wonderful system. For her, not really so much.

"Something bothering you Jen?"

"I know about Briana. How many others are there?" she said, looking straight ahead.

"Come on. We never set any ground rules here. You and I are free to date whomever we want to."

"I want a husband Brad, not a fuck buddy."

"Okay.....well, I'm definitely not looking to marry you Jen."

"Yeah, I gathered as much from all of the texts I found on your phone while you were looking for your snake.

Brad could have smacked himself. He usually locks his phone. This time, he had been careless.....too careless. Jen didn't waste a second. As soon as his back was turned, she was on it.

Curiosity killed the cat, Jen.

"I counted texts from at least three different women. How many others are there?"

"What does it matter?"

"It matters because I'm past this point in my life. At least I thought I was. I'm not looking to be some guy's side piece."

"We're just getting to know one another, Jen. I like hanging out with you. Why can't that be enough?"

"Brad, no girl on the face of planet Earth just wants to hang out with a guy. She either wants to be his girlfriend/wife or just have him get the hell away from her."

"Some girls just want sex, Jen."

"I'm not one of those girls."

"You were the other night."

"Just stop the car, Brad. Let me out."

"Come on. It's only a few more blocks. I don't want to leave you here."

"I can walk."

"Come on Jen. Don't be like this. I like you, I really do, but you can't be mad at me for just being me."

"I'm not mad at you, I just don't want to be around you anymore. Now please, let me out."

"It's like two blocks," said Brad

"Brad....."

He pulled over and let her out.

"Please don't call me.....ever."

"Jen.....come on."

She quickly walked away, pulling her coat up over her ears to shield them from the bitter cold of a winter night here in the Big Apple. No big loss. He had to thin the herd anyway. He only had so much to give. His sperm count was around zero. He wasn't a machine after all.

Ol Jen was easily replaceable. There was no shortage of applicants.

He got home and started texting some of his old reliable friends, like Alexis. He got no response. He then tried Abigail, who said she wasn't feeling well, and sent him back frowny face emojis. He tried Eliza. She texted back a minute later and said she was too drunk to do anything and was going to bed soon. That left only one option and it was not much of an option. Fortunately for him, she had gone upstate to visit some old college friends. Many of them were married with children of their own. The pressure to join the club was intense. Brad figured she would be pregnant within the first month of their being married. For Brad, marriage was pretty much a death sentence even if it meant financial security for the rest of his life. He knew he should just break it off, but what about her old man? His sales record might not be enough to save him. Her old man could be a bit of a prick when he wanted to be.

Brad woke up the next morning. He lit a cigarette and made some coffee. He liked to admire himself in the mirror. Only Brad understood Brad. He thought the same thing to himself every morning. It made him smile.

This is what a winner looks like boys and girls. Plain and simple.

He usually spent Sunday mornings with one of his ladies or his fiancé, Amanda. He was not used to being alone. He didn't like it one bit. Once in a while, it was fine, but every Sunday morning when he woke up next to someone, he always felt better about himself. He liked turning over and seeing a beautiful woman lying half-naked in his bed. His ego wasn't big, so much as it was in constant need of attention. He put the coffee cup down on the table and he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. It looked like a piece of black rope moving behind a plant. He walked over to it and moved the plant. Brad nearly had a heart attack.

It was the same snake from last night....like it had followed him or something.

It slithered behind his couch, past some chairs, and around the entertainment center. He pushed it out of the way, only to see the snake had disappeared. His heart was pounding. None of this made any sense. He looked for a hole in the wall, someplace the snake could hide. He went all over the living room and didn't see anything. It had just vanished, into thin air. Snakes just don't vanish into thin air. What the hell was it even doing in his apartment in the first place? It was like it was stalking him or something.

He finished his coffee and threw some clothes on. He walked down to his super's apartment and knocked on the door. He answered it in his bathrobe. He looked like an old Italian guy who could be doing pasta commercials.

"Hi, Dante. I have a bit of a problem here in my apartment."

"What's wrong?"

"There's a snake in my apartment."

"A snake? In the middle of winter?"

"Yes, I guess this one just got bored or something."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Big son of a gun too. I expect this will be taken care of immediately."

"It's going to be hard to get an exterminator to come out on a Sunday. I'm sure they will be here first thing tomorrow morning."

"Dante. I'm not paying three grand a month to share a bed with a snake. Get somebody over here ASAP." said Brad.

"Okay, I'll have somebody over. Sorry about this, I've never had a snake in my apartments before."

"Well, I guess there has to be a first time for everything," he said as he headed back up the stairs.

It wasn't until four-thirty that afternoon that the exterminator showed up. He was followed by Dante and his wife. Brad wasn't sure what his wife was going to do about a snake. Like most Italian families, he just assumed she ran the show and wanted to see this snake for herself. Brad thought she put on too much makeup for someone her age.

