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# The Snake Slinger



A flash fiction  
prequel to  
*The Demons Among Us*

# The Snake Slinger

By: Jill K Willis

A high-pitched shriek pierced the quiet morning air. Joy jerked her eyes from the book to her neighborhood pool. Only one person in the water—a girl, about six or seven. She flailed in the shallow end and screamed again. Joy scanned the pool deck. Empty. Where was this kid's mother?

Her eyes flicked to the lifeguard stand. Gemma stood frozen in a diving position, her dark eyes wide.

“Gemma! Help!” Joy rocketed from her lounge chair and splashed down the pool's steps. She motioned to the girl. “Hey! Come to me.”

The kid let out another ear-piercing cry. She bounced on her toes, splashing and backing toward the deep end. Why didn't she listen?

Then Joy saw it—a black snake slithering across the surface of the water toward the terrified child.

“Aaaaah!” The girl dropped beneath the surface.

*Oh, no.* She could no longer touch the bottom. “Gemma!” Joy yelled. “Get her!” She could rescue the girl, but then she'd wreck her wig. Gemma needed to get a grip. She had one job.

The girl popped to the surface, gasped for air, then sank again.

Joy tore off her straw hat and threw it over the freaky serpent. “*Gemma! Now!*”

Her friend sliced through the water. She grabbed the kid and pulled her to the surface. “I got you.” She wrapped her strong arm around the girl’s chest and dragged her to the ladder.

The snake surfaced a few feet away. It hissed, then jettied toward the girls.

Joy dashed up the steps and sprinted around the pool. *God, help us.*

*Bam!* A net slapped the water and scooped up the writhing snake.

Joy glanced at the other end of the pole. A guy she’d never seen before gave her a triumphant smile.

Joy returned the smile, then grabbed the trembling child from Gemma and laid her on her side on the warm concrete. The poor thing coughed up a few mouthfuls of water.

Gemma climbed from the water, kneeled by the child, and patted her back. “Are you able to breathe?”

The girl struggled to sit. Tears flooded her face, and her lower lip quivered. “I . . . I thought . . . I was going to die.”

“Nobody’s dying in this pool today.” Gemma brushed a strand of wet hair from the girl’s pale cheek.

“Tessie! What’s going on?” A middle-aged woman flung open the iron gate and rushed to the trio. She enveloped the girl in a hug.

“Mommy!” Tessie sniffled. “A big snake was in the pool.” She pointed to the fence behind the deep end.

Joy followed her finger in time to see the snake soar over the fence into the woods. The guy, tall with an athletic build, lowered the long pole and turned to them. A wide grin split his face. *Sweet lemonade*. What a dimple. He waved, and Tessie waved back.

The woman picked up her daughter. “A snake? In the pool? What kind?”

The guy strode up to them and smiled. His teeth sparkled against his tanned skin. “It was a harmless black snake. Probably looking for frogs.”

“Ew.” Tessie blinked her luminous blue eyes.

“Thank you for taking care of her.” Tessie’s mom gave Gemma a grateful smile. “I ran to the car for my sunglasses. It only took me a couple minutes. I thought she’d be okay. I’m very sorry.”

“That’s why I’m here.” Gemma pointed to herself. “I’m Gemma King. I’ll be your morning lifeguard this summer.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Teresa Graham. You’ll probably see our whole family out here a lot between now and when school starts again.” She turned to the hunky guy. “Are you another lifeguard?”

“No ma’am.” He shook his head. “I’m Wesley Simpson, the pool maintenance tech. This is my first day on the job, and I got lost on the way. It’s my fault the snake was in the pool. If I’d gotten here earlier, I would have checked all the filters before you arrived. I’m very sorry about what happened.” A frown creased his forehead.

Mrs. Graham said, “No worries, Wesley. You redeemed yourself by capturing that nasty thing and getting rid of it. I hope it slinks back into whatever hole it crawled out of.”

“I do too.” Gemma shivered. “I hate to admit it, but I’m afraid of them.”

