Chapter 9: Jaws of Death

“Stop! Don’t do it!”

Head tucked down into wind blasting off tractor trailers, I race along the edge of the interstate. A turtle. A big turtle is lumbering up and out of the grass towards the pavement.

Spooked, he turns away from me and scurries along parallel to the road. You know the story of the tortoise and the hare? Well, this snapping turtle was no tardy tortoise. I chase him down the interstate. When I finally catch him I have to straddle his shel—not lady-like—just so that he won’t turn back into the road. I am NOT going to step into the road myself but I have to get him heading the other way. But he keeps moving forward, away from me, forcing me to hop along to keep up.

There’s nothing to do but pick him up. A SNAPPER. No way am I getting near his mouth.[[1]](#footnote-1) And his claws are longer than Piper’s. The tail looks like that of a stegosaurus with two lines of spiky triangles jutting up like twin mountain ridges. Can he whack me with that? Can I grab it before he does? No time for questions. I just do it.

Grasping the tail firmly, the triangles feel rigid but not piercing against my palm. Pulling, it’s like his feet are suction-cupped to the ground. Heavy! Oomph. I waddle across the grassy verge and high-step over the guard rail.

Now what? I have to at least take him down the grassy slope.

At the edge of the woods I set him down as gently as I can, only to watch him start back up towards the road.

Grrrrr. “I’m trying to save your life.”

His tail pop-pop-pops[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#endnote-1) as I heft him again and before I can spend any time wondering if that’s like our knuckles popping, his neck is craning and his jaws are headed toward my leg.

Snap. SNAP.

The thought of hours in the emergency room with a snapping turtle clamped to my calf have me setting him right back down again.[[4]](#footnote-3)

“Hey! I’m trying to save your life here!”

Between the whoosh-whoosh-whoosh of cars, there’s a trickling sound. Downhill, way down through the pines and poison ivy, a bit of orange sand calls out like a bright billboard. Yes! If I can get him to the creek, maybe he will stay there.

Can I use a stick to convince him to move? Snap! Bye-bye stick.[[5]](#footnote-4)[[6]](#endnote-2) Finally I stretch my hand out as far as I can, grab the tail, and up he goes again. His pink paws swim through the air, claws reaching for my flesh. I can’t stop and think about the danger; I have to just move.

I wade into the weeds, stepping around the briars and poison ivy all the while trying to keep his jaws pointed away from my kneecaps. He has the audacity to hiss at me. I spot a gap in the old chain link fence below and head for it. It is getting steep—and tangle-y.

I stumble.

Slip.

Fall.

The turtle tumbles in front of me. Bump, bop, bounce.

A concrete ledge. Coming too fast.

He summersaults right over it.

I grab a giant pine. Wedge my fingers deep in furrows of its bark. Wrench my shoulder as I come to a halt.

My eyes drop down, down, down to the bottom of a 30-foot wall. My hands are empty. My legs are shaking.

OH.

At the bottom, a shallow stream gurgles over a jumble of rocks. Through the leafy trees I can’t see the turtle but see enough rocks to know there’s no way he could have survived that fall.

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Climbing back up to the road, I don’t even try to avoid the poison ivy. Words swim up from the depths of my memory – David Laurencio saying something about turtles and nesting.

I remember standing there in the wet collection of the museum, surrounded by all those jars. Something just behind me, at head-height, had me turning and reaching for it. A large jar filled with round things strung together intrigued me. It looked as if 30 ping-pong balls were jammed down into a pair of white pantyhose and then were twisted into knots.

The label read:

AUBURN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

HERPETOLOGY COLLECTION

**CHELYDRA SERPENTINA**

**AUM 40610[[7]](#footnote-5)**

**ALABAMA**

Colbert County[[8]](#endnote-3)

“Eggs?” I asked, puzzled. The room was filled mostly with snakes from Alabama, so that didn’t make sense. We don’t – at least I hope we don’t – have any snakes big enough to hold that many huge eggs. That would fill a lot of snake belly.

“So,” David sighed, “that is roadkill. A female that got hit by a car. A snapping turtle.”

“Oh no.” A mother. There must have been 30 eggs in there. To think of the creatures they could have become.

“In turtles, most of what gets hit are females because they are out looking for nesting sites. Most turtles are aquatic so they are in the pond or river unless they need to go nest.”[[9]](#footnote-6)[[10]](#endnote-4)

Later, climbing that hill, it hit me.

Females, nesting sites, early spring . . .

My eyelids begin to burn.

Staring at the spot where she – SHE not HE – was just trying to cross the interstate, my vision goes wavy. Think of all the eggs she carried.[[11]](#footnote-7)

David had explained how scientists use eggs like those. “These gives us two bits of information: a clutch[[12]](#footnote-8) size for that turtle and a time. The more clutches you have with dates on them, the more data you can compile, and you have a better feel for what you know.” If, in September, you found one turtle who was about to lay eggs, you might assume all of that species reproduces in September. But if instead you found ten turtles, you might discover that they actually reproduce from June to October. You might need a sample size of 50 turtles to be confident you are on the right track.

You could learn a lot from a clutch of eggs, but standing on the side of the interstate, data doesn’t matter to me. Hot tears carve canyons down my face.

What if I had just let her be?

Maybe she could have made it.

1. Turtle table manners: A scientist once watched a snapper with a huge rat crammed in its mouth, tail-end still hanging out. Turtle mouths are like beaks so, with no teeth, no hands, no teeth, and no moveable left and right jaws like a snake, you’d think he’d be stuck. Not this guy. He went up to the ditch bank and rammed the rat’s rear-end into the mud. He did that over and over until he’d gotten it all stuffed in. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Never, EVER pick up a turtle by its tail! Those popping sounds? The dislocation of his vertebrae. I cringe to think of the damage I did with that one move. Sure wish I had known better back then. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “Turtle in the Road - What Should I Do?” *Turtle Rescue League*, www.turtlerescueleague.com/turtle-in-road. Accessed 17 July 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
4. That old wives tale you’ve heard about a snapper not letting go till it hears thunder? Totally not true. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. A common snapping turtles’ neck is so long and flexible its scientific name is *serpentina* = snake-like. This turtle’s strike is like lightning. Its jaws can clamp down with 150 pounds of force. Oh, and sometimes they fart on you. Such thanks for your rescue effort. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Ernst, Carl H., and Jeffrey E. Lovich. *Turtles of the United States and Canada*. Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
7. “AUM” is the code for this museum – every natural history museum’s got one. “40610 is the number assigned to this specimen. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Montgomery, Heather L., and David Laurencio. “Auburn University Museum of Natural History.” 1 Apr. 2016. Collections Manager, Tetrapods, Auburn University Museum of Natural History [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
9. Where that nest ends up matters. If a common snapping turtle’s eggs are incubated at 68⁰ F then females hatch out. 70-72⁰ F, males and females hatch. 73⁰-75⁰ F, all males. Those guys are hot stuff. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
10. “Common Snapping Turtle Fact Sheet.” *DEEP*, Connecticut Department of Energy and Animal Protection, 8 Nov. 2016, www.ct.gov/deep/cwp/view.asp?a=2723&q=469200. Accessed 10 July 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
11. Guess they are scrambled now. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
12. Clutch: all the eggs laid together in one nest [↑](#footnote-ref-8)