She looked like someone had put makeup on a corpse.

"So, where is it?" asked Dante.

"I would assume it's in the wall somewhere. I saw it right here. It was here and I chased it back behind the sofa, over to the entertainment center. It had to be ten feet long."

Brad could tell the exterminator was skeptical. He spent the next half hour looking around Brad's apartment. Dante and his wife just stayed in the doorway. He had seen enough.

"I don't think there is a snake in this apartment," he said.

"What makes you say that?"

"If there was a snake in here, it would be looking for a place to nest. The wall would be a much better bet. Unless you want me to go knocking down walls, there isn't much I can do here. They don't eat the same food we do, they are very, very picky. It would have no reason to be in your living room."

"Except for the fact that it was," said Brad, not very amused.

"Snakes shed their skins every few weeks, it's called molting." said the exterminator.

"Molting?"

"Yes, It's a real word. I don't see any signs that a snake has been in here for an extended period. The chances of a snake being here in the middle of February are pretty slim.....like zero."

"So, what do I do if I see it again?" asked Brad.

"Give us a call. We work 24/7." said the exterminator.

Brad saw Dante's wife follow him down the stairs and outside. They were probably going to say Brad was crazy or on drugs, but he had seen it....not just once....*but twice*.

After they left, Brad spent an hour going over every nook and cranny in his apartment. That snake had to have gotten in here somehow. Perhaps there was a small hole in the wall, just large enough for it to get in. He gave up and turned on the TV. He called Alexis, who just sent back a sleeping emoji. He then called Abigail, who said he could meet her for breakfast. Their hangout was a diner not too far from Times Square. It had been owned by the same family for decades. He met her there in just over an hour.

"Brad.....I don't think we should be seeing each other anymore. It's been fun, but I met someone else and you know how it goes." she said between bites.

"No problem. We had fun. No hard feelings I hope?"

"No, not at all. You're a cool guy, just not the guy I want to marry," she said, drowning her pancakes in syrup.

Brad was hurt, but he understood. She knew he had a fiancé and that their relationship was never going to go anywhere, but he never saw himself as Mr. Right....*just Mr. Right now*. No big deal. Girls like her were very replaceable. He hugged her and sent her on her way. He even paid for the meal. He was a gentleman after all.

He texted Amanda just to see when she would be back in the city. She said not till tonight, which meant he had the day to himself.

He didn't do much that day, just hung out in his apartment and watched football. As hard as he tried to relax, he just couldn't. There was a snake following him, or so it seemed. Maybe it just wanted to be friends. Animals can be weird like that.

He never saw it coming. When he got to work the next morning, his boss said he had to meet them on the fourth floor. That was the Human Resources Floor. That could only mean one thing and that one thing was not good. In the financial services industry, you don't get a written warning or suspension or yelled at or anything of the sort. You simply are told you no longer have a job with the company. It's a one-strike and your out type of environment. Very stressful,

but very lucrative. He had made over four hundred thousand dollars last year and would do better than that this year. Four hundred thousand dollars a year to sit in front of a computer screen and press buttons. Life doesn't get much better than that.

"Brad, we have a problem here. Dawn Jenkins has filed a sexual discrimination lawsuit against this company and you for what happened at the New Year's Eve party we had. Our company has a zero-tolerance policy against sexual harassment and discrimination. I'm afraid we have to terminate your employment with this company immediately." said a very cold woman in the HR department sitting in front of him.

"Whoa, wait a second. It takes two to tango here. Since when is having consensual sex considered sexual harassment? Yes, we both had too much to drink and made a mistake, but it was completely consensual. I'm being fired because I had sex with a coworker?"

"The details of your severance package are in this folder. Security is going to escort you to your desk, where you will empty all of your belongings and will then escort you out of the building."

Brad couldn't believe what he was hearing. He had been with this company for over seven years and had started as an intern. He had passed the Series 7 Exams and was even up for a spot on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange. Now it was all gone. Seven years of hard work.....up in smoke.

He said nothing as he quickly emptied his desk. No one in the office said anything to him. He passed by his boss, who tried to console him, telling him the whole thing was bullshit, but there was nothing he could do. Her lawsuit would go nowhere, but they didn't want it to ever hit the courtroom. They settle with her and fire him and voila: it's like the whole thing never happened.

Brad couldn't believe that his side of the story was never even listened to. He was guilty simply for having a penis. He never pressured her to do anything. Sure, there was a strict no dating policy he had to sign when he started working for the company, but everyone was screwing everyone else in the building. Everyone violated it, but he was the one who had to take the fall for it.

