

GOLD

NEWBERY MEDAL WINNER

CHRISTOPHER PAUL CURTIS



# ELIJAH

## OF BUXTON

SCHOLASTIC

## ➔ CHAPTER I ➔

# Snakes and Ma

It was Sunday after church and all my chores were done. I was sitting on the stoop of our home trying to think what to do. It was that time of day when the birds were getting ready to be quiet and the toady-frogs were starting to get louder with that chirpity sound they make most the night. I wondered if it would be worth it to go fishing for a hour afore it got dark. I got that question answered when Cooter came walking up the road waving at me.

“Evening, Eli.”

“Evening, Cooter.”

“What you doing, Eli?”

“I was thinking ’bout getting Old Flapjack and going fishing. You wanna come?”

“Uh-uh. I got something that’s more interesting than watching you fish, I got a mystery.”

This might not be so good. I ain’t trying to be disrespectful ’bout my best friend, but there’re lots of things that Cooter sees as being mysterious that most

folks understand real easy. I asked him anyway, "What's the mystery?"

"I was cutting through M'deah's truck patch and seen some tracks that I ain't never seen afore."

"What kind of tracks? Were they big?"

"Uh-uh, they's long and wiggly. I followed 'em but they disappeared in the grass."

Cooter's pretty good at tracking so maybe this *was* a mystery after all.

"Let's go."

We got to Cooter's home, opened the gate, and went 'round back to his mother's truck patch. Cooter was right!

There 'mongst the rows of his ma's beets and corn and green peas were some of the strangest markings I'd ever seen.

I studied 'em real close. They were long and skinny and in six wiggling lines. Two of 'em were a good bit thicker than the rest. They started on one side of Cooter's ma's truck patch, went clean through her vegetables, then disappeared in the grass.

I got on my hands and knees to really give 'em the eye then told Cooter, "You got me. I ain't never seen such tracks nowhere. Let's ask my pa once he comes out the field."

But afore we had the chance to ask Pa, the Preacher

came walking down the road in front of Cooter's. He ain't atall like a common preacher that's got a church or nothing, but he tells anyone that will listen that he's the Right Reverend Deacon Doctor Zephariah Connerly the Third, and that he's the most educated, smartest man anywhere 'round. 'Stead of saying all those names, me and Cooter just call him the Preacher.

He leaned on Cooter's fence and called, "Evening, boys."

"Evening, sir."

"Hot one today, why aren't you two off swimming?"

Cooter said, "We trying to solve us a mystery, sir."

"Really? And what would that be?"

I told him, "It's some kind of animal tracks we ain't never seen afore, sir."

"Where are they?"

The Preacher opened the gate, walked into the truck patch, squatted down, and peered at the tracks just as sharp as I'd done. He took a jackknife out of his pocket and dug a little scoop of dirt out of one of the tracks. He looked at it so close that his eyes started to go crossed.

I quit breathing and my blood ran cold when all the sudden he shouted, "Lord, have mercy!"

The Preacher quick stood up and looked all 'round him the way you would if someone screamed out, "Wolf!"

Me and Cooter looked too. Who wouldn't've?

The Preacher said, like he's talking to himself, "No! No! No! I knew this was going to happen, I just prayed it wouldn't be this soon."

Me and Cooter called out together, "What? What was gonna happen?"

The Preacher looked like his best friend just got killed. "I warned them they had to check out those new-free folks better, and now somebody's accidentally toted some of those horrible creatures up here."

I noticed that 'stead of folding up his knife, the Preacher kept it open. Then worst, he held on to it like he was fixing to stab something.

I said, "What somebody tote up here, sir?"

"*Hoop snakes!*" He said it in a low hissing way that told you whatever kind of snake this was, you didn't want to run up on one!

Cooter's eyes scanned right and left. "What? What's a hoop snake, sir?"

Being any kind of snake was enough for me to start getting nervous, but the Preacher made matters a whole lot worst when he said, "I suppose I have to tell you, but I don't want this to get any further than the three of us."

He used his boot to rub most of the tracks out of the dirt.

I said, "Please, sir, tell us what you mean!"

The Preacher started talking but never looked at me



di-rect, he was too busy eyeing the road and the woods. "Down home there's a vile breed of snake called a hoop snake. Not only can it outrun a racehorse, it's been known to kill a fully grown bear with one bite!"

I looked at Cooter and hoped that I weren't looking scared as him.

The Preacher went on, "They look like near any other snake, except for one thing."

"What?"

"They have the habit of sticking their tails in their mouths then biting themselves."

