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There were two things that happened that day that should have given me a clue as to what was about to come. The first thing happened when I was doing my homework.

It was five-thirty in the morning. I like getting up early to work on my homework. It's really quiet, and my older brother isn't awake to bug me. I was at the dining table, working on my math. Mom had just woke up, and she came into the kitchen.

"My goodness, Leah," she yawned as she strode into the room. "How long have you been up?"

"Not long," I replied, putting my pencil down. "I just need to go over the answers on my homework."

Leah is my name. Leah Warner. I'm thirteen, and I live just outside of the Saginaw city limits. It's a pretty cool city, and there's a lot of history here. Saginaw began in 1816 as a fur-trading post. The name 'Saginaw', like a lot of Michigan cities, is actually a Native American name. 'O-Sag-A-Nong' means 'land of the Sauks'. That's where the word 'Saginaw' comes from.

But after what was about to happen, you might call Saginaw the 'land of the spiders.'

I *hate* spiders. I absolutely *hate* them. I mean, I know that they serve their purpose and everything, by eating bugs and stuff, but spiders are just so . . . *gross*. They're fine if they leave me alone, but if I see one in my house, he's history.

Like the one that was climbing on my leg that morning.

Mom had just left the kitchen, and I returned to my homework. I had my nose in a book, and was double-checking the answers on my math paper. We were going to have a quiz today. Ug.

I felt a light tickling on my ankle, and I looked down.

It was a spider! Not a big one, mind you—but that didn't matter. It was a *spider*, and it was crawling on *me*. I about jumped out of my skin!

“Yaaaa!” I shrieked, dropping my pencil and smacking my leg with the palm of my hand. The awful bugger crushed under my hard slap, and, as I wiped him away, the tiny creature balled up and fell to the floor, dead.

“Eewww,” I moaned, staring down at the lifeless, crumpled-up spider on the floor.

Our dog, Grumpy, heard me scream, and he waddled into the room. Grumpy is a brown cocker spaniel. If you wake him up from a sleep, he lays on the ground and growls at you. Oh, he’d never bite you. He’s just grumpy – and that’s how he got his name. My older brother, Scott, found him as a puppy. We’ve had Grumpy for almost five years.

Grumpy walked over to me, sniffed the floor – *and ate the dead spider!*

“Eeeww! Grumpy!” I scolded, wincing. “That’s sick!” Grumpy wagged his tail, turned around, and bounded happily away.

Silly dog. I can’t believe he would actually eat a spider!

Of course, a lot of things were about to happen that I wouldn’t believe. Things that I wouldn’t have imagined in a million years.

Later that day, after school, I rode the bus home and sprinted to the front door of our house. We live on

Hamilton Street, and our house is only a mile from my school. Sometimes I ride my bike. Scott almost always rides his bike, except in the winter, so he usually makes it home before I do. The bus ride can be kind of long.

I burst through the door, my backpack in hand – and froze in horror.

There, on the living room floor, was a spider!
Not just a spider – but a tarantula!

2

A wave of terror shuddered through my body. The spider was huge, ugly, and *nasty*. It was the biggest spider I've ever seen! It was black and brown, and looked like it had fur all over its body. Two big, black eyes stared menacingly back at me. The spider was the most hideous, horrible creature I'd ever seen in my life.

Grumpy was there, his hackles raised and teeth bared. He was only a few feet away from the spider. He snarled and snapped, but he kept his distance from the enormous creature on the carpet.

My backpack fell to the floor, and my mouth opened wide. I tried to scream, but no sound would come out. My whole body shook.

Suddenly, the spider *moved!* One of his legs raised up slowly, and the spider inched toward me.

This was a nightmare! Worse . . . it was really happening! Oh, how I *wished* it was a nightmare. Then I could wake up!

But this wasn't any dream at all. There was a spider – a *huge* one – not five feet away from me!

Grumpy continued to snarl and bark, but he kept his distance. This was one spider he was *not* going to eat!

I stood there, unable to move, when I suddenly heard snickering coming from the hall. I saw a shadow move, then I heard more giggling.

Suddenly, Scott came into the living room wearing a mischievous grin. He walked right over to the spider . . . and picked it up!

“Like my pet?” he said, placing the spider in his palm.

Wait a minute, I thought. There's something kind of strange about that spider

Bravely, I took a step forward, my eyes focused on the ugly, dark creature in Scott's hand.

“Check it out,” he urged. “But be careful. He might bite you.”

Closer

"You goofball!" I suddenly cried. "That's not a *real spider!*"

And it wasn't! Now that I had a closer look, I could see that the spider wasn't real, after all. It was fake! A very *good* fake, at that. But it really looked like an *actual* spider!

"Cool, huh?" he said, still wearing a cat-like grin. "I bought it at the gag-gift store. It was on sale." He flipped it over in his hand, pointing to an on/off switch on the spider's belly. He clicked the switch off. "See? It's battery-operated."