He stepped outside the building, holding his belongings. His boss had given him the name of a lawyer who specializes in wrongful termination lawsuits. He might just give them a call.

For the first time in years, he felt like a loser. He had been fired from his job, not because he was a loser, but because he had sex, with a drunk woman at his company party and she felt bad about it. Who cares if she was married? Clearly, she had issues, so why was that his fault? He had no idea what he was going to do. He was back at square one. The lowest rung on the ladder....the bottom of the pyramid.....loserville.

He stepped off the curb and that's when he saw the snake. He nearly stepped right on it. It was nearly twenty feet long. It seemed to stretch on forever. He dropped his box of stuff and jumped back. The snake slithered down the sewer. A woman was waiting for a cab, right in front of him. She seemed oblivious.

"JESUS LADY, TELL ME YOU SEE IT!" he screamed pointing at the street.

"See what?" the woman asked, startled.

"The giant snake in the street."

"What snake?" she said looking down.

It was gone. It had vanished into thin air. Brad was now scared. Was he losing his mind? How in the hell did that giant snake just disappear? There's no way it could move that fast. He had only taken his eyes off it for a second.

He grabbed his box of stuff and took a cab home. He slowly opened the door to his apartment. He sat down on his sofa and opened a beer. He had problems....big problems. Amanda's dad was his boss. He was everyone's boss. He was usually never there. Of course, when he found out what happened, there were going to be fireworks.....major-league type fireworks. He was not looking forward to having that conversation with Amanda....or her dad. He must have known. He was the one who is responsible for all of this. He's the reason Brad no longer has a job. Once he and Amanda sorted this all out, he would be back to work, making big money. He never did like her dad.

Just like clockwork, Amanda arrived at his doorstep that night. He could see she had been crying..... *crocodile-type tears*. He didn't say anything to her, he just invited her in. She sat down on his couch. There was a painfully awkward silence for a minute or two. Then she reached into her pocket and gave him back her engagement ring.

"Amanda, come on, I was drunk and made a mistake. Don't do this," he said.

"How many others are there Brad? I know about Alexis.....how many others are you screwing?"

"Come on Amanda. You're telling me you've been a perfect little angel this whole time?"

"As a matter of fact, I have. I figured when you're engaged to be married to somebody, you remain faithful to them. I guess you don't feel the same way. Please don't call me or text me. I never want to hear you or see you again." she said and got up to leave.

"Come on.....okay, so I'm not very good at this whole monogamy thing. I admit it. But, once we are married, all that stops. I don't want to be the guy who cheats on his wife."

"No, you're the guy who cheats on his fiancé. How is that any better?"

"Amanda. You're thirty next month. You really want to start dating again, at your age?"

Amanda just rolled her eyes and headed towards the door. Seeing her walk away from him and the possibility of never seeing her again made him feel something he didn't know he had in him.

Brad Strozak was getting angry. Very angry. No one walks out on him, especially his fiancé.

He knew he had to compose himself. This was a delicate situation. He stopped her just as she was about to leave.

"Please don't do this to me. You know I got fired today. I'm sure your dear old dad had nothing whatsoever to do with it." he said.

"So I heard."

"Just because I cheated on you doesn't mean I don't love you. I will never stop loving you, ever."

"I don't believe a single word you say, Brad, now let me out," she said and pushed him out of the way. She closed the door and the echo rang through his ears. Like he was standing next to a fire alarm. She was gone. She didn't fight, or argue, or anything. She just handed him back his ring and left. Like she was returning a sweater or something. That was it. They had been together for nearly two years. Now, she was gone. At first, he had only agreed to marry her for his career but, as time went on, he actually grew rather fond of her. She was the girl next door. The one who bakes cookies. The only woman he knew that would make a good mother to his children and he let her walk right out of his life. This had not been a good day. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

Brad Stozak was fast on his way to becoming a loser.....he'd rather be dead than become a loser. He also had the little problem of the giant snake that seemed to be following him around everywhere he went. He began to feel like it's prey. He had gone from being the hunter.....to being the one hunted.

The next few days were rough for Brad. For the first time in years, he had to watch his money. No more going out to bars and dropping 300 dollars for drinks. No more ski vacations in Vermont.

No more fun.

He just couldn't believe this had happened to him. All over sex. How many lives and careers had been ruined because some chick got hurt after she decided to drop her panties? Brad never forced her to do anything. Not that it mattered. She was suing the company because she could. He still had a lot of friends in the company who had been calling and offering their support. He recognized one of the numbers as being the main dude in charge of his department. He immediately picked up.

