

Chapter 2

Kyle's reel screamed as 20-pound braid peeled away. "That's it, show me whatcha got." He resisted adjusting the drag as he fought to keep his rod tip up and out of the water.

The tournament was on and he had something to prove. He'd brought Cynthia and the girls to Charleston so they could see him win, and by God, come hell or high water, that was what he was going to do.

He recoiled as the butt of the rod dug into his stomach. "So that's how we're gonna do this. Game on, buddy. Game on!" Fighting big fish was grueling under the best of circumstances. He just wanted it to be more punishing on the fish than on him.

The rod bowed and the tip plunged beneath the surface. He quickly loosened the drag, hoping the fish would take more line and play itself out. "Here's your rope. Now hang yourself..."

With the drag loosened, line flew across the rod guides and out to the ocean. If the red continued with its run, the line would spool the big fish in another fifty feet. Kyle powered into the pedals trying to retake line as he pedaled to overtake the fish. "You can run, but you can't hide. You're just gonna be tired when I put you in the boat."

The redfish finished its initial run and Kyle pumped his rod, fighting to win back the line he had masterfully threaded from his reel. "Come to Daddy. You really are a big boy."

The tide was out. The reds that had been hunting fiddler crab and finger-mullet in the spartina grass reeds and oyster beds had retreated to deeper water. They would await the next

high tide to return to the rich feeding grounds of the skinny water along the sandbars and plough muff that lined the length of the low country coastline.

Kyle made the bold move of venturing out to the deep water shipping lanes of Charleston Harbor. He was steadily gaining back his line, but the redfish pulled him another eighty feet to where he did not want to go, the center of the shipping lane. He chuckled. "Well, nasty-boy, this is what your game is, trying to get me plowed under by a freighter coming in from China."

He checked his back, only to see Fort Sumter standing as a sentinel, much as it did more than 150 years ago when its guns signaled the start of the war between the states. With no ships approaching from behind, he turned his attention to fishing. He cranked the drag back down and was gaining the upper hand in the tug-of-war with the red. "All day long, nasty-boy. I can do this all day long."

He noticed another kayak bobbing in from the Mount Pleasant side of the harbor. "Time to get in the boat. We don't need any lookie-loos."

He had already completed his inshore slam of a redfish, speckled seatrout and flounder, but was hoping to break 28 inches with a bull red. He needed to do better than the 19-inch yawner he'd landed off the oyster bed shortly after launching. Unless he was being played by a black tip shark, he knew the spot-tail on the other end of his line would position him near the top for the first day's measurements at check-in.

To compete, anglers needed to catch, photograph and release each species, but the tournament would be won and lost on the redfish. Each day, for three days, the length of the fisherman's three fish would determine winners from losers. The pros from the weekend warriors.

He hoisted the giant red into the kayak and was ecstatic, guessing it might break 40 inches. “Glad you could stop in for a visit.” He removed the hook, then positioned the fish to measure and snap a picture.

Suddenly, the other kayak, which had been closing in, slammed into the starboard side of his boat and pushed across his bow, stopping only when its pedals hit his gunwale. His rod and reel, along with the redfish and his official tournament measuring device were jettisoned into the ocean. The lanyard of the Go Pro camera tied around his wrist smacked him above his left ear as he instinctively covered his head with his hands.

“Hey! Watch out,” he shouted. “You could have killed someone. Don’t you know...”

Realizing the other kayak was empty, he stopped mid-sentence and looked for an overboard angler. Seeing no one, he got to his feet and scanned the rolling swells for his fish. Nothing.

“Goddamnit! Where are you, nasty-boy?” He stood poised to dive into the water, not to save another fisherman, but to grab hold of the redfish that he had been battling for the last half-hour. He peered into the water, resigned to losing the fish. “Thank you for the fight, my friend... Well played.”

He moved his head side to side, hoping to pick up a glint off his rod through his polarized sunglasses, but his favorite rig was well on its way to the ocean floor. He was grateful the GoPro was still strapped around his wrist. At least he would be on the board with his previous catch, and he had a good idea where the reds were hanging out during low tide.

He shielded the sun from his eyes with his hand and looked in the distance. The closest sandbar was too far to see if anyone might be marooned. The outgoing tide gave no clues where the ghost ship had come from.

He knew the tidal difference between low and high tide was close to five feet in the Charleston Harbor. If an angler had gotten out of his boat and fished on one of the flats, a rising tide could easily carry a kayak away in a few minutes. Getting out of a kayak to fish would be strictly prohibited by tournament rules, but as violations went, fishing from the bank was pretty minor.