"Yeah, real cool," I snapped. I punched him in the shoulder so hard that he dropped the toy spider.

"*Ouch!*" he exclaimed. "*That hurt!*" He bent over to pick up the spider.

"You deserved it!" I said angrily, storming past him. My anger boiled, and I stomped across the living room and into my bedroom, slamming the door behind me.

Brothers, I thought, shaking my head. *They should be illegal. Brothers should be against the law.*

But there was one thing that made me happy. Today was Thursday . . . and Scott would be leaving for band camp tomorrow morning. He'd be gone for two whole days! Hurray! Not only that, it was a 'teacher in-service' day, which meant we wouldn't have any school

Friday! I couldn't wait. Two whole days of peace and quiet. No Scott, no stupid pranks. Just me and Mom and Dad and Grumpy.

Peace and quiet.

Of course, peace and quiet was the *last* thing that I would have. I certainly didn't know it then, but soon, I would encounter spiders – real spiders – that were a hundred times bigger than the fake tarantula Scott had scared me with!

3

Friday morning, I slept in. The house was quiet until Scott woke up. He began racing around the house, looking for this and that, trying to pack all of his clothes at the last minute. As for me, I was snuggled in bed doing simple math in my head. I was counting the seconds until Scott would leave for band camp.

After he left, I made some toast and a cup of hot chocolate. The warm liquid tasted sweet and good. Mmmmmmm . . . I was feeling better already. Scott had only been gone five minutes, and I was already more relaxed. No pranks, no stupid jokes for two whole days. No dorky brother hanging around the house, bugging me.

Just Mom, Dad, Grumpy and myself.

Cool! I was in such a good mood that morning that I went for a walk in the park, just by myself, enjoying the day, taking my time, breathing in the fresh spring air.



When I returned, Mom and Dad had already left for work, so I found the hidden key to let myself in. We have a house key that we keep under a rock next to the porch, but don't tell anyone.

I found the key, unlocked the door, let myself in—and right away, I knew something was wrong. I could just *feel* it. I was overcome by a strange uneasiness that seeped into the pores of my skin.

What was it?

I stopped in the doorway, looking around the living room. Everything *looked* normal. Nothing was out of place. The house was silent, which wouldn't be unusual.

But it was *too* silent.

What was it? What was wrong?

And suddenly, I knew.

Grumpy. He always greets me at the door. He greets *everyone* at the door. He's usually at the door two seconds after he hears it open.

But not today.

"Grumpy?" I called out loudly, stepping into the living room. Maybe he was sleeping soundly, and hadn't heard me come home. I expected him to come running . . . but he didn't. The house was strangely quiet.

"Grumpy?" I hollered again, raising my voice even louder.

No dog. This was really weird.

I walked into the kitchen and found a yellow sticky-note on the fridge. It read:

Leah-

Your father and I will both be working late tonight . . . should be home around eight. Make yourself a sandwich for lunch. For dinner, there's some leftover lasagna in the refrigerator - just nuke it for a few minutes. Oh...I let Grumpy outside. Can you let him in when you get back from your walk? Call me at the office if you need anything. Love ya lots!

-Mom

So that was it. Grumpy was outside, in the backyard. I relaxed, and walked to the sliding glass door to let Grumpy in. Our back yard has a fence that goes all the way around it. Grumpy can run and play in our yard without wandering off.

But Grumpy was nowhere to be found! He wasn't in the backyard.

"Grumpy!" I shouted, my voice echoing out over the yard. "Come here, boy!"

Unseen birds chirped from trees, and I could hear the happy laughter of little kids in our neighbor's yard.

But no Grumpy. I looked around, and I suddenly realized what had happened.

Grumpy likes to dig holes. And today, he'd dug a hole right under the fence! Grumpy had run away!

Shoot, I thought. Once in a while, Grumpy gets out of the yard and wanders the neighborhood. He usually doesn't go too far, but we have to go look for him.

Which is what I would have to do. I couldn't bear the thought of Grumpy wandering into a road or a highway. I had to find him . . . *fast*.

But I wasn't going to search for him alone. I called Angela Meyer and Conner Karpinski, two of my

best friends. Both live only a few houses away. They rushed over to help me find Grumpy.

“Where did you see him last?” Conner asked, placing his hands on his hips and looking around the front yard. Conner is twelve, but he’s taller than I am. Actually, he’s the tallest kid in our grade. He’s got really blonde hair, the color of ripe corn.

“Well, I haven’t seen him since this morning,” I replied. “When I got home from a walk, he was gone. He’d dug a hole under the fence and crawled under it.”

“He can’t be far,” Angela offered hopefully. She sounded positive and optimistic. That’s one of the things I like about Angela: she always looks on the bright side of things. I’ve known Angela since the second grade. Her family came to the United States from a small town in South Africa. She tells me fascinating stories about what it was like to live there when she was younger.

We decided that, to find Grumpy quickly, we’d have to split up. I would go north and search a few blocks over, while Conner would go across the street and search some of the alleys and back streets.