His boss told him he felt terrible about the whole thing, but the owner was paranoid about being sued again and he felt this was only to protect himself. Not that it made much sense. Nothing seemed to make much sense nowadays. He told Brad about an opening at a competing trading company named WATERMAN Inc. Brad had only heard of the company in passing. It wasn't much, he wouldn't be making nearly what he was with his old company, but at least it was something. He'd have to start the bottom, but Wall Street was a pretty tight community. His boss had let it be known that one of his top dogs was let loose and looking for work. His son worked for WATERMAN and could probably get him an interview.

"With your track record, they'd hire you in a second," he told Brad.

Brad was interested, but he knew he could never sell himself short. That's what losers do. He was no rookie, but he doubted they were going to hire him off the streets and just give him the keys to the kingdom.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to talk to them, see what they offer," said Brad.

"Just hear em out. Your track record speaks for itself."

Brad did nothing for the next few days but get drunk and high. Most work days were ten to twelve hours. Big money came with big drama and long hours. It was nice to relax.

He almost felt like a member of the human race again.

Some days he would pass out on the couch and wake up quickly, just in time to see the snake disappearing behind some furniture. He wanted it to think he wasn't paying attention. He wanted the snake to think it was winning. It was all part of the plan. For two days now, he had been camped out on the couch, just waiting for it to emerge. One night after dinner, he made his move. He turned off all the lights, then quickly turned them on and saw it go into the kitchen. He darted after it and grabbed its tail. He had never held a snake before. It started flailing violently. Brad had a grip on it and wouldn't let go. He was going to kill this damn snake once and for all, then drag its carcass downstairs to his super's apartment and nail it to his door.

Brad began pulling and pulling. He pulled for several minutes until he couldn't hold onto it any longer. He must have had thirty feet of snake in his hands.

Jesus.....just how big is this thing? he thought to himself. He had to make a quick decision. He just needed some evidence. He grabbed a large kitchen knife with his free hand and hacked off a piece of the snake. It made a sound.....the most horrible sound Brad had ever heard in his life. Brad was no snake expert, but he was fairly certain, snakes don't make that kind of sound.....*at least not any normal snake that is.*

He held onto the piece he cut off and looked around for an empty jar. He found a large piece of Tupperware in one of the cabinets and put it inside. As soon as he turned back around, he was astonished to see the snake had vanished. Brad didn't know what to do. Clearly, this was no ordinary snake, not by a long shot. He moved his fridge and oven. He could find no trace of the snake. He reasoned that it must be coming through the cupboards. He took everything out of the cabinets and cupboards, throwing them on the kitchen floor. Still, he found no snake, or hole big enough for it to move through. He figured perhaps it came through the ceiling. Now it made sense. Of course, it was moving through the ceiling. That stupid exterminator just wasn't looking in the right places. He held up the piece of Tupperware with the snake piece inside. It started to flail and wiggle. He put some packing tape over it to make certain the lid stayed on. No way in hell was he going to lose this very important piece of evidence.

No way, no how.

He couldn't wait to see the look on his super's face when he showed him the piece of snake, which he fully intended to do.....*once it stopped moving.*

The call came from HR the very next day. Somebody named Vicky. Cute voice. Wanted him to come in as soon as possible for an interview. Brad knew he had to get back in the game, but he didn't want to appear too desperate. He made the appointment for the next day. He told her he had more interviews and that was the only time he had. The appointment was for 10 AM. Brad knew the interview was just a formality. His former boss really had come through for him and why not? He had made his former company a ton of money.

Brad also had an eight hundred dollar a month payment for his Porsche which was due soon, as was his rent. His severance package had been generous, but it was only a fraction of his normal salary. Even in tough times, he was still taking home over ten thousand dollars a month. He was going to have to make some difficult choices. It would be several weeks or months before he was bringing in real money again. He just didn't have enough to cover his bills. For the first time ever, Brad Strozak was going to bounce a check.

Bouncing checks.....walking around in your underwear.....drunk by noon. In some circles, you might be called the L-word.

Brad knew his situation was only temporary. Hopefully, very temporary. He'd go down to the interview, nail it, and be back to work within a week. He'd take WATERMAN from the minor leagues into the majors. There is always money to be made, you just have to be able to find it. That's why Brad was so good, he always found a way to skim some off the top. He'd beat the algorithm before anyone even noticed. He was that good.

Being good doesn't come cheap. Those clowns at WATERMAN should realize this.

Brad went back into the kitchen and looked at his prize. Much to his dismay, the piece of the snake had simply shriveled into just a small piece of snakeskin. He held it up to the light. How the hell was this even possible? His crucial piece of evidence was gone.

Brad was beginning to feel something he hadn't felt in years.....maybe forever.

Brad Strozak was beginning to feel afraid. Like seven years old and monster in the closet type scared. What the hell kind of a snake was this? It just seemed to appear and disappear at will. Why was he the only one who could see it?

