

FISHING FOR LUCK

by Murray Richter

CHAPTER 1

“Will it survive an attack from a forty-pound catfish?” I asked, eyeing the massive wooden raft in my best friend Preech’s front yard.

He laughed. “You bet, Kev. I used the finest lumber I could find at the dump and painted each board thirteen times before screwin’ ’em together.”

“What about snakes?”

Preech tapped the sharpened broomsticks poking out from the sides of the raft, which was about the size of four teachers’ desks combined. “Check those out. By my calculations, there’s no way the slithering serpents can make it past that kind of defense.”

I touched one of the points and checked my finger for blood. “Excellent. What’s that in the middle?”

“Trap door.”

“What for?”

“In case a flock of bloodthirsty parakeets or rabid bats attack and try to rip us to pieces. Now we’ve got an escape route.”

“Awesome. You thought of everything.” I gave him a high five. “This’ll be the best spring break ever.”

“I hope so.” Preech scratched his chin. “The only worry I’ve got is if it’ll carry us back from the island once we load up with a bunch of whoppers.”

“Thanks again, amigo. Gotta be tons of fish out there,” I tried to stop a yawn, but couldn’t.

His eyebrows shot up and down. “What’s the matter? Couldn’t sleep knowing you’ll probably be the first seventh grader ever to catch a state-record catfish?”

“Nah, I wish. My folks were fighting again last night. Got so loud, it upset Milly. I can’t remember how many books I had to read before she finally crashed.”

Milly was my little sister and had two speeds: asleep and a hundred miles an hour.

“Why were they fighting?” Preech asked.

“Dude, I don’t know. Got a weird feeling it’s something I did.”

“How could it be you? Did you ask them what’s up?”

“No way,” I said shaking my head, thinking how extremely uncomfortable I got talking to grown-ups about that kind of stuff. Like licking my own elbow, dancing in front of anyone, or swimming up a waterfall—never gonna happen.

“Why not? May be something totally different.” He spread his arms out at the neat piles of sprockets, gizmos, tubes, and what appeared to be robot guts scattered around his yard. I figured he had everything he needed to build a rocket to Mars. And if anyone could, Preech was the guy. “I just don’t have a lot of time for drama like that,” Preech said. “What keeps me busy are my inventions and thinking up new ways to prank Rudy.” He looked at his watch. “Who’s late, by the way.”

I checked mine. “Huh, he’s never late.”

Preech shrugged. “That knucklehead probably found something dead and spent the last half hour poking it with a stick.” He snapped his fingers. “Think I’ll give the wagon wheels one last greasing with the brand-new super-grease I invented.”

Three little red wagons squatted under the raft. “What happened to the handles?”

Preech jogged to the garage. “Took ’em off for a place to tie off on our bikes.”

I pulled on the rope that crisscrossed the raft and secured it to the wagons, it was so tight it snapped when I let go. Preech returned with a coffee can full of goop the color of blended catfish skins. He grabbed a stick off the ground to stir the gooey concoction and climbed under the raft.

I pinched my nose shut as a sharp chemical twang filled the yard. “What’s in that?”

“A highly volatile mixture of every grease we had, plus some goose grease, baby oil, some of my mom’s face cream, butter, and anything else slippery I could find.” His head popped out from under the raft. “Remember when The Oracle taught us to shoot bows and arrows?”

The Oracle was Preech’s uncle Oliver, a name we gave him because he was quite possibly the smartest and coolest guy on the planet. But we never called him that to his face. Even though the name sounded respectful, we’d never do anything to disrespect a real-life Army hero.

“Yep.”

Preech slid his finger down the side of his nose. “And remember he showed us there’s always a little grease here to put on the bow rest to keep from making noise when you pull the arrow back?”

I nodded.

“Well, I’ve been scraping mine off every night for a month and mixed some in there, too. This could be the slickest stuff on the planet.” He disappeared back under the raft.

“Excellent,” I said. “Did The Oracle come back from Germany?”

“Got in last night.”

“Any luck finding her?”

“Nope.” Preech’s muffled voice floated up from under the raft. “Three trips over there so far and still no luck. What amazes me is that a few months ago, he didn’t even know she was alive. That he still had a wife after all these years. Man, war sure can mess things up.”

“We’re heading to his place tomorrow, right?” A tingle of excitement rippled through me. I loved everything about The Oracle’s ranch, except for Pele, the donkey. That evil beast could kick somebody into next month.

“Yep. And he said there may be some good news about our lucky rocks.”

I dug mine out of my pocket. “If these turn out to be real diamonds, what are you gonna do with the cash?”

He laughed. “Got some epic ideas for pranks on Rudy that’ll be costly, but definitely worth the money. And I’d like to finance a trip back to Florida and dive that shipwreck again. Think I saw a bunch more lucky rocks scattered around, right before that gargantuan shark cut our time short. What would you buy?”

Pictures of a real-live fishing boat and new rods and reels floated around my head, but disappeared when I thought about my parents. Their fight was definitely about money. Would I have to give them some? All of it, maybe?

“Not sure yet,” I said. “It’ll be good to see The Oracle again. It’s always fun at his place.”

“Heck yeah,” answered Preech. “Hey, you should ask him what to do about your folks.”

“I don’t know. Wouldn’t want to drag him into anything.”

“If anyone can help, he can. And like he says, ‘Things aren’t always as they appear.’”

I slid the sparkly stone back into my pocket. “We’ll see.”

“Ready to rock and roll.” Preech wiggled out from under the raft, stuck the stick in the grease, and jogged to the garage.

