

Search for the  
**Golden**  
**Piranha**

Matt Wash

## **Search for the Golden Piranha**

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is dedicated to my dear friend, Sara Stonhill.  
You had such a positive impact on my life in many ways.

Miss you, mate. X

I'd also like to thank John Hudson for creating such  
fantastic illustrations for the book. The next apple juice is on  
me!



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Matt lives on the beautiful south coast in Dorset. As well as long beach walks, golf and sea swimming, he spends much of his spare time scribbling down ideas for his children's books.

He has been a primary school teacher for almost 17 years and has always had a passion for writing.

Search for the Golden Piranha is his fifth children's book after Mrs Tripplehorn's Magic Paper Clip and three others that he wrote for Longleat Safari Park.

Some of Matt's favourite authors include: John Grisham, Roald Dahl and Claire Mackintosh.



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# CHAPTER 1

## TIME TO FLY

“Come on, Kids—Let’s go!” shouted Penny from the bottom of the stairs.

Silence.

“Get down here, NOW! The plane won’t wait for us you know!”

“Alright, Mum... keep your hair on!” Amelia snapped back. “I’m doing my lipstick.”

“Urrgghh, gross,” mumbled Zac as he brushed past his sister, deliberately tapping her arm with his rucksack. A long, bright-red smear spread across her cheek. Instantly boiling with rage, she swung her leg in anger, kicking his backside with full force. “Out of my room, you little rat!” she roared. “Now I’m going to have to start again.” Zac smiled as he scurried downstairs and stood beside his frustrated mum at the front door.

“Women!” he sighed, rolling his eyes with a cheeky smile on his face.

Eleven very long hours later, the Thistle family were in the final stages of their journey to Brazil. As the plane descended through the Rio sky, Zac grabbed his father to look out the tiny window. “Look, Dad. It’s amazing!”

“It certainly is, Son,” replied Colin, before warning the family, “And it looks extremely hot out there too. We must make sure we’ve applied our sun cream at all times throughout the holiday. I’d suggest factor 50 between the hours of 11am and 3pm and then factor 30 should be fine for all other daylight hours.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Colin! Can we stop worrying for just one minute and enjoy the view?” Penny huffed, as she edged closer to join the others in admiring the stunning scenery.

“Don’t touch me, you weasel!” Amelia shouted at her little brother as he slumped over her shoulder, desperate to see more.

Zac smiled to himself and whispered in his sister’s ear, “Oh, weasel now, is it? Any other creatures you want to compare me to? Come on, I dare you.”

“Don’t tempt me, rat boy!”

“Ooooh, I’m a rat again. Well done, Sis—great imagination.”

“Stop arguing, you two—we’re on holiday!” Penny demanded, secretly wishing she was going to Brazil by herself.

When they arrived at the hotel, Penny and Colin were barely speaking to each other. This was due to a very frustrating baggage collection episode where Colin almost got a punch on the nose; he accused another man of trying to steal his luggage. As it turned out, they had identical suitcases and, yet again, Penny had to save the day.

Once they were shown to their family suite by the hotel porter, Amelia shoved the door closed and they all collapsed onto their beds. The long flight and airport stress had sucked the life out of everyone. Moments after sinking into their beds, the whole family were in a deep sleep. Zac looked like a snoozing tortoise as his bulging rucksack was still strapped to his back.

The morning seemed to arrive in a flash for the jet-lagged Thistles. They all had showers and got their summer clothes on, ready for the first exciting day of their trip. Because the time was approaching 11am, Colin frantically checked to make sure everyone was applying their factor 50 sun lotion. Amelia found this

particularly annoying, as she was only halfway through her 45-minute make-up routine.