It wasn't really so much an interview, as it was just being shown around the office building. Marc Waterman was the CEO. His father founded the company back in the 1980s. They were hustlers and money changers. Vulture capitalism at its finest. Brad figured they would give him some small accounts and see what he does with them. Marc took him in his office and laid down the law.

"You made your last company a ton of money. I can't believe they let you go without a fight," he said sitting back in his chair.

"Their loss," said Brad

"Well, this is going to be quite a step down for you. We're much smaller, but we're getting bigger every day. We have plowed a ton of money into China and Asia recently and are seeing good returns. I'm curious to know what you think."

"China is great....until you have to deal with the Chinese. I found if you don't speak the language, don't bother," said Brad.

"Exactly. We were hoping to have you as our Asia point man. We'll pay for a tutor. In a few months, you'll be having conversations in Chinese."

Brad was intrigued. He had no intention of sticking around any longer than he had to. Still, there might some easy money to be made here. Brad could look the part and act the part, so long as the price was right.

"That's quite an offer....I...." he stopped in mid-sentence as soon as he saw the snake crawl out from underneath Waterman's desk. It seemed to go on forever. Brad stood up and stepped right on its tail. It began to wiggle and flail.

"Do you see it?"

"See what?"

"The giant snake on the floor. It's everywhere."

"Brad, I just see you stepping on the carpet. I don't see a snake anywhere."

"How the hell do you not see it? It must be like two hundred feet long? It's getting bigger and bigger by the day?"

"Brad, I'm sorry. I don't see any snakes here. Are you feeling okay?"

"You don't see it, do you? Am I imagining this?"

Marc just looked at Brad as if he had some incurable disease.

"Don't look at me like that. I'm not crazy."

"Right.....well Brad, we'll be in touch," said Marc as he showed Brad to his office door.

"It's my pet snake from when I was a kid. My sister and I flushed it down the toilet one day. His name was King Matilda. I think he's come back. That fucking snake is like, following me or something."

"Brad, there is no snake in here. Don't you think I would have seen it as well?"

Brad said nothing. He knew it was over. The snake had taken something else from him. It had destroyed his life preserver. There was no way Marc was going to hire him now. Marc almost seemed to be pushing him out of his office.

"There was a snake in there Marc."

"If you say so, Brad. We'll be in touch," he said and closed the door behind him. A few curious onlookers had poked their heads around the corner to see what was happening. Brad said nothing as he walked by them.

Well, fuck him. Why was I even going to waste my time in this place? This place was where losers thought they were something special. Any place that does cold calling is not somewhere I want to be, simple as that. He thought to himself as he took the elevator downstairs to the lobby. He walked out into the street and hailed a cab. He was going to go home and get very drunk very quickly.

He woke up at five-thirty that afternoon. He had passed out for nearly two hours. He lit up a cigarette and tried to concentrate. He walked around his apartment, then went downstairs to check his mail. It was nothing but bills. He had auto-pay set up and most weeks didn't even check on them. This was never a problem, so long as he had money to pay them. His bank account was getting smaller and smaller by the day. Last year, he went to Las Vegas with Amanda and spent over ten thousand dollars. He never even thought twice about it. Now, he had to think twice about spending ten dollars. He couldn't believe how far he had fallen.

From the sublime to the ridiculous is but a step, my friend

He knew he had to snap out of his funk and quick. He hadn't felt this lousy in years. He hit up a few of his regulars, just to see what they were up to. His only response came from Alexis. Good old, reliable Alexis. He should have just married her. She said she could be over in an hour.

Brad ran back upstairs and cleaned up. He showered and threw on some cologne. He brought out some wine. Alexis loved the wine. The quicker she got drunk, the quicker her panties hit the floor.

She was a breath of fresh air. Brad told her he had lost his job over some bullshit. She threw her arms around him. Alexis was cool like that. Brad knew one of the reasons she was with him was for his money and he was perfectly fine with that, she didn't make it a secret or anything. He knew it was going to put a strain on their relationship, but right now, she was very sympathetic and that was exactly what he needed.

"I missed you kid," he said and kissed her on the lips.

Ten minutes later, they were in his bed, ready to go at it. It had been a few weeks since Brad had sex, which for him was like a record. He didn't want it to become a habit.

Brad looked up for just a second and could see the snake slithering along on the roof of his bedroom. It was crawling on his ceiling.

This was impossible. Like physically impossible.

He got up, stood on the bed, and grabbed it. He pulled and pulled until it came crashing down on top of him. He pushed it off and threw it on the floor. The snake seemed to go on forever. He

grabbed it and pulled it over to the window. He pushed open the window and started feeding it out. He was going to get rid of this damn thing once and for all.

"Um Brad.....what are you doing?"