That don't make no sense, that don't make no sense atall! If what the Preacher was saying was true, these snakes sure ain't too sharp-minded.

I said, "How're they gonna bite you if they're clamping down on their own tails, sir?"

"Good question, Elijah. But they don't hold their tails when they're ready to bite, they hold them when they're ready to chase after you!"

Cooter said, "But . . ."

The Preacher held up his left hand. "Listen! And, my young brothers, you better listen good! This may save your lives. Once they've bitten their tails, they form the shape of a circle then stand up like a wheel or a barrel hoop and commence rolling after whatever they've decided to kill!"

The hairs on the back of my neck started jumping like a skelter'd brushed up 'gainst 'em.

The Preacher said, "After they catch you and bite you . . ." He snapped his left hand shut like it was the mouth of one of these hoop snakes. ". . . the true horror begins. You're doomed."

Cooter said, "How come?"

"Because, Cooter, their poison gets into your blood too quick. Within hours you commence swelling till your skin looks soft and rotten as a ripe peach left in the noon-day sun!"

Cooter said, "*What?* You swells up?"

The Preacher said, "You swell so much that after exactly seven and a half days the pressure in your body becomes too great and you *explode* like an overheated steam boiler! In seconds your stomach and your lungs and your other entrails are flung around you for miles and miles!"

I couldn't believe folks who'd got free would do this to us! Even if it was a accident!

But the Preacher weren't through. "Worse, the swelling affects everything but your head, so you're forced to watch the whole tragedy unwinding right in front of your eyes!"

Cooter edged close to me and choked out, "Well, sir, at least you dies quick and ain't left to do much suffering."

“No such luck, Cooter.” The Preacher held up two fingers. “Two weeks! It’s fourteen endless days after your explosion before you pass on. And it’s no pleasant death either, you finally die from starvation.”

Cooter said, “Starvation? How come you don’t eat nothing, sir?”

“Because, Cooter, no matter how much food you swallow, it simply falls through the hole where your internal organs used to be and drops to the ground right in front of you!”

The Preacher stared hard in the direction the tracks were headed and said, “Those tracks were fresh, looks like a momma and poppa and a slew of babies! Which, God bless us all, means we’re too late, they’ve already started breeding! And from the way those tracks were going, I’d say they’re hungry and have started up a hoop snake hunting party!”

The Preacher threw his knife into the ground where the tracks use to be and put his hand on the fancy holster and mystery pistol he always totes. “Boys,” he whispered, “I need you to solemnly promise me something. I want you both to swear on your mothers’ lives that if I’m ever bitten by one of these beasts, you’ll take this pistol and put a bullet in my brain! I’d rather be shot *dead* than face such a horrible, prolonged death! Raise your hands, I need



each of you to promise that you'll blow my head right off my shoulders!"

I near jumped to the moon when a loud bang came from behind me! I looked back and Cooter'd already run into his house and slammed and locked the door. He warent 'bout to promise nothing!

Afore I knowed what was happening I was through Cooter's gate and right in the middle of a good long hard run home. I had sense enough not to take no shortcuts and stuck to the road so's I could at least see the hoop snake hunting party if I ran up on it. Ma must've heard me screaming from a ways off 'cause she was running out our front gate by the time I got there.

She said, "'Lijah? What on God's earth is wrong now?"

I busted through the gate, pulled Ma into the house, and slammed the door behind her. I was too worned out and shooked up to talk so she started looking me up and down and spinning me 'round to try and figure what was wrong. After a second she said, "'Lijah, sweetheart, you's scaring me to death! What's wrong, baby?"

Once my breathing caught up with me I let her know 'bout how the runaways from America had accidentally brung hoop snakes up to Buxton and how they were out in the woods rolling 'round looking for something to kill.

Ma looked at me like I was daft. She shooked her head and said, "'Lijah, 'Lijah, 'Lijah. What'm I gunn do 'bout

you? How many times I got to tell you, a coward die a thousand deaths, a brave boy don't die but once?"

I didn't say nothing but I couldn't help wondering how that's supposed to be comforting. Seems to me after you die the first time, the ones that follow ain't gonna really matter too much.

I said, "But, Ma, I ain't looking to die even one time, 'specially not from no hoop snake bite! It's better to get your head blowed off!"

Ma knelt down next to me, grabbed both my shoulders, and looked hard in my eyes. "'Lijah Freeman, you listen and you listen good. Ain't *nothing* in the world worth being that afeared of, son. Nothing."

I said, "What 'bout toady-frogs? How come you're so afeared of them? How's that any different?"