He pushed the other kayak off of his boat and held onto it. Like his, it was a yellow 14-foot Hobie Pro Angler. That was not unusual, as most of the serious fishermen were in the same vessel and yellow was the preferred color, better chance of being seen by drunks in their speed-boats or Coast Guard vessels searching for a missing kayaker.

Inside the other boat was the usual arsenal of rods and reels, fitted with popping corks, top water plugs, and jig heads with imitation mullet and paddle tails, ready to be deployed depending what the fish fancied that day.

Blood swirled inside the deck of the other kayak. He was not alarmed by the blood. He had caught countless fish that took a hook deep and made his kayak awash in blood. Tuna were the worst. He scanned the horizon again, thinking no self-respecting tuna would be anywhere inside the harbor.

He reached inside the empty kayak, opened a front scupper plug and allowed the blood to drain. He was not squeamish, but dried blood on the deck was hard to get off and he would hope that if someone captured his kayak after it went adrift, they would do the same.

Check-in was at 5 o'clock. He needed to be in line or already checked in by then, or risk disqualification. He had forty-seven minutes and over two miles to go, against an outgoing tide. Dragging the other kayak would slow his progress, but he remembered the last tournament and was not going to miss check-in, not twice in a row. He settled into his seat and pumped the pedals for all he was worth.

He passed several sandbars and watched for a stranded fisherman waiting rescue, but saw no one. His legs ached from the pace he had set for himself, but he pressed on.

He looked at his watch. Seven minutes to check-in and he still had a long way to go. He thought about letting go of the kayak that was slowing his progress, but he'd brought it this far; he wasn't going to cast it adrift now. He would just have to pedal harder.

Exhausted and dripping sweat, he made it to the inlet of Shem Creek, then the boat ramp for check-in. He pulled each kayak by the bow out of the water and left them on the boat ramp. He peeled off the buff covering his face and shoved the Maui Jims in his pocket as he made his way to check-in with two minutes to spare.

Waiting in line, he stretched, still feeling the pulsing in his legs. Pedaling his kayak for miles each day, and battling tarpon, wahoo, and king mackerel, his legs and arms were hard as nails, and permanent crow's feet caressed his eyes from long days of squinting into the sun. When he found the owner of the other kayak, they were going to owe him. Tournament rods and reels did not come cheap.

He was the last to check in and handed his camera to the tournament sponsor seated at a six-foot folding table with a laptop in front of him. The official had a pasty white complexion

and delicate hands that had never been exposed to saltwater or felt the bite of a treble hook buried under the skin.

Kyle had fished in tournaments from Hawaii to the Bahamas, the Gulf of Mexico to the Southern Atlantic Seaboard, and the officials were all the same. They couldn't tell a snell knot from a spider hitch, let alone how to tie either. Yet, they had absolutely no compunction disqualifying a real fisherman for the slightest thing, like having a sailfish pull him half way to Cuba.

The official transferred the photos onto his computer and studied the pictures with the same intensity as a wolf would eye a flock of sheep.

“Anything wrong?” Kyle asked.

“Just making sure the nose of the fish are against the baseplate in all the photos. We don't want anyone to eke out a few more inches than they deserve.”

“That'd be disrespecting the fish. Anyone doing that should be banned for life from tournament fishing.”

“No one exaggerates like a fisherman. I'm just keeping everyone honest.”

“Hey, you're talking about tournament fishermen. We're not like that...this is what we do. We're not cheaters.”

The man folded his arms across his chest and leaned back on the folding chair.

Kyle saw the tournament judge was becoming annoyed, so he changed topics. “I was working the deep water this afternoon, the other side of Folly Island. I found a yak out there without anyone in it. Anyone report a missing Hobie?”

The man looked at his watch. “It’s after 5. Everyone should have been checked in by now.” He sat up and scrolled through the registration list. “Looks like there are four anglers who haven’t come back. Are you sure it belongs to someone from our tournament?”

Kyle shrugged. “If they’re not, they should be. They’ve got a sweet set up.”

The official rubbed the back of his head. “This better not be a joke.”

Kyle raised his right hand. “No. I swear to God. The kayak’s sitting on the ramp.”

The man nodded and called out to another official, who was a few feet away. “Hey Clayton, you want to go down to the boat ramp and have a look at what this angler found drifting in the harbor?”

Kyle didn’t recognize Clayton from any previous tournaments, but it was obvious he was a fisherman, tan lines around his eyes from sunglasses, a threadbare t-shirt from the Sailfish Smackdown of a few years ago, and a left forearm with deep scars on the underside in vertical irregular rows. Kyle guessed them to be teeth marks left by a shark that hadn’t quite been played out before Clayton tried to remove the hook.