"I'm getting rid of this damn thing. I don't know much about snakes, but I don't think it can survive a drop of a few hundred feet."

"What snake?"

"The one I'm holding."

"I don't see anything."

"You don't see anything? How the hell can you not see anything? It's everywhere!"

"Brad, I don't see a snake in here."

Brad stopped what he was doing. He had about a hundred feet of snake hanging out the window. He just stopped and closed the window on it, leaving it half dangling out his apartment window.

"I'm not crazy Alexis. There is a snake in here. It's everywhere."

"So then, why can't I see it?" she said sitting up naked in bed.

"I don't know. I really don't know. I wish you could. I wish at least one other person on this planet could see it, cause it's starting to freak me out. I see it everywhere I go. When I try and grab it, it's so long, I can't even see the other end of it.....I don't even know where it ends. Come on, let's get back to business."

Alexis just sat up and grabbed her clothes. Brad couldn't believe what was happening.

This was not happening. There was just no way this was happening. He was being turned down by a woman. Brad Strozak had just hit a new low.

Alexis, come on. Don't like this. Not now, I need this right now."

"Brad.....I've known you for years and this is the first time I've ever seen you look vulnerable. It's kind of sweet. I love you, but we both know this is never going to go anywhere. I should have stopped you before, but...well, I was horny. I met someone. I really like him. I can't see you anymore. I'm sorry, I hope you understand." she said getting dressed.

"You could have just told me this over the phone."

"I know. I'm a slut, but I'm going to try real hard not to be anymore."

"Come on Alexis. Tigers don't change their stripes."

"I don't know Brad. I mean, look at you. You've changed an awful lot in just a few weeks." she said.

"It's just a speed bump. I'll be back on my feet and banging random chicks in no time," he said smiling.

"I know you will and I don't want to be one of them anymore. I hope you understand."

"So what, you're going to marry this guy or something? He must be loaded."

"No, actually he isn't. He lives on Staten Island with his parents. They own a restaurant." she said.

The longer she spoke, the worse Brad felt. He had been dumped for a loser. Some guy that clipped coupons and drove a pickup truck. He and Alexis had been dating off and on for years. They even talked about moving in together at one point, but she knew him and he knew her and they both realized monogamy was not their thing....until now.

"Brad, I'll be thirty next month. I have a clock and it's ticking. I waited for you to grow up for years. I realized it's never going to happen. You're always going to be you, because, as you said: *tigers can't change their stripes*.

Brad felt like Alexis had just kicked him when he was down. Right in the guts. He wished her well. They had a very awkward hug in his doorway. He asked her to keep in touch and she said she would. She closed the door.

Brad sat down on the couch and stared at his cigarettes. He used to only be a social smoker and now, he was going through a pack a day. He did not like the person he was becoming. Not one bit. He had watched his old man become a loser after losing his job and here he was, ready to follow in his footsteps.

Brad Strozak would rather be dead than be a loser.

His name was Sarnak. He looked and acted as if he were a character on Star Trek. His specialty was snakes. He was a certified Herpetologist in the state of New York. Brad found his name and number on the internet. He called him and told him his story, only he added the fact that he had a piece of evidence to support his claim. Sarnak was hesitant, but this was a snake and his lively hood was studying snakes, so he decided to give it a try, especially when Brad told him he would give him a thousand dollars if he could catch the snake. He would have paid him a thousand dollars if he could just say he saw the snake. He came over to Brad's apartment one afternoon with some equipment. Brad showed him the shriveled piece of snake in the Tupperware container. Sarnak seemed genuinely intrigued.

"The skin came from a water moccasin, but there's something else in here as well. Brad, most of the snakes we deal with in this state are very basic. I once had to track down a King Cobra that had been brought in by a recent immigrant. I won't know until I run some tests, but it looks as if you have a hybrid snake here, which is also very rare in these parts."

"I just want you to catch the damn thing," said Brad

"Brad, judging by the size of this skin, this snake is quite large, and usually large snakes are quite slow."

"Just find it. Make it fifteen hundred. It's all yours if you can catch it."

Sarnak didn't care about the money at this point. He had never seen a snakeskin quite like this. He began to suspect that Brad might simply be pulling a stunt, but why offer him fifteen hundred dollars? A snake this size should be very easy to catch and yet by Brad's nonsensical description, it was thirty or more feet long, which was impossible.....at least in theory.

He spent the next hour going around Brad's apartment. There was zero trace that any snake had been in his apartment recently. Brad's story just wasn't adding up.

"Brad, once we have this snake piece analyzed, we'll have a much better idea of what we're dealing with. So far, I can't see any signs that a snake has been in this apartment, not one this size anyway."