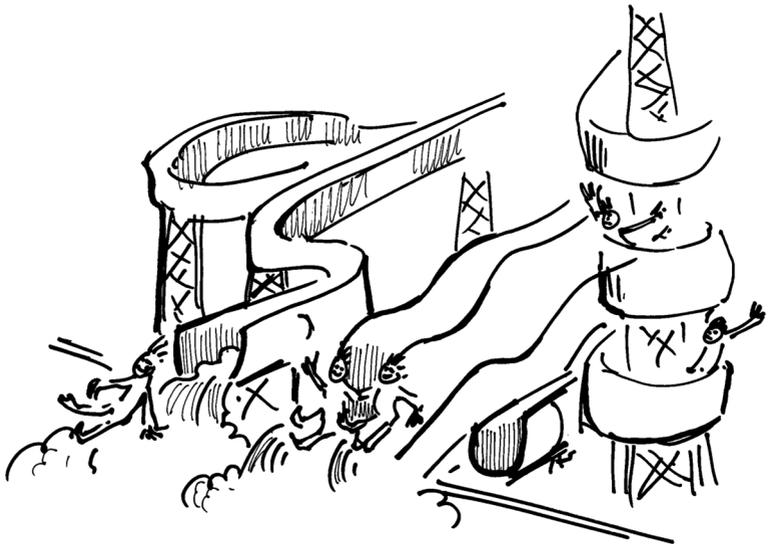
The moment they stepped outside the hotel, each of them was hit by an instant rush of heat that wrapped around their bodies like an electric blanket. “Woooooahhh!” said Zac. “Now that’s what you call hot.”

“Oh my gosh—I can’t breathe!” stressed Amelia. “I can feel my mascara running already; I’m going back to my room.”

“Hold it right there, young lady. We’ve paid an awful lot of money for you to come here and YOU WILL ENJOY IT!” Penny barked, with a look in her eye that said ‘do not mess with me’.

Reluctantly, the children turned and followed their mother, who was striding ahead with an army-style march that they’d never seen before. Colin, wearing a large cream-coloured Panama hat and knee-high white socks that were being gripped by an ugly pair of dark-brown leather sandals, was still shuffling along, fighting with the huge map of Rio he’d bought at the airport. Worried they might get lost, Zac and Amelia tried to keep up with their mum, but they also wanted to avoid getting too hot and sweaty from the burning sun.

The first activity of the day was a visit to a huge water park; it was a colourful mix of twisting, looping and vertical waterslides that sat invitingly on a section of the beautiful, sandy beach. The children stopped and looked up, their eyes bulging and mouths wide open. Suddenly, the day was promising to be a lot more fun. A very nervous-looking Colin then blurted, “Oh my word! I’m not so sure this is appropriate, Penny. Did you know that there are over 1000 injuries at water parks EVERY YEAR? Lots of them are very, very serious! I read a few weeks ago that one boy had to be rescued by lifeguards and firefighters after falling out of the river rapids ride in California. Shall we skip this and head over to the Amazon Rainforest Creatures Museum across the road? It looks very, very interesting.”



“Oh, don’t be such a bore, Colin,” said Penny. “We’re going in. Are you coming?”

“Err... well, I think it would make sense for me to be looking after all the valuables and bags. In my preparation for the trip, I actually read that Rio is now the 49<sup>th</sup> worst city in the world for tourist muggings and theft. Also, I read online that they have the ‘Lesser Spotted Blue Back Chameleon’ at the museum, and I’d kick myself if we went home without seeing it.”

After accepting that Colin wasn’t keen on the idea, Penny, Amelia and Zac stripped down to their beach outfits in seconds. “Catch ya later, Dad,” shouted Zac, as they all threw their belongings in Colin’s direction and sprinted over to the waterpark.

Almost three hours later, the children and Penny finally emerged from the exit of the waterpark. They were greeted by Colin who was sitting on a bench like an excited puppy. His arms were wrapped protectively around a carrier bag that was bulging with souvenirs from the gift shop.

“Ah, hello, my favourite Thistles! Look what I’ve got,” said Colin teasingly, swinging the bag gently from side to side. “If you’re good, I may just have some presents for you when we get back to the hotel, you lucky bunch!”

“Ooh, Dad, how exciting!” said Amelia sarcastically. “Hopefully, it’s another keyring to add to the other fourteen you got me from all the *other* museum visits.”

“Now, now, don’t be cheeky, Amelia.” mumbled Penny, with a hint of a smile. Brushing off his daughter’s ungrateful response, Colin decided, “I’ll put this bunch of goodies in your rucksack for now, Zac; it’ll be safer in there.”

As the Thistles approached their hotel entrance, a large, black van skidded with an ear-piercing screech up onto the pavement. Suddenly, a group of masked men jumped out of the sliding door, grabbed the startled family, threw them into the van and sped off down the road that led away from the city. They were petrified and silently frozen in fear as the men aggressively put hoods over their heads and tied them on with rope.

After travelling for an hour or so, the road surface suddenly changed. The van was jumping, shuddering and throwing its passengers against each other; clearly now ‘off road’, they could hear huge, thick leaves slapping the windscreen as the vehicle thundered along.



