

# BASH and the Chocolate Milk Cows



story by BURTON W. COLE  
illustrations by BUDDY LEWIS

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Nashville, Tennessee

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*For Terry, who, despite how I mangled her name, didn't giggle  
it off as an April Fool's prank when I asked her to marry me.  
I love you, "Teresa Ann."*



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## Chapter 1

# Roll Out the Rain Barrel Kayak

Bash squished a blue Play-Doh snake over the last glittering nail point jutting from the plank seat. “Better safe than screechin’ ’bout prickly pants.” His nose twitched like a rabbit with the sniffles. “Sides, only thing better-smellin’ than Play-Doh is chocolate.”

Sebastian “Bash” Hinglehobb, my weirdo third cousin twice removed—but not removed far enough to keep me from getting splished, splashed, splayed, or splotted—stood

inside the jagged hole cut through the middle of the rain barrel lying on its side on the creek bank. I stepped back and tripped over a three-hundred-pound hog rooting through the ground.

“Ow!”

“*Snork.*” Gulliver J. McFrederick the Third—Bash’s rust-colored, floppy-eared pig with a perpetual smile—grunted. From flat on my back with my legs hooked over a hog’s back, it sounded more like a pig giggle.

There is no Gulliver J. McFrederick the First nor Second, nor any other McFredericks, for that matter. Bash can’t stand short, sensible names for his farm critters.

“How come you can’t just stick with a dog like a normal kid?” I flicked mud off my hands. “Where is your dog anyway?”

“Uncle Jake O’Rusty McGillicuddy Junior doesn’t like the creek so much.” Bash swung one leg out of the hole in the barrel, dragged the other behind him, and splatted onto the bank. “Besides, I can’t ride him.”

I slid off Gulliver. “*Skoink, skoink, skoink.*” The flat end of his springy nose bobbed as he sniffed from the top of my T-shirt to the bottoms of my jeans pockets in case I carried any candy bars. I didn’t. “*Skoink.*” Gully snuffled off to the water.

Bash slapped the wooden hull. “Told ya we could build our own kayak. Pretty cool, huh, Ray-Ray Sunbeam Beamer?”

“Stop calling me that. It’s Raymond. Or Ray.” I glurped out of the mud. “Beamer, if you must. And I still don’t see

why we can't just walk across the stream to the frog-catching rock. We always did before."

"'Cause that's boring. So we're gonna paddle to the rock to catch frogs."

Straw-colored hair swished atop Bash's bobbing head. Or maybe those were straw-colored brains shaking loose. Two hours into spring break on Uncle Rollie and Aunt Tillie's farm in Ohio, and already I waded up to my T-shirt in mud and my cousin's weirdness.

"When you said we'd build a boat, I figured you were teasing for April Fool's Day," I said.

"That's not for two more days. An' the cows are goin' to give chocolate milk for April Fool's Day."

I crossed my arms. "I might be a city kid from Virginia Beach, but I know cows don't give chocolate milk. Not even brown cows."

Bash grinned. "That's why it's going to be the most awesome April Fool's joke ever. An' you're an Ohio boy now."

"But how—"

"You moved to Ohio last year. In the city."

"Not that. How are the cows going to give chocolate milk?"

"Later, Beamer. Today, we're kayak builders." Bash tossed leftover boards into a red wagon with a pile of screwdrivers, string, screws, chisels, nails, and other tools borrowed from Uncle Rollie's workshop. Baling twine wound around the wagon and trailed off into a pig harness. Gulliver had pulled the wagon across the hayfield to the creek. Bash had ridden Gully. I, of course, had walked.

"I wish Uncle Rollie and Aunt Tillie would get you a pony. Then both of us could ride."

I poked at my glasses and studied the sawed, nailed, and gooped-together contraption Bash called a kayak. A couple stones jammed into where it sank into the ground kept it from rolling into the creek.

The barrel started out as one of those wooden slat things held together by iron rings that you see in old-timey pictures of general stores. Aunt Tillie stood two or three of them beneath downspouts outside the farmhouse. When it rained, water rolled off the roof, rivered through the gutters, gushed down the spouts, and filled the barrels. Aunt Tillie used it for her gardens on sunny days.

She kept a couple spare wooden barrels in a tool shed. Well, only one spare now.

"Are you sure we didn't need to ask first? She'll know it wasn't that robber you told me about who's been holding up stores and stuff the last few weeks. She'll know *we* took her barrel."

"Maybe he steals barrels too. We'll find out when we catch him."

I stiffened. "You didn't say anything about chasing any bad guys."

"I just did. We can solve the mystery, Beams. We'll be heroes."

"We'll be dead when he shoots us. I'm not chasing any robber. I don't want him to catch us." I shivered. "I probably don't want your mom to catch us with her rain barrel either."

"Ma won't mind us borrowing some of her stuff."

I cringed. “That’s what you always say, but she always does.”

Bash chewed on his tongue, a sure sign that he was thinking his deepest thoughts. Like the creek, you could wade across them. “Why would Ma care if we borrowed an old barrel she’s not using?”

“Well, we’re going to put it into the creek. It’ll get wet.”