Brad was fuming, but he knew he had to let this guy do his thing. He was the only chance Brad had at this point. He left and took his bag with him, along with the piece of the snake. It was just a waiting game right now and Brad hated to wait. It was just not his bag.

Things just got worse for Brad over the next few weeks. His bank account was being drained at an alarming rate. He had to return his Porsche, which thankfully had just been on a lease. He loved that car and hated to see it go, but he had no choice, it was just too much money. He had to sell some of his watches, including a 2,000 dollar Rolex he had received from his company as a Christmas Present one year after he made them over two million dollars in profit. He pawned other jewelry and some sports memorabilia. He had gotten a decent amount of money for them, but he knew it was not enough. It only covered a month's rent and living expenses. He had to get back in the game and quickly. He was also stuck using public transportation for everything. He liked going out to his parent's house upstate and pulling into their driveway in a brand new Porsche. Everyone in his neighborhood knew when he was home. They knew he was no loser. Growing up, his parents never had much. They could barely afford their house payment every month. His father would rather blame everyone else for their problems, rather than just own to his failures. He had even given his parents a considerable amount of money over the years. His mother had always been there for him. He didn't want her to worry about money any longer. He knew he would have to make a very difficult phone call. He didn't want his mother to worry.

He made it short and sweet. He told them he had been laid off from his company. He made it sound like it was no big deal. That he could easily find another job that paid four hundred thousand dollars a year or more. He told them he had to get rid of his Porsche. He knew his mother was worried. She was a mom and moms worry. He promised her he would be out to their house soon. It was her parting words that really hurt.

"Honey, you can always move back in with us until you get on your feet again."

Her words hit him like a brick. Move back in with the rents.....nothing says success quite like moving back in with your parents.

"I'll be fine mom. Just keep an eye on dad."

"Brad, I've been doing that for almost forty years. I have it down to a science by now."

He hung up and sat down on his sofa. His furniture had cost almost fifteen thousand dollars when he bought it new. His rugs cost thousands. He wondered how much he could get for them now. Much of it had to be imported from Asia. Maybe they would take it back.

He lit up a cigarette and looked at his phone. He knew Waterman had told everyone about his little episode in his office. He figured someone would take a chance on him. Except no one had called. It was a stark moment of reckoning for him. He had his Series 7 and just about every other accolade one could want in his field. He had a stellar track record. He even applied to some foreign firms but had heard nothing. He had been blacklisted from the very business he loved. He knew if he was going to survive, he might have to look for employment in a completely new field, except those completely new fields didn't pay a fraction of what he made previously. He was falling further and further with each passing day. He just didn't know how to stop. His six-pack was gone. He had gained weight. He was smoking. He did not like what he was seeing. He knew where this was going.

Brad was turning into his old man.

He got drunk and passed out on his couch. It was becoming an all too familiar routine. None of his girls would even text him back. Once the money disappeared, so did they. Brad couldn't even pull in a girl anymore.....things were that bad.

He woke up and made dinner. The snake was crawling across the table right in front of him as he was eating. When it got too close, he simply pushed it away. He could feel it underneath the table. He even stabbed it with a fork at one point. The snake just stopped for a second and then kept going. Brad was eating and started sobbing. He couldn't remember the last time he cried. Most of all Brad wanted this damn snake gone. It was getting bigger and bigger with each passing day. He had given up trying to stop it and just tried to control it now. No matter where it was, he could never find its head. It didn't have a beginning or an end. It was just there, all the time, like a tumor. Only this tumor moved and slithered. He had always hated snakes.....now he hated them with a passion.

Three months went by. He hadn't heard back from a single company. There was no point in taking a job in any other field other than finance. None of them paid enough. He missed his last month's rent. He couldn't pay all of it. He wanted to get drunk but couldn't afford the scotch. He had to drink vodka.....just like the rest of the drunks.

He had sold most of his furniture. He got two thousand dollars for it. He couldn't do much of anything. He had to keep his phone. That was his only lifeline. His TV had also been cut off. He kept his power on and utilities. Even that was becoming a burden. He pawned or sold everything he had, but it wasn't enough. Sometimes he was so insulted by their offer, he just stormed out.

Out of the blue one morning he got a call from Sarnak. He had pretty much written him off. He sounded very excited.

"Brad....I have the DNA results back from your sample."

"Okay.....what did you find?"

"Brad.....I admit it. You're very good. I must tip my hat to you. I don't know how you did this."

"Did what?"

"Brad, that snake has DNA from every species of snake on this planet."

"Huh?"

"There is even some DNA from a species that went extinct eons ago. We ran the test several times to make certain there was no error. There wasn't. The results are correct."

"That's impossible."

