

**Honorable Mention**  
**Kindred Spirits**  
*by Barbara Purbaugh*

They were in the butterfly exhibit. Angela was sitting still, letting the butterflies land on her, when her eight-year-old son interrupted that peaceful moment with an unbearable whine to go to the snake house.

Kristen shuddered. She hated snakes. Angela stood up, and all the beautiful butterflies flitted away.

As they trudged in the summer heat to the snake house, Kristen thought about her friend Angela's life. She had married Emmett Grady III, who was a condescending idiot, and they had produced Emmett Grady IV, whom they should have named Pugsley because he looked like the kid from the Addams family. Angela was sweet and kind, way too good for the Emmett Grady of the world, Kristen thought.

In the snake house, Pugsley was obnoxiously approaching every glass window and hissing at every snake. By the time they reached the end of the hallway, Kristen was panting from the heat and the sheer terror of all those snakes, slithering and hissing in their glass cages. I'll have nightmares for weeks, she thought. This can't get any worse.

"Can I hold the snake?" Pugsley screamed, extending the word snake into a high-pitched screech.

It just got worse, Kristen thought as she saw a zoo employee holding an enormous snake.

"Inside voice," Angela said as the zoo employee laid the snake gently on Pugsley's shoulders.

Please let it be a boa, Kristen thought. Not that she wanted him dead, just scared enough so he would be less obnoxious.

"Why did you come with us?" Angela asked.

Kristen was startled. "I wanted to spend time with you and Emmett." The Emmett part was a lie, but when your friends had kids, you always told that lie.

"You hate Emmett," Angela said accusingly.

“I don’t hate him,” Kristen lied.

“You think he’s a whiny spoiled brat who ruins everything.”

Kristen was shocked; Angela said it with such venom. Where was sweet, kind Angela? Kristen looked around the room at all the slithering creatures hiding in their fake habitats just waiting to strike.

“Kristen, one of the things I value most about our friendship is your honesty. You are always straightforward. People know where they stand with you.”

Kristen watched as the snake started to wrap itself around Pugsley’s neck.

She values me because she thinks I’m a bitch, Kristen thought with a cold realization. Kristen valued Angela’s friendship because she thought she could be herself with Angela. She didn’t need the armor of being a bitch. But maybe she was wrong.

The snake seemed to be tightening around Pugsley’s neck.

“Have I done something to make you think I hate Emmett?” Kristen asked.

“Please. It’s written all over your face. You’d rather be locked in here with snakes, which I know you are terrified of, than spend one minute with my child.”

Is she trying to pick a fight? Does she want me to say I hate her kid? Kristen thought.

Pugsley was making little whimpering sounds as the zoo employee tried to remove the snake from Pugsley’s neck.

“I’m not going to say I hate your kid,” Kristen stated.

“But you do,” Angela said.

Under normal circumstances, Kristen would have said something like “I like him, but you know I’m not a kid person.”

But right now, she had no idea who this Angela was or what she wanted to hear.

There seemed to be a real struggle between the snake and the zoo employee. Pugsley’s face was turning red, and he look terrified.

“Angela, I think Emmett might be in trouble.”

Angela pulled out her phone. “I’ll just get a pic for my Instagram account. I’m sure the zookeeper has it under control. Besides, you don’t really care anyway.”

The zoo employee looked terrified, too.

“Uh, Angela, could we table whatever this is?” Kristen gestured between the two of them.  
“And maybe you could go help your kid.”

“Oh, you don’t even like him, and now you want to tell me how to raise him.”

Pugsley was decidedly purple now.

“No, I want you to save him. He’s being choked by a giant snake.”

“He’s fine,” Angela said. “I have a maternal instinct. I would know if he was in trouble.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I’ll have to touch the damn snake, Kristen thought as she ran toward the kid.

“What the hell?” Kristen said to the zoo employee.

“I can’t get it off of him.” The employee was clearly panicking.

“Use your walkie-talkie to call for help,” Kristen said.

The employee said something into his walkie-talkie.

Kristen reached out and with all her strength yanked the snake off Pugsley’s neck and tossed it across the floor. Other visitors screamed and scattered as the snake slithered away undamaged.

Pugsley was crying hysterically, and suddenly Angela was there comforting him.

Kristen noticed she hadn’t put down the phone. Had she almost let him be suffocated by a snake for an Instagram moment?

Pugsley seemed to be calming down. He looked at Kristen and his eyes said it all. This was a kid who already knew what Kristen was just beginning to understand. All those horrible things Angela had tried to force her to say were how Angela really felt about her own kid. Angela was not lightness or kindness or butterfly sweetness. She was a snake in the grass.

Kristen looked at the snakes around her. Nope, that wasn’t the right description. Snakes never lied about who they were. They were dangerous and venomous, but you always knew where you stood with a snake.

Angela was now crying dramatically and yelling at the zoo employees, all while holding her phone.

Kristen turned to leave. As she walked out of the snake house, she looked at each of the snakes. We are kindred spirits, she thought.

**Author Bio:** Barbara Purbaugh is an academic advisor living in South Bend, Indiana. Her first book, *Crossties*, is available for purchase from Amazon and Barnes & Noble. For more information, contact her at [www.barbarapurbaugh.com](http://www.barbarapurbaugh.com).