Ma couldn't hardly tolerate even hearing the word *toady-frog*, she'd near die if she ran up on one.

But just like that, the conversating was over. Ma stood up, smacked the back of my head, opened the door then said, "They *is* different. Them things is knowed to pass on warts and all other sorts of nasty dis-eases. And don't be back-talking me neither, 'Lijah Freeman. I ain't so scared of toady-frogs that I'm-a be running down the road in the middle of the day screaming my head off like you just done."

She knelt back next to me. "Acting that way don't look

good on no child old as you is, 'Lijah. You got to learn to get control of you'self and quit being so fra-gile, sweetheart."

Ma started acting like she couldn't decide if she was gonna be nice to me or give me a good swatting. She ran her hand along my cheek and said in a kind way, "I don't know what I'm gunn do 'bout that Zephariah! I done axed you over and over not to have no dealings with him, Elijah. He need be 'shamed of hisself, scaring young folk with them nonsense stories."

She was still acting friendly and peaceable when she said, "And you, you poor thing, you got to start thinking things through, you got to try hard to understand if what folks are telling you make any kind of sense."

Then, just like that, she's back at being mad at me, she pinched my cheek hard and said, "But that ain't no excuse for you to be acting all fra-gile like you done, none atall."

She squozed on my shoulders 'cause being fra-gile's the biggest bone Ma's got to pick with me. There ain't nothing in the world she wants more than for me to quit being so doggone fra-gile. It's something I'm aiming to do myself, but the trouble is me and her have two different ways of doing it. And her way always seems to be the exact back side of mine. Whilst I try not to be fra-gile by sucking down the looseness and sloppiness in my nose when they come and by not screaming and running off at the littlest nonsense,

Ma sets 'bout it different. Most times she tries to encourage it by talking the subject near to death. And, doggone-it-all, learning a lesson that way just don't stick in your head.

But what's worst is when Ma quits talking and starts doing something to make a lesson permanent. The first time she tried to make me quit being fra-gile I didn't even know she was doing it, but that's one lesson that's stuck with me so good that it seems like it happened yesterday and not a long time ago.

Ma had been walking me 'round the yard near our truck patch, and I must've been mighty young 'cause I had my arm stretched way over my head to hold on to her hand.

I remember stopping to get a good look at a pile of dirt that was being scampered on by a bunch of bugs. I couldn't understand how things that small could be moving all by theirselves! I dug my toes down into the dirt to make Ma quit walking so's I could get a better look. It turned out to be one of the biggest mistakes I ever made.

I can recall squinting my eyes to look up at Ma and seeing her pull off her sunbonnet and wipe her forehead afore she squatted down next to me and said, "Lijah, that ain't nothing but a anthill, sweetheart."

I reached out to pick one of the ants up. This was afore I'd learnt that bugs have ways of discouraging you from touching 'em. But afore I could get hold of one, Ma grabbed

my hand. “Uh-uh, ’Lijah, they’s some of God’s hardest workers and just ’cause you’s bigger don’t make it right to mess with ’em.”

Then she said, “Ooh, ’Lijah, lookit there! Ain’t that the prettiest thing?”

She turned my hand a-loose and reached over in the grass and pulled out the most terrorfying creature that ever lived! It was twisting and whipping in a way that waren’t one bit normal. And it didn’t have a arm nor leg nowhere on it! It looked like it came straight out your worst nightmare. But the fearfulest thing about it was that it was right in Ma’s hand, which up to then had been the best place to run if there was any kind of trouble.

Ma always counts that as the first time I ran off screaming, but who wouldn’t’ve?

Near everything I learnt about snakes on that day and every day since shows that screaming and running from ’em ain’t one bit atall fra-gile, it’s sensical.

It waren’t but a week or two later that me and Cooter were down at the river and he yelled, “Oh, ho . . . !” then snatched out a toady-frog big as a pie pan!

I was still smarting ’bout the way Ma’d made me feel fra-gile, so the first thing that came to mind was how

fra-gile *she'd* get if she saw a toady-frog as big and round as this one.

Like most real good ideas, this one didn't come to us right off. One thing led to the 'nother, and after 'while me and Cooter came up with this plan that's got toady-frogs and Ma and her sewing basket all meeting up together. In Sabbath school Mr. Travis is always telling us that the Lord loves laughter, and what could be funnier than watching Ma reaching down into her basket and getting a little surprise?

After supper I wrapped the toady-frog in the sweater Ma had been working on and put it in her knitting basket and ran 'cross the road to hide in the drainage ditch with Cooter.