My other best friend, Rudy, came flying down the street, pumping his pedals like a pack of wolves was after him. He came to a screeching sideways stop, creating a long, black, swooping skid mark on the driveway shaped like a giant fishhook. Rudy wiped the sweat off his forehead on his shirt sleeve.

“Morning, Big Cat,” I said.

“Morning, Kev. Sorry I’m late. Where’s Dog Breath?”

“I’m in the garage, you big galoot. Just like a blister, you show up when all the work’s done. I was five minutes away from seeing if Kev wanted to head to the pond without you so we could—” As Preech walked out, he glanced at Rudy and started laughing so hard he had to bend over to catch his breath. “What’s up with your hair? Ride your bike through a car wash?”

Rudy licked his palm and ran it over his head. “Aww man, nope. Didn’t have time to shower. Me and Mom were watching the news.” His eyes bugged out. “Did y’all hear?”

Preech smiled. “That the circus is back in town? And they picked you for the freak show?”

“No, Weasel Face. They were taking a busload of prisoners from here to a different jail, and the bus drove off the bridge into the river.” Rudy smacked his palm with his fist. “Hit so hard the bus split open like a banana. Found all but a couple of the bodies. Said they probably got washed down-river and are fish food by now.”

Rudy’s head swiveled back and forth from me to Preech. “I kept watching to see if they’d name names of people on the bus, but they didn’t.”

The spit in my mouth dried up. “Y’all think Ted was on the bus?”

Rudy nodded. “Yep. Never thought I’d have to think about the meanest stepdad in the history of stepdads ever again, but the guy on the news said all the prisoners were on board.”

We didn't blink or breathe for a whole minute. Pictures zipped through my head: Ted screaming at Rudy, my lucky rock slicing his head open, and the police throwing Ted into their cruiser.

Preech waved his hands in the air. "I read somewhere that 86.7 percent of what people worry about never even happens."

I gulped. "You know, I've always wondered if he'd bust out and come after me for nailing him."

Rudy shrugged. "Wasn't like he was on his way to being an underwear model or anything. That gash probably made him look better."

Preech wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "C'mon, guys, gotta be a sixty-foot drop from that bridge. No way anyone survived. And I'm not going to let some what-ifs ruin the day that we're gonna catch some monsters. People will forever remember the year 1980 and will weep and gnash their teeth that bigger fish will never be caught."

Rudy's stomach growled so loud I jumped. "Man, forgot breakfast too. Y'all got any chow?"

Preech shook his head. "All you do is eat. I might have peanuts or something in my backpack."

Rudy puffed out his chest. "All I do is eat because I'm gonna grow up and be super strong and fast. You know, a man's man, like Paul Bunyan, or the Flash."

Preech hooked his thumb at me. "Nobody can run as fast as Kev did the day Milly broke her arm and he ran her to the hospital. The dude only had a block head start, and I still couldn't catch him on my bike."

"Crazy day," I said.

Rudy whistled and rubbed the raft. "Looks cool. Will it float?"

"Yes, Brainless Wonder. And take a full-on assault from a gator if there are any in the pond. Daylight's a burnin', so we gotta get the show on the road if we're going to have any time to fish the island."

Preech ran back into the garage, and came back with a pool cue. "Last thing we've got to do is make the pull ropes. They have to be the *exact* same length."

He laid the stick on the ground, looped the rope two times next to it, and took his pocket knife out of his backpack. After cutting the pieces, Preech stood up, held them next to each other, and nodded. "Pull your bikes over there and I'll tie one end to a wagon and the other under your bike seat."

Rudy laughed. "Something's been bugging me about your bike. I just figured out that there's not a pile of junk pokin' out all around it. Looks naked."

Preech let out a long breath as he climbed under the raft. "Well, El Dunderhead, I have meticulously combed over every piece of this plan. I don't want anything messing up Kev's chance of catching the biggest catfish in Texas today."

"Thanks, bro. What can I do to help?"

"Just put your bike on the left, or port side, Rudy's bike in the middle, and mine on the right, or starboard side. Hey, did y'all know the starboard side is on the right because that was the side the plank was normally on pirate ships? Astronomers would also use it to get away from the candlelight on the boat to study stars and stuff."

Rudy grinned at me and rolled his eyes. “Whatever, Word Nerd. Didn’t you say we gotta boogie?”

“Done,” Preech said. He climbed out from under the raft, tied off our bikes, and jumped on his. “Let’s roll.”

My leg muscles burned and the wagon wheels squealed in protest as the massive wooden beast lurched forward and followed us out of the yard.

“Awesome,” said Preech. “Let’s move at the same pace, and we should have plenty of time to figure out how to get to the island.”

Rudy pumped his pedals. “Figure out how to get to the island?”

“Well, I didn’t have time to carve any paddles, so we can cut some cane to use as push poles to—” Preech’s head whipped around to look at the raft. “Aww, man. I forgot all of our gear and stuff. We gotta go back.”

“Smooth move, Ex-Lax.” Rudy stopped pedaling.

“Great Caesar’s ghost!” Preech yelled. “Don’t do that; don’t stop pedaling. Oh man, oh man, I just realized a major hole in my plan.” The color drained out of Preech’s face, and his eyelid geared up for maximum twitch mode: a sure sign he was about to freak out.

I pointed to where the street ended. “No problem, buddy. We’ll stop up there, unhook the raft, and go back and grab everything.”

“That’s the problem,” croaked Preech. “We can’t...we can’t stop. We literally cannot stop. If we do, we’ll be skewered like shish-kabobs!”