

Live Caught

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CHAPTER 1

A MAN'S LEGS APPEAR NOT THREE FEET from Lenny's face. Slick, flat fish hang vertically one after the other against one leg, their green bronze scales painted in downward streaks of blood from mouths gaffed by a rusted stringer. The man's knees and elbows fold downward and slowly collapse into a skinny squat beside where Lenny is wedged under the dock. The chained fish splat into the mud. Jingle jingle.

"Son?" Grizzled face.

The man reaches toward him, slowly, then snatches his hands away. Claps them three times. Goes still.

Lenny realizes the man thinks he's wide-eyed dead. He stares at the scrawny mess beside him, old-old, his loose and careless face unshaven, maybe dodging the razor's edge for weeks.

Homeless, Lenny will take a guess. And day-old drunk. Well, who else would be mucking along deserted shorelines and busted boat landings?

Lenny can't pull off dead much longer. For starters, if he waits much longer, there's not going to be any need to pretend.

He's already bone cold, unable to unclench any muscle. All of a night and most of a morning now he's been swamped here on his back, not by the speed boats as he'd predicted, but goddamn swallowed by a storm-enraged Lake Norman, his boat disappearing beneath him just before he was spit to shore to battle the mud sucking at his back and the weight of a collapsed dock post on his chest, sinking him deeper. He's dreamed his rescue twice, perfectly. It actually happened. Then it didn't. So maybe he's dreaming now, who knows? Maybe he's already silt. His missing lower arm, goddamn untrusty ex-friend, still feels like it's there. Just loves faking him out. So maybe it's somehow jinxed the rest of his body to disappear like it had disappeared. His whole body gone missing. Except for his tongue, his gritty and caked tongue. And his eyes. Held wide open by the grit. And of course, his ears still echoing out his pulse.

This old smudge swaying beside him in the lake, about two staggers away from face down, might be the only human to drift his way today.

So, exactly one week after finally escaping the family farm, it appears he's caught again.

Lenny's mind drifts as taste buds announce themselves. Mud and blood, metallic and lime, all confusion in his mouth. He considers swallowing it, decides against it, then regrets the trickling out the sides of his mouth.

A fish that won't hit, might just hit in a storm, Buddo.

His dad's chatter, always rattling around inside Lenny's head.

Aren't those days supposed to be over? Isn't that one of the reasons he ran away? Or, paddled away? To get away from his dad's things-always-turn-out-right talk?

Nothing ever turned out right back at the farm. Nothing. What his dad would never understand is that you can't wish things right.

Still, sliding into Lake Norman on his skiff last night, bone hungry, he'd listened up.

Fish might bite in a storm, son. He'd let those words fool him into pushing back out onto the gray, rumbling water just before the storm blacked everything from shore to shore. All for a fish that might, or might not, hit bait in a storm.

Hunting for his dad's goddamn luck.

Buddo, keep watching, cause luck never really runs out.

Lenny watches the old man squatting in the mud beside him.

Green, green eyes, bright like the shield of dragonfly wings, sobering up, hovering out there in the flinty midday sun. Homing in on Lenny. Among a field of bristles, the old man's lips part. Wet, crazy young lips mingling with the rest of his dried apple face.

More muck leaks out Lenny's mouth. He guesses, if he were honest about it, seriously honest, he had been lucky. Yep, there's really no doubting it. To have landed last night under the collapsed dock with his head above water, instead of under, warm summer water instead of cold like it could've been. That's certainly not unlucky. And, hell, for the storm to kick him in the direction of land at all, sheer dumb-ass luck. Even wedged up under the pilings, chest caught under the anchor post, legs tangled in partially submerged, sickly yellowed fish netting, well, he was still breathing. You gotta hand that to the luck gods.

Lenny stares at the washed-up geezer.

Lucky or unlucky? Well, he has a choice.

Lenny forces his eyes to blink against the grit. Then, when the codger doesn't seem to notice, and even though it's like sandpapering the underside of his lids, he blinks a couple of more times.

The old guy peers in closer, hunching there beside the dock. Then blinks three exaggerated blinks back.

A freaking mimic. Lenny waits.

“Taint-ass sweet mother a god,” the grizzled codger whispers, shifting in the muck. Jingle jingle. One of the fish on the stringer gives a wavy-tailed flop, lands itself on the old man’s bare foot.

Lenny slowly flaps his eyes twice more. Just for assurance. Just to make sure they both understand.

“Sweet mother a god. Sweet motherfucker. Son?”

