

# *The Great Duvet Mystery*

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Edited extract from a national newspaper, February 2020:

## Mystery of 29 Snakes left at Fire Station

A mystery involving 29 snakes left at a fire station remains unsolved.

In the early hours of February 13, 2020, fifteen royal pythons were left at a fire station in Sunderland. They were wrapped in a Buzz Lightyear duvet cover. The RSPCA was called and the snakes removed to safety. Then, twenty-four hours later, fourteen corn snakes were left at the same spot, this time in two matching pillowcases.

The Fire Chief said: 'We are used to other animals being dumped. This happens all the time but snakes? But really, it is the number which confuses me. Most people have one snake or one lizard, nowhere near the number we collected. Why so many?'

Various theories have been followed up by the Police without conclusion.

The snakes are being cared for by the North East Reptile Rescue centre whose spokesman said: 'Some people have suggested they were dumped by a pet shop but why? These beautiful animals are valuable and they make excellent pets. In any case, the reptile loving community is quite small and we would soon learn who dumped them. This is one of the oddest mysteries we have ever come across.'

The public have been invited to help but so far, silence reigns. The snakes are keeping their secret safe.

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The old Transit van crept forward slowly. Its lights were out. The low burble from the engine was hardly audible. It was after midnight. The two sisters were wearing black boilersuits and balaclavas. Jenny, the older one, the driver, had blanked out the registration plates front and back with duct tape. This was a planned operation, timed to the minute. Frieda, the younger one, had once been married to the stationmaster and knew the fire station's routines.

Jenny backed up the van. Frieda, wearing latex gloves, hauled the Buzz Lightyear duvet cover towards her. The mouth of the make-shift sack was sealed with a cable tie but the material was breathable. The cover was a from a charity shop located in Carlisle, on the other side of the country, part of an anonymous batch bought for the purpose. Together they lowered the precious bundle onto a large, rusty wheelbarrow retrieved from the rubbish heap at Frieda's allotments. The wheel was wonky and the tyre was soft. Frieda pulled while Jenny pushed. The fire station was in standby mode, the lighting reduced to save energy. Jenny bummed open the side door and together they eased the make-shift sack from the wheelbarrow onto the floor. Together they hauled the sack close to the radiator. Frieda wound up the kiddies' toy timer and placed it beside the inner pass door to the duty office beyond.

Twenty minutes later, after a detour to dump the wheelbarrow back at her allotments, Inspector Frieda Hanson was dropped off at her apartment block and took the lift to her top floor flat. Standing in the darkness of her bedroom, she used her binoculars to study the fire station. She checked her watch.

Inside the fire station the toy emitted an ear-splitting mee-maw sound, bringing the shift running to investigate.

Frieda watched as the fire station sprang to life. She kept watching. The local police arrived. She recognised Sergeant Phoebe Kilroy and PC Anya Duffy get out of their patrol car. She smiled, imagining their reaction when shown the snakes. Frieda made herself a strong black coffee and returned to watch. The RSPCA van arrived and, after a short delay, she saw it drive off with a large trunk in the boot.

She decided to risk it and called HQ.

Frieda recognised Bertie Brownie's voice.

'Hi, Bertie, sorry to be nosey but I was up for a pee and saw the fire station lit up like a Christmas tree, what gives?'

She listened, almost whooped with joy.

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'No, my ski trip was cancelled. I've re-booked for next month so I'll be back in the office the day after tomorrow, ok? But do ring me if anything else exotic turns up. Mind you, I guess it'll be hard to top 15 Royal Pythons, eh?'

Jenny, was grumpy, annoyed to be roused from her slumbers.

'Hi, sis. It worked,' said Frieda. 'They're safe and sound at last.'

'Wonderful. Just leave me out of your next rescue mission please. God, that one with the tiger cubs still gives me nightmares. Cubs? They were bloody fully grown!'

'Actually, Jenny, I do have one last favour to ask.'

'NO!'

The line went dead.

The next evening, in a copy-cat of the python rescue, a second consignment comprising 14 corn snakes was placed beside the radiator in the fire station.

In a press release Inspector Frieda Hansom advised both donations of snakes had been taken into care by North East Reptile Rescue.

When quizzed on a local radio phone-in programme she responded:

*Frieda: Sorry, but despite extensive enquiries we have so far drawn a blank. We welcome help from the public.*

*Caller: I've heard these snakes are bred for their skins, to make bikinis and thongs for lap dancers?*

*Frieda: This is news to me. If you have any leads, let me know, please. Exploitation of any of God's creatures is despicable.*