"Until I saw the results, I would have said the same thing. It clearly isn't. there is DNA from a tree snake found in remote jungles of Southeast Asia. Brad, you have DNA from one of the rarest snakes on the planet, the Antigua Racer. They are only found in captivity. Quite a stunt you pulled here. I for one am certainly impressed and I don't impress too easily."

"Look you, idiot, this isn't a stunt, this snake is for real. It's everywhere. It's in my apartment. I can see it crawling on the wall right now. It's getting bigger and bigger with each passing day. Please, please Sarnak, you have to help me. I know this snake is real. I'm not trying to pull a prank here, I want to kill it."

"How do I kill a snake that doesn't exist?"

"IT DOES EXIST! I CAN SEE THAT FUCKING THING RIGHT NOW!" shouted Brad.

"Brad, I would like to use this in our monthly publication for Herpetologists. We call it HERPES. It's an insider joke."

"Are you going to help me or not?"

"Me, no. I can ask around. I'm sure someone will want to speak to you, now that we have this very unusual bit of evidence."

Brad hung up on him. He looked over and could see the snake. It wasn't just getting longer and longer. It was getting wider and wider as well. It was slowly encircling him. *Suffocating him. Strangling him*, like it would its prey. Brad wasn't about to be anyone's prey.

He heard a loud knock on his door. He knew exactly who it was. He was not looking forward to having this conversation. It was his landlord, Dante.

Brad opened the door. His super was standing in front of him with some papers.

"Hi, Brad."

"Hello."

"I think you know why I'm here."

"Yes."

"Brad, unless you can come up with the rest of the rent money by this week, we are going to have to start the eviction process. I'm sorry," he said and handed Brad the papers.

"I'll see what I can do. Dante, do you see the snake in this doorway?"

"What snake?"

"The one that's crawling over your feet right now."

"Brad, what are you talking about? I don't see any snake."

"I figured you didn't. Just checking," he said and slowly closed the door behind him.

Brad collapsed in the hallway and began to sob. This is not how his life was supposed to turn out. Not by any means. He didn't have much rope left. The thought of having to move back in with his parents was just too much. He would rather be homeless.

Being homeless was definitely not out of the picture at this point.

He had lost count of the days. He hadn't worked in six months. He had managed to beg, borrow and steal to stay in his apartment, but he knew it was hopeless. It was just too damn expensive to live in this city unless you worked in finance. He had only been with one girl in those six months. He picked her up at a bar one night. Her name was Sarah.....or maybe Hannah. Not that it mattered. He gave her a fake number. She gave him a fake number. He kissed her goodbye the next morning and never saw her again.

He was running out of food. He had been staying alive on take-out Chinese and Thai food. Even that was becoming unaffordable. He bought rice and oatmeal at his local grocery store. He hadn't actually been in a grocery store in years. He couldn't believe how expensive food had become. He had to pay in change. It was that bad and getting worse by the day. Of course, never too far behind was the snake.....*that horrible, goddamn snake from hell. The snake only Brad could see.*

It was now everywhere. It was in his apartment. It was on the street. It was even on the bus he had to take the other day. He looked up and saw the snake wrapped around a giant skyscraper office building. It just seemed to go on forever. It wrapped itself around the fruit stands and boxes at the farmer's market. It wrapped itself around the fire hydrant and taxis parked on the street.....*it was even slithering on the floor in the men's room at the bar.*

Brad knew exactly what it wanted. It wanted him out of the city. As soon as he left, so would the snake. King Matilda would go back to wherever it had come from. Brad had no intention of leaving the city. Where would he go? What would he do? Winners don't run away from a fight. This city had been so good to him. It had given him so much, only to take it all away.

He walked up the stairs, avoiding the snake at every step. He opened the door to his apartment, which was now, covered, wall to wall in snake. There was not an inch of free space that wasn't covered by the giant snake. He had difficulty sleeping at night because the snake would crawl over his body and wake him up.

He walked out to his balcony and looked over his beautiful city that was now engulfed in a dark, black snake.

The snake was everywhere he looked....crawling, slithering, strangling him. He knew there was going to be only one way out of this and it ended with him doing a high dive off a shortboard.

"Show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser," he said softly.

He climbed out onto the edge of his balcony and looked down below.

"This is going to suck, big time." he thought to himself as he jumped off the balcony. He landed on the roof of a car below, smashing it to pieces. He heard a woman scream and two others rush over to help him. He opened his eyes and looked up. The snake was finally gone. Brad had won because that's what winners do.....they win.

"I beat it.....I beat it. No more snake.....it's gone forever." he said, choking on his own blood.

The last thing Brad saw on Earth was the sun beating down on his face. As soon as he recovered, he'd be back at the bar, picking up girls and paying for everyone's drink. Brad Strozak was the guy every man wanted to be.....and then some.