Then, just like they always do, Ma and Pa came and sat in their rockers on the stoop, getting ready to do some relaxing. They're laughing and carrying on and Ma put her sewing basket in her lap.

She took her knitting spectacles out of the basket then quick closed it to make a point 'bout something with Pa. She acted like she was set to reach in and pull her knitting out but stopped at the last instance to slap at Pa's arm. She even set the basket back on the floor and, doggone-it-all, it seemed her and Pa weren't gonna get nothing done but talking and laughing! I was *this* close to losing my mind!



Finally Ma put the basket back in her lap and reached in. She knowed right off something was wrong 'cause with that toady-frog added to it, her sweater weighed 'bout five pounds more than the last time she touched it.

She twisted her head to the side to look at Pa, unwrapped the toady-frog, and it dropped smack-down in her lap. She froze up for 'bout one second, then jumped straight out the rocker. Yarn and needles and buttons and the toady-frog and the half-knit sweater flew all over the stoop like your guts do after you been hoop snake bit! Ma's knitting spectacles jumped partway up her forehead and she started hopping up and down and slapping at her skirt like it's afire! The whole time she didn't scream nor say a word.

It was the funniest thing I'd ever seen in my life!

Me and Cooter near 'bout died peeking out of the ditch. It caint be good for you to try to keep a laugh inside, I was *this* close to busting clean apart!

Ma heard us trying to smother our laughs down and stared 'cross the road. She looked like she was fixing to say something but her mouth just opened and shut over and over. Didn't no words come out so she walked all a-shake-ity into the house.

Pa called over to me and Cooter, "Don't y'all move."

He set Ma's rocker back up then collected all her knitting tools and put 'em back in the basket. He picked up the

toady-frog and brung him 'cross the road right at me and Cooter.

He set the toady-frog down, shooked his head, and said, "Now, Elijah. You, me, and Cooter all thought that was funny. Your ma and that there toady-frog ain't likely to see the whole adventure quite the same way."

Me and Cooter tried to keep our faces serious whilst Pa was talking, but tears were rolling down both our cheeks.

Pa said, "Past a wart or two, I don't think the toady-frog's gunn cause you no grieving. But your ma . . ." He whistled low and long. ". . . she's a whole 'nother story. So whilst you's out here rolling 'bout in that ditch enjoying the tormentation you caused your ma and that toady-frog, why don't you save us all some trouble and go in them woods and break off whichever switch it is you wants her to beat you with. 'Cause you know the next time you and her is in the same room together, that's what's gunn happen.

"Cooter," Pa said, "today your lucky day, son. You's 'bout to get two shows for the price of one. If you thought that there was funny, you just wait till you see the way 'Lijah starts a-hopping and screaming once his ma lays that switch on his behind."

Pa smiled then walked away.

Me and Cooter had to run near a mile afore we figured we were far 'nough away to really let our laughs rip out. And

rip out they did. I ain't *never* laughed so hard! We fell all over ourselves and couldn't barely stand up. We rolled and rolled whilst talking 'bout the way Ma looked when she opened that sweater!

We couldn't neither one of us get a whole sentence out.

I said, "Did you see the way —" then I commenced choking.

Cooter said, "And . . . and . . . and then she —" and started pulling at the grass and slapping at the ground.

Then I said, "I never knowed Ma could jump so —" and the laughing closed my throat right up.

Once me and Cooter were all laughed out and commenced walking home, things changed. A gloom started creeping over me the same way clouds'll all the sudden start sliding up to cover a full moon. Cooter was whistling and still laughing every once in the while and, doggone-it-all, I saw how unfair this whole commotion was turning out to be. He'd got just as much fun from everything that happened as I did, but it looked like *I* was gonna be the only one that had to do any kind of paying for the enjoying. I started working up a good apology fullled up with lots of sincereness for when I saw Ma.

When I got home, Ma didn't say a word! She must've thought the whole thing was too embarrassing and couldn't see no way of 'buking me without bringing up the subject of toady-frogs again, so she let it go.

I gotta say I was real proud of Ma 'cause of the good way she took the toady-frog joke. It's funny, just when you think you caint admire your folks no more than you already do, something like that happens and lets you know you're wrong.

Two days later I got back from helping Mr. Leroy down on Mrs. Holton's land. Ma and Pa were sitting on the stoop. Ma was back to working on that sweater and Pa was whit-tling away. She must've baked, the cookie jar was sitting twixt 'em.

She said, "How Mr. Leroy doing, son?"

"He's good, ma'am."

"You stop in and give my regards to Mrs. Holton?"

