

ISLAND OF FOG BOOK I

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by Keith Robinson

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Prologue

The woman handed one of the group a curious object. It was surprisingly light, and looked like a tusk or horn of some kind, about a foot long with spiral indentations along its length.

“If you need me,” she said, “just come to this cliff and blow into the horn. You won’t hear a sound, but I’ll answer immediately.”

A strong gust of wind caused the long grass to whip around the legs of the group gathered on the cliff. For a moment the fog was so thick that the woman was engulfed in it, almost completely swallowed up even though she stood a mere few feet away. When the fog moved on, she remained there with her shimmering green silk billowing.

“You’ll get used to the fog,” she said. “Just be strong.”

“Easy for you to say,” one of the group grumbled. “I’m not sure I can stand to live like this.”

“It’s better than the alternative,” another argued.

The woman sighed. “You’ll manage. Just remember all I’ve told you. And not a word to the children—just keep your eye on them as they grow.”

Still, some of the group were unsettled. “What happens if things don’t go according to plan? What if they don’t change?”

“We’ve been over this a thousand times,” the woman said. “Let’s just keep our fingers crossed.” She looked around one last time with her startling blue eyes. “Be strong. I’ll stop by from time to time to see how you’re doing. Hopefully you’ll only have to put up with this fog for eight years or so.”

With that, the woman bade them fare well and jumped off the cliff.

Chapter One
A strange discovery

Halfway into the silent woods, Hal Franklin paused before a clump of blackberry bushes and scratched at his left forearm. *Why* was it itching so much today? He unbuttoned his cuff and was about to roll up his sleeve when Robbie called from up ahead, his voice sharp and clear.

“Keep up, Hal! What are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Hal called back. He pushed up his sleeve and studied his arm, expecting to see the welt of a mosquito bite or the redness of poison ivy. To his surprise everything seemed normal, and yet it itched like crazy. Irritated, he rebuttoned his sleeve and plunged through the bushes to catch up with his friend.

Robbie Strickland was pacing back and forth at the foot of a steep rise, a tall, skinny boy with dark brown tousled hair and a pointed nose. He was twelve, the same age as Hal but a head higher. Robbie’s thick plaid shirt hung off his shoulders as though wrapped around a wire coat hanger, and his jeans ended above his skeletal ankles.

“You got fleas or something?” Robbie asked as Hal approached.

Hal realized he was busy scratching his arm again. “It’s nothing. Let’s keep moving before it gets dark on us. I don’t want to be riding home across the fields at night.”

They’d left their bikes and school backpacks in the meadow outside Black Woods, under the sprawling oak.

Together they started up the slippery slope, using thick protruding tree roots for footholds. Hal broke into a sweat despite the chill in the air.

“So where’s this amazing thing you were talking about?” Hal asked, panting.

“Almost there,” Robbie said, reaching the crest of the hill. He brushed his hands off, then disappeared from sight down the other side.

When Hal reached the top, he too paused to brush the cold wet soil from his hands. The knees of his jeans were plastered with the stuff. *This had better be worth it*, he thought.

He followed Robbie down the other side of the hill, sliding on pine needles and cones. Already at the bottom, Robbie was foraging for something in the bushes. He grinned and held up a long stick, then set off once more, thrashing at poison ivy as he went. No path existed this deep in the woods, but he darted between the trees without hesitation, following some uncanny sense of direction.

Hal followed close behind, stealing glances left and right, sometimes over his shoulder. Daylight across the island was feeble at the best of times, but here in the woods it was dismal. Patches of fog drifted between the pines as if lost and alone.

He scratched his arm again. It had been itching an awful lot lately, now that he thought about it.

Robbie stopped, and Hal almost bumped into him.

“What—?”

“Shh,” Robbie said, holding up a hand.

The sound of trickling water permeated through the trees, and Robbie grinned. “We’re close,” he said, and set off once more, stomping on a bunch of toadstools before picking his way over a rocky formation that poked out of the soil.

Ducking under low-hanging branches, Robbie pushed through a clump of bright green ferns and disappeared. Hal struggled after him, and emerged behind his friend in a clearing thick with fog, where a foot-wide stream gurgled along a shallow rut. The water foamed on smooth rock and poured under thirsty overhanging root systems before meandering off down a gentle slope out of sight. Robbie stood at its edge, looking back at Hal.

“See it?” he whispered.