The old man again stretches his deeply veined hands toward Lenny, and this time one of them reaches Lenny’s shoulder. Lenny tries to remember the last time someone reached to touch him. Had his mom touched him on Sunday, the day he left home for good? Maybe during church? One week, and he can’t remember. But it would’ve been an accident, anyway. If she’d have touched him, it would’ve scared her, and he would for sure remember that. So, no. And certainly not his dad nor his brothers. Nothing on purpose, anyway. He would remember.

Maybe Glenna. Sure, Glenna. But that had ended so badly you couldn’t count it.

The old man’s hand is firm, warm. Then gone, just like that. Reaching for where the piling presses its weight along Lenny’s chest. The young lips part the ancient bristles.

“You’re screwed around the axel worse than a pecker without a pecker hole.”

The old man straightens to his knees, draws his elbows and face back up and out of sight above the pilings, leaving Lenny with only the legs and the jingling stringer of fish, and like those fish, some small scrap of hope. Lenny wills the old guy’s voice to hold the connection that was lost when the warmth of his veined fingers slipped from his shoulder.

“No worries, no worries-worries,” the old man mutters from above. “We are just finding things today. Finding things a the utmost interest. A who-knew-Jesus interest. But we will set

all things crooked straight. All things. Among other things. No worries.”

The bowed legs and the fish jingle away.

Lenny lifts his head to call out, or at least to position himself to keep the fish in sight, but his lungs go another direction, suck in silt-air and he gags a thick drain down the long side of his throat, backwards through his nose. His neck won't hold the weight of his reamed-out brain, his tongue won't let words pass.

Most of a week he'd rowed. Cold stinging sweat dripping into his eyes, he'd imagined monster river boats, their power motors bearing down on him, headlights bright, though that made no sense. Not in such a narrow waterway. Still, he'd dreamed up police fierce and impatient, waiting along the shore at every bend in the river. All week, visions of his mom, not understanding, irritated, and too distracted trying to keep her irritation under wraps, control, control, she could barely manage that on her best days, would she try to find a way to understand? And his dad, perplexed, worried maybe, possibly, but curiosity king almighty over anything else he might feel.

Concentrate. Row.

But his parents asking their endless questions broke through.

Why? No that wasn't right. Neither one of them ever asked him why.

What? Just what do you think you were doing?

Nope, that wouldn't work either. Too concrete, steering too close to getting a true answer from him. They didn't want true. True would kill them.

How? Let's try that one. His mom first.

How could you do this to me? You can never, never understand, you've cut deep, little one, deep.

Yep. That fits. Nothing he can say to that.

And his dad. *How, Buddo? How did you figure the rapids? Hell, those rapids just before you hit Gorge Bridge? Deadly, son, deadly. How did you figure that—in the dark?*

Well, sure, he'd portaged the goddamn rapids—but totally beside the point.

All night he'd imagined his parents paying their drifty attention, not to him, but to how he messed with them. How he got to circling their heads like summer gnats.

And him finally, finally—a total stoner dream on his part, nope, never going to happen—him explaining so that they could listen. So, they would get it. Finally, he could make them understand. He could tell them something true, and they would nod, and they would say *yes, yes, we see that now, you've been fighting for your life all these years, yes, your brothers, Jude, and even Frank, yes we should have paid more attention to your brothers.*

Those thoughts, all of them, bundle them up and toss them in the river too. Because what if they'd finally understood?

Now *that* scared the shit out of him. Home, it scared the shit out of him. He could not let those hopes come true. He could not go back home.

Concentrate. Row.

He'd been lucky.

Lucky to escape.

Lucky to make it through that first night, to see morning light stalk the misty river bank. Lucky to find safe enough coves, hide the skiff, sleep the days, paddle the nights until he hit Lake Norman. He'd made it halfway to the Atlantic, by god.

Paddling into Lake Norman, Lenny had lifted his oars, let the skiff glide through a deep pool, and scanned the dusk for a place to rest. His stump strap was holding. Both upper arms were quaking, but they were equally quaking. At least there was that. One

shoulder, really, just as good as the other.

That was the thought he'd hung onto as he turned the skiff toward shore.

His stump and his arm, one just as good as the other.

A deep silence settles over the pilings, except for the gentle lapping of water.

He goddamn dreamed up the green-eyed geezer. Dreamed up another rescue. Number three of the morning, a morning full of boats spouting wakes that ran up his chest, big boats hemorrhaging water up and over his head. The mud swirling, water flooding up his nose, stopping up his ears, sheer choking terror, submerged panic that the dock pilings would shift, hold him under forever.