"Yes, ma'am, she told me to ask 'bout you."

"Mrs. Brown come by, axed if you's gunn go fishing tomorrow."

"Yes, ma'am, right after my stable chores."

"She done some baking too, say she hoping to trade for two of them big perch."

It weren't Ma that baked, it was Mrs. Brown! This made the baking in the cookie jar a lot more interesting!

"What she bake, Ma?"

Ma reached down and picked up the cookie jar.

She said, "You know how Mrs. Brown is, 'Lijah, always

trying something new. She baked some sugar cookies and some other kind of cookie she call . . .” Ma quit knitting and looked over her spectacles at Pa. “Ooh, Spencer, I must be getting old. I caint for the life of me recall what she said they was, can you?”

Pa held up on his whittling, looked at her, and said, “Naw, darling, I caint recall neither.”

Ma slapped the arm of her rocker. “Oh yes! Now I ’member, she baked them walnut and sugar cookies and something she say she gunn call rope cookies. You’s lucky they’s some left. Was all I could do to keep your daddy out of ’em.”

She tipped the cookie jar toward Pa and he reached in and pulled out a cookie that had walnuts stuck to the top of it and sugar dusted all over it!

Pa bit on the cookie and said, “Almost as good as your’n, Sarah!” He winked at me.

Ma leaned the jar at me but just as I was ’bout to reach in, she pulled it back and said, “Now, ’Lijah, you know better than that. You been working hard with Mr. Leroy. Go wash up first, son.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I ran ’round to the back stoop to wash my hands quick as I could. When I came out front, Ma tipped the cookie jar at me again and I dug my hand right in.

Ma was right, it felt like Pa’d et near all of ’em. But as

I moved my hand 'round in the bottom of the jar, I felt one n'em rope cookies . . . and Mrs. Brown must've *just* brung these cookies over, 'cause the last one left was still warm!

I pulled the cookie outta the jar.

My heart quit beating, my blood ran cold, and time stood still!

My fingers were wrapped 'round the neck of the worst-looking snake in Canada West!

I screamed, "Snake!" and afore I knowed it, I was tearing off 'cross the road into the woods. By the time I worned myself out I must've run two miles. I stopped and leaned 'gainst a tree, waiting for my breathing to catch up to me. Something made me look down in my hand.

I screamed, "Snake!" for the second time.

But this time I remembered to turn the snake's neck a-loose and throwed it down.

I wouldn't've thought I had enough strength left in me to run, but being afeared and being tired look like two things you caint feel at the same time.

When I ran back up on our stoop, Ma's and Pa's faces were wet with tears. Pa was leaning over the side of his rocker like he's having a fit.

I'd been so afeared and trusted my folks so much that it didn't come to me till right then that that snake hadn't crawled into the cookie jar on his own, he must've had



some help. It was a true shock when I figured out Ma was setting this whole thing up as a lesson!

When my voice finally came back I said, “Ma! How could you do that?”

They rolled!

Pa fought to catch his breathing. “Well, Elijah, seem to me what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.”

It’s a horrible feeling when the people who’re supposed to raise you go out of their way to scare you for no good reason, and making it worst was that they were getting so much enjoying outta it. ’Sides, fair’s fair, and scaring your ma with something as harmless as a toady-frog calls for getting switched, not getting terrified.

“Why would you do that?” I was crying so hard that the words were getting choked down in my throat. “Ma, you’re always telling me I can dish it out but I caint take it, so if you know that, how could you do this to me? And ’sides that, you know how much I hate snakes!”

“Mmm-hmm, ’bout the same ’mount that I hate toady-frogs.”

“But, Ma! Toady-frogs ain’t nothing! Snakes are dangerous! ’Twaren’t no toady-frog that gave Adam and Eve a apple, ’twas a snake! And you ain’t never heard of nothing called a hoop *toady-frog*, have you? No! That’s ’cause they’re harmless! It’s snakes what’ll kill you!”

Pa was slapping his sides so hard it’s a wonder he didn’t

bust no ribs. You couldn't do nothing but expect that kind of rudeness from him, but the way Ma was carrying on was terrible shocking!

“Ma! I thought we were trying to make it so's I wouldn't be so fra-gile! Look at me, I caint quit shaking!”

I could see I was wasting my breath. If people could die from laughing too hard, I'd be a orphan.

I know it probably ain't right to feel this way 'bout your own ma and pa, but I was sore disappointed in the way they were acting. Afore I got in bed that night, I even used a stick to flip my pillow over. I was so shooked up that I wanted to make sure Ma weren't gonna carry on this lesson no further.

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