

CHAPTER



This is what you do with a kid brother who drives you nuts most of the time and then specifically drives you nuts by catching the biggest bass ever taken out of the Jamesville River. You get him to fish in a mud puddle.

The idea hit me at roughly 10:04 A.M. that summer morning as the three of us—Mike Andrews, Ralphy Zee, and me, Ricky Kidd—watched along the bank while my six-year-old brother, Joel, struggled to carry the bass with both hands. Its tail fin hung low enough to rub the top of his sneakers.

“I can’t believe it,” Mike muttered with disgust as he kicked a rock into the slow-moving water of the Jamesville River. “I just can’t believe it.”

Mike was the one who had laughed at Joel’s toy fishing rod.

Ralphy replayed the catch with admiration in his voice. “First of all, the kid manages to track us down to our secret spot. Even with our fancy dodge out the back of Jim’s Pizza House. Scares Ricky into losing the only fish he’s had in two days. Borrows the half-drowned worm Mike had used for half an hour. Then, wham! Hooks a monster and fights it for fifteen minutes without saying a word. And just when it’s about to slip away, the kid wades in and grabs the monster by the gills. What a fish! I’ll say it again.” Ralphy whistled. “What a fi—”

“Spare us, okay?” Mike kicked another rock into the river. “We’re a miserable bunch of twelve-year-olds to let ourselves be outfished by someone his size.”

Joel worked his way up the grassy bank to where he had left his teddy bear.

Up to that point, I hadn’t said a word. I was still trying to recover from the tap on my shoulder that had nearly sent me vaulting into the river. But then, Joel usually does that to me.

He’s like a personal ghost, the way he follows me everywhere. It seems he can get through locked doors and closed windows. Joel never says much when you do manage to spot him, just stares and watches. He disappears as soon as you turn your head and then reappears when you least expect it. Which is mostly when you’re doing something you shouldn’t. Those are the times I faint or have heart attacks or fall into disaster. I also have a baby sister named Rachel; I dread the day that she might be old enough to do the same.

All I could say was “See if he manages to do this to us in San Diego.”

Mike grinned. “That’s right, pal. Only one day left and then Southern California and sunny beaches. And no Joel. He can fish here every day for all I care.”

That’s the moment the idea hit me. “Maybe,” I whispered slowly, “just maybe there’s a way we can convince him to fish somewhere else.”

Joel, above us on the bank, was showing the fish to his bear.

I turned to Ralphy. “How much money do you have on you?”



Half an hour later, after his detour to the grocery store, Ralphy met us in downtown Jamesville on the Memorial Park Bridge. Mike and I still carried all our fishing gear. A small creek ran beneath us on its way to the river. The park around the bridge was mainly scattered

benches, clumps of small trees, and short groomed grass overlooked by City Hall and the town library. More important, for us anyway, was the tiny pond almost within the shadows of City Hall.

“Ralphy,” Mike hissed, “Joel could be watching as we speak. Hide the bag!”

“But it stinks.”

“So does leaving our secret fishing spot in that little twerp’s hands while we’re gone to San Diego. You want him to empty the entire river of bass while we’re gone?”

Ralphy shoved the bag under his shirt.

We sauntered the last fifty yards to the pond. I had no doubt that Joel—teddy bear, huge bass, and toy fishing rod included—had managed to follow us this far.

Now came the tricky part.

“Okay, Ralphy, bend over and drop the bag at the edge of the pond,” I said quietly. “We can’t allow Joel to see this.”

As Ralphy slid the bag from his shirt, I surveyed the pond with satisfaction. *Perfect*, I told myself. *It’s a glorified mud puddle.*

The pond was murky black, about the size of a basketball court, with a tired, mildewed marble mermaid water fountain that dribbled day and night. Green scum caked the pond’s edges.

Within seconds Mike and Ralphy were ready.

“Will it sink?” I asked.