You couldn't just find your thought hole and dive into it. You had to stay alert. You had to tell yourself, mental yourself into believing, it's not the ocean, it's not a goddamn *rising* tide. No. He can figure the timing, hold his breath between waves of terror, ignore the mud building up under his head, tell himself he's not wearing out, no he's not wearing out, not choking, not gagging, he can shake caked muck from his nose, his eyes, his mouth. Make a game of it. Estimate how many more wakes it will take for the backwash from the bank to start sliding over his hair, over his forehead. Testing, testing whether the numbness in his legs, his arm, his stump, has completed its work.

Shit, would he know when he's dead?

Lenny pushes hope back down into the muck, like the rest of him, but it just won't go. It's too much like drowning your last friend. Or more like your enemy. Even if you could, even if the possibility sits right there at your fingertips, you just won't do it. Besides, could the old man possibly be a dream? Would Lenny have ever put "taint" and "Jesus" in the same sentence?

But if he's not dreaming, what a whacked out, unlucky way

to die. Even for a kid who's been hung by the neck, who's been rolled off a freaking barn roof resulting in half an arm being sawed off. And just as he was starting his first solo and therefore his best adventure.

A long, splintered plank drops into the muck beside Lenny.

"Anything broke-broke down in here?"

The old man's legs reappear, fishless this time, because wouldn't you hang your slimy catch right back in the water to keep it fresh? To keep it alive?

The ridge-lined face drops low as the old man again squats below dock. Green dazzle eyes run from Lenny's head to his toes then back.

"I say, Mister Dead Dick, anything broke?"

Would Lenny call himself "Mr. Dead Dick?"

Lenny gathers his strength, because *getting it over with* was the one thing that three years without a lower right arm had taught him, you gotta do it early because you just absolutely cannot take people by surprise with a thing like a stump, *getting it over with* is one of his only defenses against ignorant scorn, so he siphons in a deep breath and slowly, slowly wills his raw stump into a reverse suction out of the muck. The twisted seam of leathery healed up sutures hang in the air between him and the old man.

In Lenny's experience, people generally head one of two ways when confronted with such an unsightly remnant: hell-bent in the opposite direction, or, and this is what Lenny's hoping for, head-over-heels determined to help out a one-armed boy.

Seemingly of its own accord, Lenny's stump drops back into the mud with a loud thwuck.

The old guy rocks back and splats on his butt. Sits there, peers at Lenny like he's just found him under the dock pilings all over again. Then a raspy giggle escapes the geezer's throat.

“You,” he says. “You little fucker you.” Abruptly his hands clap twice, then he sucks in a deep breath. “I can see you got a joke or two left, you little pea head.”

Again, the hand clapping. Like his own live punctuation.

“Okay, okay worries be gone, we believe you. We believe you, just fine. But don’t be thinking I’m easy fooled, though, just because you got only half a what you should have, don’t be a thinking that-a-way.”

The old man pulls his sweatshirt off over his head and crawls in closer under the dock to flash the dragonfly eyes at Lenny. Neck hairs sprout sporadically over what appears to be...a clerical collar?

Lenny strains to focus.

Where would an old geezer find a clerical collar? In a Goodwill bin? A church shelter? Jesus, maybe he murdered a priest and stole the clothes right off the holy man’s back.

Lenny tries to call his neurons to order. Just let this homeless, murdering priest-man, or whoever he is, find a way to release him from this aching muscle press, from this nothingness from the waist down. Then, hopefully, his legs will have time enough to wake up and run the rest of his aching body out of here. Surely, he can outrun this scrap of rags.

The priest-man, muttering as if there were an audience between his own ears, hauls a semi-flat stone out of the muck.

Lenny braces himself for a quick end.

But instead of slamming the stone into Lenny’s head, the geezer carefully folds his sweatshirt around the stone, takes care to tidy up the edges.

Then he sits back on his heels and seems to freeze into some kind of trance, eyes closed but moving rapidly beneath his lids.

Eventually, his young lips whisper, “Amen motherfucker,” and he lifts Lenny’s head to ease the padded stone under Lenny’s neck.

The lake is still and quiet and Lenny wonders what the old man is up to, and if he really is trying to help, how the priest-man will react once the wakes start hitting. But mainly he's glad for the padding, he's glad for the relief a rock can give a boy's head. He's glad for the man's fingers firm in his hair and gripping his scalp. And when it comes down to it, and he doesn't want to get all dramatic about this, but still, he's glad for this one last dream, if that's what this is.