Hal stopped and scanned the clearing. *See what? Something in the stream? In the trees?* All Hal could see was fog; nothing unusual there, since it was always foggy on the island. On the other hand, it wasn’t usually quite this thick in the middle of the woods . . .

Then he saw it. He blinked in amazement. Across the other side of the clearing, almost buried under tall ferns, lay a cave-like opening ten feet across. From this cave billowed a thick column of pure white smoke, rising up through the trees.

“What is it?” Hal gasped. “Is there a fire under the ground?”

He stepped across the stream for a closer look, imagining a raging inferno deep below the surface in some cavern or tunnel. He pulled aside the ferns and saw that the opening was like a giant rabbit warren, set in the side of a shallow slope. The gaping entrance funneled down to a dark, narrow tunnel, and from this tunnel belched the strange thick smoky substance, twisting and turning as it escaped into the air.

Hal suddenly got a face full of the stuff as it whorled over him. He lurched backward, expecting his eyes to sting and his lungs to fill with acrid fumes. But instead the smoke smelled musty and damp, somehow familiar.

Perplexed, he followed the column of smoke upwards, noting how it mushroomed out and filtered through the leaves, yet left no sign of blackening as smoke from a fire might. If Robbie had been here before and seen this, it must

have been burning a while . . . and yet there was no heat emanating from the hole, and no stinging, choking fumes.

Robbie came up beside him and planted a foot on the rim of the cave, causing soil to shake loose underfoot and trickle down inside. He was engulfed in thick gloom from the knees up, and when he spoke his voice sounded muffled. “It’s not smoke. It’s fog.”

With a jolt, Hal realized his friend was right. “This is where it all comes from?” He shook his head in wonder. It explained a lot. It had been foggy across the island every day of his life, and now he knew why. “Do you think if we plug up the hole, the fog will clear?”

“That’s what I wondered,” Robbie said, backing away from the hole and beaming. His eyes shone with excitement. “Can you imagine it? A day without fog? A blue sky? Come on, let’s find something to block it up with—branches, leaves, anything will do.”

“Wait,” Hal said, pointing at the muddy ground nearby. “What are these?”

Around the mouth of the cave were several strange footprints—large, hand-sized prints of some kind of animal.

Robbie circled the prints with a puzzled expression. “That’s weird. They weren’t here yesterday.”

“Why *were* you here yesterday?” Hal asked. “You mentioned a new bug?”

“Yeah. Found a beauty, a blood-sucking butterfly. Look.” He showed Hal a red welt on the pale, tender skin of his inner arm. “Isn’t it cool?”

Hal didn’t think so. He would never understand why his friend spent so much time lurking in dark, creepy woods, studying bugs and plants. “Yeah, great. I didn’t know there was such a thing as a blood-sucking butterfly.”

“There isn’t,” Robbie said, looking smug. “So I bottled it to take home. Then I came across this hole.” His brow knitted into a frown. “But like I said, these prints weren’t here then.”

The prints were cat-like, Hal decided; large rounded pads, each with four smaller indentations at the front end.

“Lauren’s got a cat,” Robbie murmured.

Hal grinned at him. “Trust you to think of her.”

“She’s the only one of us with a cat,” Robbie protested, his cheeks reddening.

“Not for much longer,” Hal murmured. “Biscuit is as old as we are, and in cat years, that’s pretty old.” He studied the prints thoughtfully. “These are far too big for a cat though. It might be Emily’s dog, I suppose.”

They both stared in silence.

“Well,” Robbie said, looking around, “I guess it *has* to be Emily’s dog. It must have run away or something, got lost in the woods. There are no other big animals on the island, unless it swam across from Out There.”

Out There was the world beyond the island. Hal pictured it as a vast expanse of land, but Robbie argued it was a series of small islands just like theirs. Since the adults refused to talk about their old home, imagination was all the kids had to go on.

“I wonder why it was sniffing around the cave,” Hal said. He thought the tunnel probably went deep, maybe as deep as the earth’s core. Maybe all this escaping fog was steam from underground rivers that were boiling away under the intense heat of volcanic activity. Hal had once read a book about volcanoes, and could imagine bright red hot magma coursing through the rock far below, waiting to erupt as a river of lava, eating everything in its path . . .

A rustling in the bushes nearby caused both boys to spin around.

Hal scanned the woods, seeing nothing but dense vegetation and gloomy darkness. “Did you hear that?” he whispered.

“Yeah.”