“Beamer, they’re rain barrels. They’re supposed to get wet. Duh.”

I shook my head. “Only on the inside. The outside’s supposed to be dry.”

“Not in the rain. The barrel gets soaked on both sides.”

“You cut a hole in your mom’s barrel.”

Bash scratched his ear. “You can’t have a kayak without a pilot’s hole in the middle. A kayak without a pilot’s hole for a guy to sit in isn’t a kayak. It’s a log.”

At the water’s edge, Gulliver flopped down, stretched out to let the creek roll over his back, and sighed. Or maybe the sigh came from me.

Bash reached through the pilot’s hole and pressed on the bench he’d nailed inside to make sure it held. “Sides, when we’re done, we’ll yank the seat out and caulk the cutout part back in place with more Play-Doh. It’ll be like new.” Bash squinted one eye at the hole. “Should I use the red or yellow Play-Doh for that?”

I stared at him. Definitely straw-colored brains shaking loose up there.

Bash gave me a little shove. “Climb aboard, Beamer, and make sure our kayak doesn’t sink.”

I pushed back. “It was your idea. You sink or swim.”

“Can’t.” The Basher gripped my wrist and dragged me toward the barrel. “One of us has to stay on shore an’ watch for goofs. I’m the engineer, so it’s my duty to watch.”

I dug my heels into the mud, shook my arm free, and glared at Bash. “I think I see the goof.” I stomped away from the barrel boat to sit in the grass.

Bash scurried behind me. “You know chief engineers and inventors never get to have any fun. They gotta stand on shore and watch while brave captains get all the fun an’ become famous an’ stuff.”

“Drowning’s not fun. It was your idea. You go down with the ship.”

Bash slumped. “Bummer, Beamer. I guess you can’t be captain then.”

“That’s right. Wait. What?”

“Captain. If I’m chief engineer and inventor, that makes you the famous captain. Well, not now. Shoulda figured you’d chicken out of the important stuff.” Chief Engineer and Inventor Bash shaded his eyes and peered across the fields. “I wonder if Jig’s home. He wouldn’t be scared to be a hero captain.”

I stepped forward. “Wait a second. Hero captain’s good, right?”

Bash shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and shrugged. “Yep. And brave and famous. The hero captain runs the ship. He’s in charge of everything.”

I nodded. “That sounds like me. I turned twelve in February. You’re still eleven. So I’m older. Smarter too. That makes me the boss of you.”

Bash turned away, probably so I couldn’t see how the

truth stung. He shuffled toward the ship. “Yep. You should be the hero captain, not me. But you don’t wanna, so—”

I jumped up and pulled Bash out of my way. “So nothing. Stand aside, engineer. The captain’s coming through.”

Bash bumped me aside and made for the kayak. “That’s okay, Beams. I get that you’re a fraidy-cat, scaredy-minnow. I’ll do it.”

I practically tossed him aside. “*I’m* the captain, and that’s that.”

Bash turned his back to me again and shook a little. I hoped he wasn’t crying. “I reckon so.” Then he spun, jammed both palms into my back, and shoved. “So hurry up and climb aboard the kayak, Captain, so I can push you into the creek.”

While Bash steadied the sideways barrel, I slung one leg through the hole in the side. I pulled my other leg inside the sitting hole and sat on the plank bench. “Is the seat supposed to tilt like this?”

“Sure. When you hit the big waves, it’ll feel just like you’re level.”

“It’s a creek, Bash. There are no big waves.”

He pointed at the rippling water. “That one looks pretty big.”

“For Ohio, maybe.”

I stretched my legs to the end of the barrel and kicked something. *Clomp*. “You left the hammer in here.” I toed around the end of the barrel feeling for holes. *Clang*. “The nails.” *Snap*.

“Yikes!” I shook my foot and peered into the bottom of the barrel. “You set a mousetrap?”



Chief Engineer and Inventor Bash grinned. “Yep. Didn’t want ship rats aboard.”

I pulled the mousetrap off my sneaker and tossed it at Bash. “Trust me, the rat’s not on the ship.”

“Kayak, Beams.” Bash slammed his full weight against the end of the barrel and pushed me into the creek. “Ahoy, matey!”

The barrel bobbed on the creek, which smelled like an odd mix of mud milkshakes, wet weeds, and crisp water.

Bash shouted instructions. “Make sure to paddle for the frog-catching rock. If you miss it, you’ll float all the way up Conneaut Creek to Lake Erie. Then you could paddle all the way out to Niagara Falls, an’ go over in a barrel kayak.”

The current caught the barrel and pulled me toward the middle. “Hey, wait a minute. You didn’t tell me that part.” I slapped around the inside of the barrel. *Uh-oh*. “Where’s the paddle?”

“All right, Beamer. You discovered the goof. You forgot to make a paddle.”

I started to yell something about heading up the creek but heard a splash. Then *glub, glub, glub, snorrrrk*. The glubs and gags came from me. Creek water stung my nose and burned down my throat. My head bounced along the pebbles on the bottom of the creek.

I’d discovered the second goof—and maybe my last: barrels roll.