When they finally came to a halt, the Thistles were dragged from the dusty floor and pulled from the van.

“Walk!” growled one of the gang members. Doing as they were told, the family shuffled through the long grass. Suddenly, they felt cold water; wading through

the tangled reeds, they were terrified and confused about where they were being taken.

Then, the sound of propellers. Within seconds, they were bundled into what was obviously a plane and roaring across the water. Still blindfolded, their stomachs flipped as they started to lift and soar into the sky above. After hours of being huddled together in the creaky-sounding plane, they started their descent and then landed with a thud onto the water.

The Thistles were then transferred into yet another vehicle and had to endure a very uncomfortable ride through the jungle. The van slowed and eventually stopped; the engine was silent. A door opened and was then slammed shut. The rusty side door screeched open.

“Get out!” thundered the same man from earlier.

After being shoved through an open doorway, they were then pushed down aggressively onto some rickety, old chairs that had been arranged in a way that had all four family members back-to-back. Their hoods were whipped off, forcing them to squint at the bare lightbulbs hanging precariously from the beams above. Nervously scanning the room, they discovered it was a shabby, neglected log cabin. Colin started to whimper,

whilst Penny and the children, still terrified, leant into each other for comfort.

**“Stop your crying—be a man!” growled the beastly figure, who was clearly the head of the gang.**

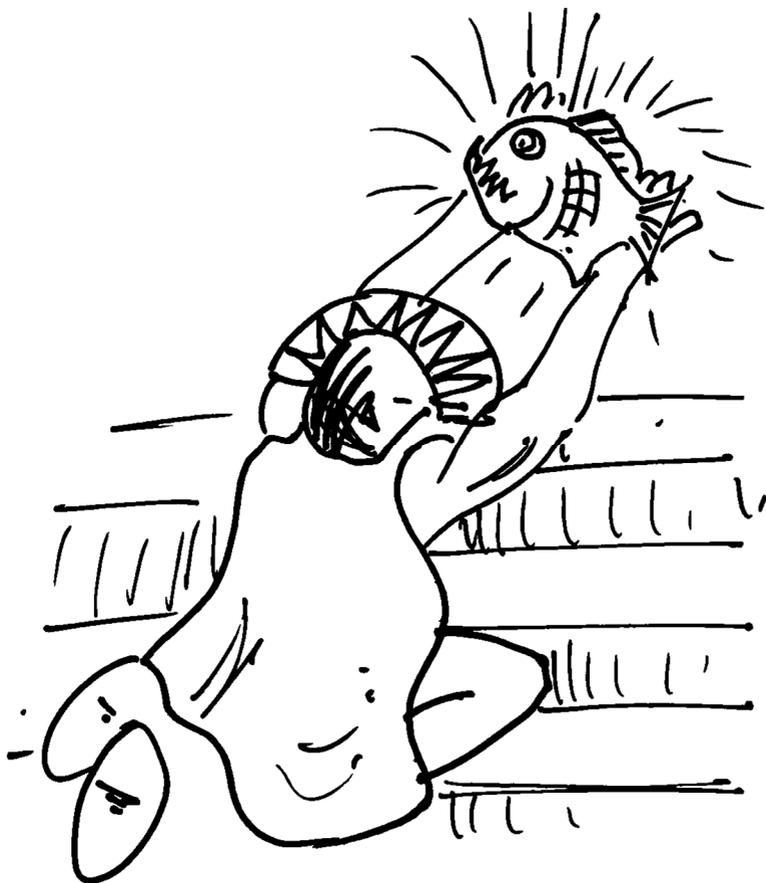
“Now you must listen very, *very* carefully. My name is Xavier Santos and I’m the head of the Blood-Knife Gang. You are here because we need you to do something for us. If you succeed, you have my word that you won’t get hurt... at least, not by us..

The reason we need you is this... almost 500 years ago, the Inca people, who lived here in the Amazon, were invaded by the Spanish. They were trying to steal the Incas’ priceless collection of gold and jewels. There were horrific battles and, despite their efforts, the Incas couldn’t prevent their treasures from being taken. However, they did manage to hide some of the most valuable pieces from their attackers. The most important and sacred of these is why you’re going on this mission.”

Just as Colin tried to speak, Xavier roared, “Stop with your noise, and let me finish!” Colin gulped nervously and sunk back into his chair.