They stood in silence, watching and listening. The woods were too thick to reveal much. For all they knew there were a hundred pairs of eyes staring at them from the cover of darkness. Over the constant bubbling of the nearby stream came the faint, faraway sound of a woodpecker hard at work.

A frog croaked and hopped into the stream with a tiny plop. Robbie sighed. “Well, whatever it was, it’s gone. Must have been Emily’s dog. Come on, let’s find some branches and cover this hole. After we get a framework going, we can stuff the gaps with leaves and mud.”

They searched the clearing for something suitable to start the framework, but the pines in this patch of the woods were high and the lowest branches far out of reach. “We need a dead tree,” Hal said after a while. “One that’s dropped a few branches. Or maybe we could come back another day with a saw.”

Robbie frowned. “We could follow the stream to the cliff. The trees aren’t so high there. They have room to spread out.”

They followed the meandering stream, trying to keep close to its edge. But the overhanging vegetation caused them to veer off, and Hal was just starting to wonder if they’d lost track of the stream altogether when Robbie called out, “It’s through here. I just stepped in it.”

At last the woods brightened and they reached the cliff edge, along which ran a narrow man-made path. The fog was thick here, nudging up against the bordering trees and blurring the fifty-foot sheer drop into the sea. The stream bubbled out of the woods and off the cliff, and suddenly Hal recognized where he was. “Isn’t this where Thomas was killed?”

“Yeah,” Robbie said. “He fell off that little slope right there.”

They edged closer. Patches of grass swayed in a gentle sea breeze, and trees leaned out over the cliff as if on a dare. Far below, visible only when the fog

thinned for the briefest of moments, the deep green sea swirled and foamed over jagged rocks. The island was surrounded by them, but sometimes the fog was so thick around the coast it was impossible to see them even from a beach right down by the water's edge.

Hal had a vision of Thomas Patten, a small red-haired boy with a happy face, straying off the cliff path and slipping down the slope, then plunging to his death on the rocks below. It had happened six years ago, but Thomas's desk remained in the classroom, empty, as a constant reminder to stay away from the cliffs. Nine desks, eight students.

Hal shuddered and backed off, glad he hadn't been there at the time. "What was he doing?"

Robbie gave him a puzzled look. "He was six. He wandered off into the woods, got lost—"

"Yeah, I know all that, but what was he *doing*? Playing in the stream? Maybe trying to see the waterfall?"

Hal doubted it was a spectacular waterfall. The stream bubbled down the slope and, from what he could see, fell away over the edge in a fine spray. But he couldn't be sure without crawling down the slope and peering over the edge.

"And where did his parents go afterwards?" Robbie added. "You reckon they jumped off the cliff and killed themselves?"

They'd had this discussion many times before. But before Hal could answer, they heard a crack somewhere in the woods, followed by a rustling sound.

Every muscle in Hal's body tensed. He squinted, searching for a sign of movement in the bushes. But he saw and heard nothing.

"What *is* that?" Robbie whispered. "Do you think it's Emily's dog?"

Hal cupped his hands to his mouth. "Wrangler! Wraaaaan-gler! Here boy!"
Silence.

Robbie put his hands on his hips and scowled. "Do you think it's Abigail, messing with us? She's been following us around a lot the last couple of weeks."

Hal felt relief wash over him, mixed with annoyance. Of course! It would be just like that annoying brat, Abigail Porter, to follow them into the woods and spook them. Hal glared into the darkness. "Abi, get lost."

But there was no answer, so they got back to the business of finding decent branches to drag across the fog-hole. "You'd think it would be easy to find a few branches in the middle of the woods," Robbie complained. "Oh, hold on. There's one."

It was long and brittle, but if they were careful it might survive the trip back to the clearing without breaking up. They put it aside and foraged for more. After a while they found another two, each long enough to span the ten-foot fog-hole but not so heavy as to be impossible to drag through the woods. They decided they

needed one more, so Hal climbed a tree and edged out along a low branch to the end. It bent under his weight so that Robbie could reach up and grab it. Then Hal swung down and, together, they yanked on the branch until it snapped and tumbled down in a flurry of brown and red leaves.

“That should do,” Hal gasped, wiping sweat from his brow.

Robbie picked up one of the heavier branches by the thick, splintered end and set off, dragging it through the dirt. It caught on bushes as he went, but he put his back into it and soon disappeared into the woods. Hal tucked the ends of two thinner branches under his armpits and hauled his load after Robbie. One of them would have to come back for the fourth limb.