Angela said she would go down near the old drainage ditch where the forest is really thick. It’s kind of a swampy area, with lots of trees and muck, and I’ve never hung around there much. Nobody does. There

are a lot of weird stories about the drainage ditch . . . crazy, bizarre stories. I've always ignored the stories, because they were too weird to be true.

But I've stayed away, just in case.

I searched and searched for nearly an hour without any luck. Conner hadn't spotted Grumpy, either, and we finally met up again at our house. We waited for Angela.

And we waited.

But Angela never came back. She never returned, which wasn't like Angela at all.

So we decided to go look for her . . . at the old drainage ditch a few blocks away.

And what we were about to encounter was the scariest, freakiest thing that had ever happened to me in my entire life.



The drainage ditch isn't far from where we live. Conner and I walked down the sidewalk, completely unaware of the terrible circumstances that were about to befall us.

"Where does Grumpy like to go when he runs off?" Conner asked.

"All over the place," I answered, rolling my eyes. "Grumpy just likes cruising around and checking things out."

We kept our eyes peeled as we walked, looking for signs of the dog. Once, I spotted a movement in a yard, but it was someone else's dog.

Soon, we came to the old drainage ditch—and right away, we should have known that something was wrong. The tall trees and thick brush seemed cold and lifeless. The whole area was dark and strange. Which was kind of odd, because the day was sunny and warm.

I cupped my hands around my mouth. “Angela!” I shouted into the forest. “Angela?!?!? Are you around here?!?!?”

No answer. Not a sound came from the dense, wooded thicket.

Conner and I jumped over the drainage ditch. It’s about three feet wide, and, three feet deep. When it rains, the ditch fills up with water and runs off. It hadn’t rained in several days, so today there wasn’t much water in the ditch at all.

I raised my hands and cupped them around my mouth. “Angela?!?!?” I called out again. “Where are you?”

As we approached the trees, we were enveloped by shade. The darkness seemed to swallow us up, and the air instantly grew colder. I couldn’t help feeling like we were walking into some strange world or something. It was a spooky sensation.

“Have you ever been here?” I asked Conner, looking around.

He shook his head. “Nope,” he replied. “I can think of better places to hang out.”

“Me too,” I said, staring up at a gnarled, old, oak tree. “But, I imagine, Grumpy would probably like playing around in the woods. I’ll bet he’s here somewhere.”

“He’s probably rolling around in the mud as we speak,” Conner said, smiling.

“Oh, don’t say that,” I grimaced. “Then I’ll have to give him a bath before Mom and Dad come home. I’ll have to—”

Conner suddenly grasped my arm.

“Shhhhhh,” he whispered.

We stopped walking and listened. In the distance, I could hear the rush of cars on the highway. A horn honked a long way off, and an airplane buzzed somewhere high overhead.

I slowly nodded my head closer to Conner. “*What is it?*” I asked quietly. “*What did you hear?*”

Conner paused a moment, then answered. “Well,” he said, a bit louder, “I guess it was nothing. I just thought that I heard something, that’s all. Something moving. It must have been my imagination.”

The problem was, it *wasn’t* his imagination, as we were about to find out.



The wooded area around the drainage ditch isn't very big. Sure, there are quite a few trees and shrubs in the small two-acre tract, but there really isn't any way you could get lost. In two minutes, you could walk through the woods and be back in the subdivision.

We walked along a dense path. I was becoming more and more worried by the minute. I was concerned about Grumpy, but I was more worried about Angela. It wasn't like her to just disappear like that.

"Do you think she went home?" Conner considered. "She doesn't seem to be anywhere around here." He stopped walking, and stood next to a big, dead tree stump. Blades of sunlight sliced through the trees, and I looked around. There wasn't any sign of Grumpy or Angela. Or anyone else, for that matter. No footprints, no sounds, nothing.

"No," I responded to Conner's question. "She would have told us. She wouldn't have gone home without letting us know."

Suddenly, a twig snapped on the other side of the stump. Conner jumped, and I did, too. Then I laughed.

"Gosh, we're both a bit jumpy in these woods," I said.

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But Conner didn't hear a single word I said. He took several quick steps backward, and I noticed that he was shaking.

"Conner?" I said. "Conner . . . what's wrong?"

He was really trembling now, and he was trying to speak – but no sound came from his lips. He raised his hand to point, and I could see his arm shaking badly.

"Conner?!?!?" I said again. I was worried. There was something wrong with him.

I looked at the stump he was pointing at, and a surge of horror hit me like a truck. My heart stopped. My skin crawled. My hair stood on end.

The 'stump' that Conner was pointing at was not a stump at all – *it was a spider!*

It was a living, moving, live spider, the size of a picnic table! It was black, and had long, sinewy legs. Glaring, shiny eyes, the size of bowling balls, focused intently on Conner and me. Two dagger-like fangs protruded from the spider's mouth.

And it *moved!* It began to move, slowly, cautiously, one leg at a time – toward us!!