Xavier continued, “During the Inca civilisation, there was a vicious, red-bellied piranha—said to be the greatest protector of the Inca people. It fought off evil spirits and leapt from the river water to kill any invaders that tried to threaten the tribes. The Incas believed that when it finally died, it became a magical symbol and continued to protect them. A message from the gods came to them one night. They were told to scoop out the insides of the magic piranha and fill it with diamonds and jewels to hide it from the greedy Spaniards who were trying to steal from them. They were also ordered to soak it in liquid gold so it would shine brightly and light up any danger that was approaching. To this day, the Golden Piranha has never been seen, but this story has been passed down from generation to generation, and many believe it to be true.

When the few remaining Inca people were left, the story goes that they placed the Golden Piranha deep inside the Cave of Death to stop anyone from ever taking it away from their precious land.



Sadly, for you, any South Americans that enter the sacred ground are cursed forever; if we ever tried to retrieve the Golden Piranha, we would be fed to the gods' evil creatures. Unfortunately, the sacred ground surrounds the Cave of Death. Luckily for us, outsiders have no such curse, but the Incas *definitely* did not want anyone to find the piranha... as you will discover over the next few days.

I don't want you to worry too much, but I feel I should tell you something; you're not the first to try this. We've had others attempt the mission before, but they've all disappeared... never to be seen again. Hopefully, you're our 12th time lucky."

Xavier turned to the rest of the gang with a smug smile and a deep laugh that caused Penny to ask desperately, "12<sup>th</sup> time lucky? For goodness' sake, what is it you're asking of us?" Xavier then calmly placed a rickety chair in front of him, crossed his arms on the backrest and slowly began to describe the task that faced them.

"It's quite simple; you need to enter the jungle, find the Cave of Death, take the Golden Piranha and return it to us. It will be worth *millions*, and I would live like a king forever!"

"The Cave of Death? The jungle? Do you think we're stupid?" interrupted Colin firmly—much to the surprise of Penny and the children. The tattoo-covered, giant of a man then rose from his seat, walked over to Colin and menacingly pulled a gleaming, razor-sharp knife from his pocket. Resting it slowly against Colin's sweating cheek, he calmly asked, "What did you say? I think I may have misheard you."

“Oh, Err... nothing, nothing at all. We’d-we’d-we’d be delighted to help, wouldn’t we dear!?” Colin stuttered.

Xavier then sat back down and continued, “The route to the cave is easy to follow, but along the way there are ancient stone walls that will block your path. My friend Gomez will fill you in on the details, but there’s one thing you need to know; if you fail to pass the challenges you’re given by the ancient walls, huge, blood-sucking critters will pour out from the cracks in the wall and attack each of you. I’m afraid there is no escaping them, and it is a certainty that you would not survive. The Thistle family all turned very pale and beads of sweat started trickling down their faces. Xavier then added, “You might also come across some other *not-so-nice* problems on the way, but if you find the Golden Piranha and bring it to us, then you will be free to go—you have my word.”

Throughout the time Xavier was instructing the terrified family, there was a very grumpy-looking parrot perched on his shoulder. He finally pointed at the bird and said, “By the way, this is Gomez, and he will be coming with you.”

Catching her breath, Penny bravely spoke up. “I’m sorry, but what good will a parrot be to us?”

Xavier then laughed, “No, no... Gomez is not there to be your helper. You are most likely to fail the mission, so when you die, he will collect the map and return it to me—just like he did with the last eleven families.”

“Ah... glad I asked,” gulped Penny.

The Thistles all stared at each other—their faces overcome with panic and fear. Food and water supplies were then shoved into the family’s bags, joining the wet swimming gear, museum presents and all the other bits and pieces they’d taken out for their day of fun. It was time to go; they had no choice but to head off into the jungle to try and find the Cave of Death. The creased and crumpled map they were handed looked old and worn. It was also very basic, mainly just showing a path to the sacred area where the cave is said to be.

Penny snatched it from her husband immediately, just to give them some hope of *actually* going in the right direction.

Xavier then stood and warned, “I wish you the very best of luck. I’m afraid you’ll certainly need it.” As the family turned to begin their daunting mission, things immediately went against them.

“Oh, great start!” moaned Zac, as a gloopy, white dollop appeared down the front of his jacket.

“Oops... sorry!” said Gomez. “They fed me pizza for lunch and it always goes straight through me!”

“You have got to be kidding me?” said Amelia. “The parrot can talk—and it’s got a dodgy tummy; this is a total nightmare.”

“It’s worse than a nightmare,” Zac mumbled. “Much, much worse...”