They were gasping by the time they arrived back at the clearing. They dragged the branches over the stream to the fog-hole, and then collapsed for a rest. After a while, Robbie climbed to his feet. “Give me a hand,” he said.

Together they struggled with the heaviest branch and laid it across the fog-hole, kicking ferns aside as they did so. It spanned the gap with ease, but on its own did little to stop the fog from billowing out.

“I’ll get these other two branches across the hole,” Robbie said, “if you’ll go back and get the other one.”

“Yeah, you do the easy bit,” Hal said, rolling his eyes.

He set off, following the drag marks so he wouldn’t lose his way. The woods seemed even more silent and lonely without Robbie close by, and he wondered how Abigail could stand shadowing them from a distance—assuming it was her. Or maybe it wasn’t her but Fenton. Fenton was big, kind of pudgy and heavy, but strong too, and Hal couldn’t imagine him being scared alone in the woods.

On the other hand, maybe they were right the first time, and Wrangler, Emily’s faithful border collie, was running loose.

As Hal collected the fourth branch and headed back to the clearing, a nagging doubt crawled into the back of his mind. Wrangler was an old, sturdy dog, but he wasn’t big enough to leave footprints the size of those by the fog-hole. And if it was Wrangler out there, why didn’t he come running to greet them?

Hal quickened his pace. It was impossible for any other kind of large animal to be lurking in the woods . . . wasn’t it? They’d all been on the island twelve years—surely they’d have come across a large animal by now.

When he got back to the clearing he found Robbie sitting on a boulder, knees up to his chin, rocking back and forth. He had laid all three branches across the fog-hole. The fog hardly faltered, and a fourth branch across the hole might not help much either, but it would give the boys a good, solid framework to build on. Cramming the gaps with smaller limbs, twigs, leaves and ferns should do the job.

Hal dragged his branch closer. “You gonna help me or not?” he gasped. Robbie said nothing, so Hal finished the job on his own with a final heave. He

stepped back and brushed his hands, nodding with satisfaction. “Now the fun part—”

He broke off and stared at Robbie, noticing something strange for the first time. His friend sat there on the boulder looking forlorn and embarrassed, and his shirt was in tatters over his pale, bony frame.

Hal stared in silence.

Robbie shrugged. “I don’t know what happened. One minute I was struggling with that last branch, and the next—I don’t know, I just—”

Hal waited, bewildered. “Just what?”

“The branch got caught up and I tripped, and I got annoyed and . . . and then . . . I don’t know, I suddenly felt stronger and I just picked up that branch like it was a twig and threw it across the hole.” Robbie shook his head. “I couldn’t believe my own strength, you know? I fell back into the ferns and just sat there staring. Then I realized my shirt was all torn up. I even popped the button on my jeans.”

“Robbie,” Hal said, feeling awkward, “what’s up with you? Did you lose your temper or something?”

“No, I . . . well, I don’t think so.” Robbie frowned. “Maybe I did. I was pretty steamed for a second there, and scratched to bits on thorns, and then the stupid branch wouldn’t budge, and . . .”

Hal stared at his friend, disturbed by the uncertainty he saw plastered across his face. Was Robbie cracking up? Who got so angry they ripped their shirt apart? It hung on him in tatters. All the buttons were gone, and the arms were ripped open lengthways. That had been some temper tantrum!

“Remind me never to annoy you,” Hal said, trying a grin. Robbie seemed to perk up, and the awkward moment was over. “And Robbie, your mom’s gonna kill you when you get home.”

They turned to finish the job they’d started. The hard work was done; now came the fun part, filling in all the gaps and stopping the fog forever.

Something scampered through the woods toward them. Twigs cracked and leaves rustled, and there was the splash of a puddle. Then sudden silence, and in that silence Hal thought he could hear harsh breathing. Something was right there in the shadows, watching them from behind some bushes.

A high, fluty voice floated out of the gloom. “Where am I? What is this place?”

The voice was so strange and unfamiliar that Hal almost jumped out of his skin. He found Robbie clutching at him.

“You!” came the strange voice. “How did I get here?”

About twenty feet in front of the startled boys, a face came into view around a bush. It seemed to hover out of the darkness, bringing with it a bulky body that

Hal couldn't make out. But the face was clear to see, and it wasn't human: an animal of some kind, with bright blue eyes set in a dark red face, and with what seemed like hundreds of razor sharp fangs lining its gaping mouth.