The priest-man runs his hands down toward Lenny's legs, and though Lenny can no longer feel his legs he can glimpse the rapid weaving of the ancient fingers, disappearing low, pulling high, nicking knuckles against the dock pilings just above his grizzly head, cursing, muttering as he untangles Lenny's feet from the soggy netting.

"Two skinny legs, two. Just sticking out from under a dock."

The priest-man's eyes flick up toward Lenny's head, then black out as he focuses on the net.

"They could've been cut off! Disembodied legs praise the Lord Jesus-Jesus. They looked so. They did, they looked so."

Lenny tries to imagine how he would look from the bank above, his legs lying tangled in the mud, how the old man might've felt spotting them. The thought gives him a twinge of guilt about the stump thing.

"Then we saw his face, we did. Baby face-baby face. And breathing. Live caught!"

The priest-man has Lenny's legs free from the netting now and is examining the post across Lenny's chest, dragonfly eyes flickering. He creaks to a stand and picks up the splintered plank he'd dropped into the muck.

"But he *was* dead. We saw that he was dead-dead."

Lenny tries again to move his legs, and an awakening pain

shoots up to his knees, his thighs. Or he thinks it does. *Anything broke-broke down in here?* It was a question he hadn't thought to ask yet. He'd skipped right over the broken bone thing, what with the breathing air thing being such an immediate issue.

The priest-man leans his plank against the dock.

"Goddamn resurrection is what we got all up in here."

Lenny hears the click of the man's belt buckle and the slip of the belt being pulled through pants loops. A shirt brushing over a head.

The old guy drops back down to his knees in the mud, his bare, mottled skin barely holding in his ribs, his belly thin but loose over his pants, sagging now for lack of a cinch. Slowly, painstakingly, he secures his shirt to the end of the plank with his belt. He takes hold of the board, begins to wedge the shirt end between Lenny's chest and the stuck dock post.

The clerical shirt encasing the plank is practically zero defense against the wood digging into Lenny's chest, but Lenny's not going to stop the old guy now.

"Do it."

Lenny's own voice startles him. Chiseled. A failed dry heave.

A puzzled look takes hold of the geezer's face. His eyes wander for a moment like they might be in danger of rolling backwards for a view of the inside of his own brain. But then the dragonfly eyes recover and dart off across the water, only to follow the water right back to Lenny's chest where it's suddenly lapping. The old man cocks his head, hearing the same thing Lenny's hearing: the high-pitched saw of an outboard. Large by the sound of it, signaling a grand wake.

The priest-man starts to hum, his fingers jittering a beat against his plank. Lenny wants to tell the old crackbrain not to worry, that he can take it. But the thought has arrived in his brain that the

repercussions of the wake, now licking up onto his chin, closing in on his mouth and nose, might just scare the priest-man into a fit of strength that could finally, finally set him free. So Lenny tries his best to look even more desperate than he is, but that turns out not all that difficult, because when the wave hits, it's a gusher, washing completely over Lenny's head in a rush he was in no way prepared for. He chokes out muck as the water eases back. He gulps in air just before the lake erupts again.

Please God let the priest be real.

The water rises, and the old man wrenches the splintered plank in both arms, shoves it beneath the post that's trapped Lenny in the mud, carves his plank deep into Lenny's chest, and throws his whole body to the downward side of his makeshift lever.

"Let a loose, ye fungal-infested load of oppression," the priest-man yells. "Let a loose."

His plank creaks, bows to what must be the breaking point, the rail-thin geezer pulsating on his end, the *load of oppression* seemingly immobile on the other. But as the water builds speed toward the bank, the piling suddenly rocks along Lenny's chest, settles back, rocks again, harder. The old man gives one last heave and the plank snaps, knocking him face down into the rushing water. The log rolls right back into place, but the shift across the knot in Lenny's chest inspires him to dig into the muck with his good elbow and stump and wrench his body just as the largest contingent of the wake washes back over him. Lenny holds his breath under the silty lake and, working with the wave, twists hard to his side.

The piling pops him in the head as it rolls free.

Lenny pushes up on his good elbow, his back screaming. Lake Norman washes the foamy debris of its wimpy encore back up onto the shore.

The dripping priest-man turns and sits up in the water, panting, struggling for air.

The thing about the priest-man? He does not ask Lenny how he got stuck up under that dock. Nor how long he'd been wedged there, exposed and cold. Nor even whether Lenny is okay.

Instead, once he's breathing easier, once the lake has died down and they are sitting side by side in its calm shallows bordering the big city of Charlotte, North Carolina, the city that had been Lenny's destination for the past week, but was still less than halfway to his quest, the old man turns to him and asks the one question Lenny will absolutely not answer.

"Where the hell you from?"