So that's why she'd hesitated. "I've known you all my life and just now learned you're afraid of snakes. Good thing we had a snake slinger here today." She grinned at Wesley. "Hi, I'm Joy McLain. Thanks for arriving in the nick of time."

Wesley's face reddened beneath his straw hat—almost identical to hers except for its narrow brim. "Happy to help. I'm glad Tessie's okay." He scratched the back of his neck. "Since I'm already running late, I better get to work." He strode to the pool house.

Joy's heart gave a little flip. *What a nice guy.*

Gemma stuck her feet in the flip flops she'd left at the base of her lifeguard stand. "Mrs. Graham, I need to fill out a report. Do you mind signing it when I'm done?"

"Sure. We'll be here a while," Mrs. Graham said. She carried Tessie toward a row of shaded lounge chairs.

Gemma lowered her head and eyed Joy through her long lashes. "I'm sorry I didn't dive in immediately."

Joy shrugged. "You didn't see me diving in. I'm sorry too."

"You have an excuse."

Joy shook her head. "Alopecia is not an excuse. Just because I didn't want to mess up my wig shouldn't have stopped me from saving a kid's life."

"We're both at fault."

"Agreed."

They grinned at each other.

"I'm going to get my iPad from the car to access the report." Gemma picked up her towel and wrapped it around her lean waist. Her dark skin shimmered in the sun. "You're in charge."

“I’m all over it.” Joy leaned against the stand under the umbrella’s shade. She’d freckle in a heartbeat.

Gemma walked to the gate as Wesley exited the pool house, still carrying the pole. He dipped it into the deep end and fished out Joy’s hat.

Joy hurried toward him. “Oh, gosh. I’d forgotten all about that epic fail. Thank you.” She retrieved the soggy wad of straw from the net. “Not sure it’ll ever be the same again.”

Wesley chuckled. “You throw a mean curve. Do you play Frisbee?”

“Uh—” Was he teasing her?

He crossed his arms. “I’m serious. That was a great shot. It slowed down that crazy snake. I used to play on an Ultimate Frisbee team at my old school. We moved here last week from Charleston to open a pool business with my uncle. Does your school have an Ultimate team?”

*Wow.* What a lot of words. Her brother did nothing but grunt. “Um. I don’t know. Maybe it’s on the school’s website. I’ll check on Gemma’s iPad.”

His face lit up. “That’d be great. Thanks. Well, I better get cracking. There’s no telling what’s in those filters.”

A horrified expression must have crossed her face because he burst into laughter. His green eyes danced. “I’m only kidding. I’m sure they’re full of dead leaves.”

“Good luck. Thanks again for your help.” Joy walked back to her chair and layered more sunscreen on her face before stretching out on her stomach. What a weird, memorable way to kick off the summer.

She found her page and immersed herself in the strange dystopian novel. After a while a shadow crossed the text. She looked up, squinting into the sun. Wesley. She'd forgotten to ask Gemma to borrow her iPad. What an idiot. She rolled over and sat up, shielding her eyes against the brightness with her hand. "I'm so sorry. I forgot to check on the Frisbee team."

"It's okay." He sat on the adjoining chair. "I'll do it when I get home. I just finished the pool and need to go to my next stop, but I wanted to say goodbye. It was great meeting you."

"You too." She took in his curly brown hair and angular features. Before most of her hair had fallen out last year, she'd had naturally curly brown hair too. Maybe it would grow back this summer.

"This will always be my first stop on Mondays." He bit his lower lip as he met her gaze.

Nothing would come between her and this chair next Monday. She tried to arrange a not-too-eager smile on her face. "No one's at the pool this early. I like to read here because it's quiet and I can get some sun without burning."

He nodded. "I'm also reading *Brave New World*. Are you taking AP Lit this fall?"

"Yep. You?"

His lips curved upward. "We should be in the same class."

Cute and smart. Her pulse quickened. "That'd be cool."

He rose. "See you next Monday?"

She grinned up at him. "I'll be here."

This had the makings of an awesome summer.