Robbie turned and bolted. Hal pounded after him, praying that his friend didn't get them both lost. Hal didn't look back, but imagined the hideous creature preparing to leap on his back at any moment. Was that its hot breath on his neck? A snarl inches from his ear?

Black Woods was a blur of scratchy bushes, low-hanging branches and squelchy mud all the way to the outskirts, where the boys burst into an open field and stumbled through knee-high grass. Snatching glances over their shoulders and seeing no sign of a monster, they finally collapsed behind a lonesome bush, gasping, streaming with sweat, and almost crying with relief.

"What was *that*?" Hal panted.

"No clue," Robbie said, white-faced. "Scared me to death though. That voice—and that red face—it was like a cat, but with human eyes and hundreds of teeth."

"Yeah, those eyes," Hal agreed with a shudder. "So bright and blue . . ."

"Evil," Robbie said. "Whatever that thing is, it's not something I'm going to stick around and chat with. But how did it get here?"

"That's what it was asking us," Hal remembered. "It was asking where it was and how it got here. Do you think we should tell our parents?"

They discussed the matter at length, and finally decided not to say a word—for now. For one thing, they were not supposed to be in Black Woods. Since Thomas Patten's death, the woods were off-limits, at least to Hal and some of the others. Robbie's parents didn't seem to care so much, but if the boys admitted to being there they'd also have to explain *why* they were there, and then the subject of the fog-hole would come up.

"It's *our* fog-hole," Robbie said, clenching his fists. "We found it, and we're going to block it up. And when the fog stops pouring out and a blue sky appears, it'll be *us* that everyone thanks."

That's if we ever get a chance to return, Hal thought, glancing for the umpteenth time toward the woods. It seemed unlikely they'd be able to finish the job if a strange and frightening creature had taken up residence in the woods.

Tired and disappointed, the boys snuck out from behind the bush and warily skirted the perimeter of Black Woods until they found the sprawling oak where they'd left their bikes and backpacks. They set off across the meadow as fast as they could pedal, Robbie's ragged shirt flapping off his bony shoulders like a flag in the wind.

Chapter Two
Thursday morning class

It was drizzling on Thursday morning when Hal's mom rapped on his bedroom door. He woke bleary-eyed and looked out the window at the thick gray fog. It was a shame he and Robbie hadn't been able to finish blocking the fog-hole. They'd have to return sometime and pack it with smaller branches and twigs, then leaves and ferns, maybe some mud on top to seal it off for good.

With a jolt he remembered the red-faced monster in the woods! He pressed his nose to the glass and scanned the front lawn, half expecting to see a pair of creepy blue eyes staring back at him from behind a tree or hedge. But, thankfully, there was no sign of the creature. Perhaps it was a forest-dweller and preferred to hide itself deep in the woods. That would explain why he and Robbie had never come across the thing before.

Mulling it over, he pulled on his clothes and ambled to the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror, he dipped his hand in the bucket of fresh water and slicked down his short, sandy-colored hair. Then he brushed his teeth with the last of his mom's homemade mint-flavored tooth powder. It wasn't as good as the toothpaste from Out There, but that supply had run out years ago.

Along the hall came the sounds of his mom pattering around in the kitchen. Hal returned to his room, made sure he had the right school books in his backpack, and then popped his head into the living room to check the time.

His dad was there, a huge man, quite unlike Hal and his mom—black hair, brown eyes, olive skin, broad shoulders, and very tall. He had a thick bushy beard that tended to collect food when he ate. He was standing by the fireplace with the precious clock in his hands, winding it up as he did every morning and evening.

“What's the time, Dad?”

“Morning, Hal,” his dad said. “It's just after seven.” He hung the clock back on the wall over the fireplace with the sort of loving care Robbie gave to his precious bugs when he bottled them to take home.

In the kitchen, Hal's mom was busy frying eggs, sliced potatoes and onions over the fire. The kitchen fireplace was even larger than the adjoining one in the living room, and over the crackling flames stood a heavy iron framework with hooks for pots and pans, a rotisserie spit that spanned the hearth, and a small iron surface for frying. Above the frame hung an enormous soot-encrusted metal hood that collected the smoke and guided it up the chimney.

“Hey, Mom,” Hal said.

She smiled at him, her face red and her forehead moist. Her long sandy-colored hair was streaked with gray, and she stood not much taller than Hal, a slim woman with a weary look in her green eyes. “About ready to eat?”