Ralphy studied it carefully. “I think so. After all, the density of its mass must be greater than that of water, and accordingly—”

“Knock it off, Einstein,” Mike said. “It’s big and frozen. Not warm and bloated. And I just jammed some rocks inside the belly. Don’t worry, Ricky, it’ll sink.”

With that, Mike threw the frozen halibut into the center of the pond. One quick splash and it was gone.

Ralphy stared, almost mournfully, at the nylon line that ran from the fast-sinking halibut to the tip of Mike’s fishing rod.

“Sixteen bucks that fish cost us—five dollars and thirty-three-and-a-third cents apiece. I hope it’s worth it.”

“That depends”—I grinned—“on the kind of fight it gives Mike.”

“Shhhh!” Mike nodded his head at a shadow approaching from behind me. By the time Joel arrived, Ralphy and I also had our lines in the water.

For once, I was ready for Joel’s deathly quiet tap on the back of my shoulder. But when it came, I still jumped and landed with my ribs clutched in panic. After all, Joel needed to believe this was a normal situation.

“I’ll get another fish here,” he said proudly, ignoring, as usual, any terror he might have caused.

To follow us, he had tied his precious teddy bear to the end of his fishing rod and carried that with his left hand. In his right hand, he held a thick, forked stick that leaned back against his shoulder like a parade soldier’s rifle. At the top of the stick, and hanging down Joel’s back from the fork, was his large bass, hoisted through the gills.

We watched in fascination as he unloaded himself. First the stick, which he jabbed into the soft ground at the edge of the pond. The bass hung there in the cool morning air, making the three of us itch with envy.

Then, gently, Joel untied his teddy bear from the fishing line. He set it on the grass. Finally, he reached into his pocket and dug out the remains of the worm he had borrowed from Mike to catch the bass. He squinted to get it on the hook, then flipped his hook and line into the pond and sighed happily.

“Swim to them fish, worm,” he said shyly to the water.

Joel doesn’t say much. Not because he doesn’t know the words. He can read better than most kids his age. But he mispronounces words once in a while, so he says as little as possible. And by nature he’s quiet anyway. Most ghosts are. Plus he’s got this weird thing about his teddy bear.

I wanted to tell Joel right then that worms don’t swim, especially squished ones, but he had the heavy bass beside him and I didn’t.

Mike raised an eyebrow at me quizzically.

I nodded slightly in return.

“Whooooaaaaa!!!” Mike shouted. “Whooooaaaaa baby!!!”

He pulled hard on his rod and whipped the tip frantically. The

weight of the dead halibut arched his entire fishing rod nicely. By reeling hard and then slipping the drag and reeling hard and slipping the drag and shouting and jumping and whipping his fishing rod, Mike managed to make it an exciting fight. He carried on for five minutes.

When Mike finally hauled the fish close to shore, Ralphy—who had lost the coin flip earlier—waded into the pond and thrashed with the halibut, churning water and mud.

“It’s a monster, Ricky,” he shouted. “Get the bag quick!”

I jumped for the green garbage bag Ralphy had used earlier to carry the halibut.

We fumbled and bobbed the halibut a few times before dropping it into the plastic. Mike grabbed the bag, wrapped it around the fish, then dashed up the bank and quickly slammed the bag into the ground a half dozen times.

“It’s a fighter,” Mike shouted. “But I think this should quiet him down!”

He sat down and panted. Ralphy climbed onto the bank and shook the water from his clothes. I peeked at Joel.

He was still at the edge of the bank, hunched over his fishing rod. From there, he stared at the bag at Mike’s feet in awe. Then Joel jutted his jaw forward and turned to glare at the pond with new determination.

Hah! I told myself. We got him! Hook, line, and sinker. He’ll never leave this pond until he catches a fish that big. Which will be forever. Hah, hah—

That’s when fat Mayor Thorpe appeared at the top of the bank, pin-striped suit bulging from his belly. He carried a fishing rod and tackle box.

“Boys,” he boomed, “I keep this gear in my office all the time. I saw the monster you hooked. I hope you don’t mind my joining in on the action.”