The family ate together as usual, idle words passing between them as they cleaned their plates. Hal’s dad devoured the last of the bread and then kissed his wife goodbye. He threw on a long coat, climbed into well-worn boots, and set off for the farm, leaving Hal to help his mom clear away the plates.

“Be a dear,” his mom said, handing him a bucket. “Go and fetch us some water, would you? My shoulder’s acting up again.”

Hal stepped out into the drizzle and grimaced as the cold damp started to soak through his clothes. He hurried across the lawn to the road, the bucket clanging against his leg. According to his dad, the main road had once been busy with cars, trucks, and motorbikes, the hub of a thriving island community, especially down toward the docks where the old shop fronts were rotting away. Hal found it hard to imagine.

Robbie’s house loomed out of the fog on the opposite side of the road. Despite a choice of bigger, better houses tucked away in idyllic spots on the island, in recent years all eight families had ended up huddled together on this small stretch of road. Living near one another made life much easier, and there was a handy freshwater stream they could all share.

Hal arrived at a narrow, humped bridge, under which the clean, sparkling stream flowed. A wooden frame and pulley system had been rigged up, and Hal hung the bucket on the hook and lowered it into the water. The pulleys made it easy to wind the bucket back up, but carrying it back to the house was another matter. Water slopped over the rim as he hobbled along, and the handle dug into the palm of his hand. How did his mom manage this two or three times a day? He was just glad he lived so close.

“Hal, where’s your coat?” his mom asked with a frown as he returned to the house and dumped the bucket in the kitchen. “You’ll catch a cold.”

“Won’t,” Hal said. He’d never had a cold in his life, and neither had any of his friends.

He pulled on a jacket, grabbed his packed lunch, slipped it into his backpack, and left for school. Packed lunches weren’t essential since class ended before lunchtime anyway, but some of the classmates—Hal and Robbie in particular—preferred to eat out in a field somewhere, or perhaps up a tree, rather than go straight home and sit at a kitchen table. Food always tasted better outdoors!

A heavily trodden dirt path led away from the main road and ran alongside a cornfield bordered with a rickety wooden fence. Since all the kids used the same path, Hal often met his classmates along the way. Sometimes they rode their

bikes, but on wet, muddy days like this it was better to walk. He brushed past Emily and Darcy as they walked together, and caught up to Robbie.

“Get home all right yesterday?” Hal asked.

Robbie nodded and grinned. “I snuck in the bedroom window, changed my shirt, then climbed out and walked in the front door as if I’d just got home. Mom never suspected a thing.”

“Cool.”

They reached the top of the hill and started down the path that led into the meadow. An old community hall, now used as a school, stood there with the tip of its narrow bell tower lost in a mist of drizzle, its aged wood siding dark with moisture.

“I wish we could have blocked that fog-hole,” Robbie said with a faraway look. “Imagine waking up this morning with no fog, just a blue sky and bright yellow sun.”

“It’s raining,” Hal said. “There wouldn’t have been a blue sky anyway.”

A voice shouted from behind. “Hal! Shortie! C’mere!”

Hal groaned.

Heavy feet came stamping up and a large hand clamped onto Hal’s shoulder. “I’m talking to you, squirt. And you, beanpole.”

The hulking form of Fenton Bridges butted in between Hal and Robbie, shoving them apart. He wasn’t quite as tall as Robbie, but was built like a bull, with short spiky hair and small, staring eyes. As always he carried with him a faint smell of underarmbody odor.

“Teacher’s giving us a test today,” he said, glaring at Hal. “That means you’re going to pass me the answers when I need them. Right?”

“Work ’em out yourself.”

Powerful fingers gripped the back of Hal’s neck. “Sorry? Didn’t quite hear you.”

Hal squirmed but couldn’t get free. “Get off!”

“Pick on someone your own size,” Robbie mumbled.

Fenton turned on him at once, but retained his tight grip on Hal’s neck. “Oh yeah? Like who, skeleton boy? Show me a single person our age who’s as big as me, and I’ll go pick on him.”

“Try Out There,” Hal said through gritted teeth. “There are probably hundreds of kids your size you can go play with.”

“Or try the pig sty,” Robbie said.

Fenton released his grip on Hal, and a huge fist lashed out. It caught Robbie on the chin and, in a flash, he was lying in the mud holding his face.

Fenton stood over him, his face red. “Watch yourself, stick insect. Say anything like that again and you’ll be fishing around in that puddle for teeth.”

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