

Middle-Grade Action/Adventure Sample

Chapter 1: The Arm

“Last one to the woods has to wear their mom’s underpants!”

Dylan pedaled his bike faster than ever. He’d caught glimpses of his mother’s frilly undergarments when she did laundry. He did not want to wear those to school. Dylan biked along the edge of town with his two best friends, Tyler and Leon. Tyler was the overactive one who declared the rules of the game. Leon was the cool, laid back one who effortlessly took lead in the race.

This is what life was all about: Friday after school, a long weekend ahead. Homework could wait, teachers crawled back to their dungeons, and all the kids at school who teased Dylan were nowhere in sight. Dylan was born with three fingers on his right hand. He underwent multiple surgeries as an infant, resulting in what Tyler liked to call his lobster claw. Two fingers and a thumb, which reminded Dylan of the claw game at the arcade. He was proud of his hand, as it made him unique. His mom was proud of him, too, as were his friends. And unlike the arcade game, Dylan was very good at grabbing things.

What he wasn’t good at was any kind of athletic sport. As they reached the edge of the woods, Dylan came up last.

“That’s how it’s done,” said Leon, riding around them in circles.

“You lost, Dylan!” Tyler yelled.

“No, I didn’t.” Dylan defended himself, even though he knew it was true. What if the kids at school saw Dylan wearing floral underwear and pantyhose?

“What do you think is in there?” asked Leon, pointing to the woods.

They never ventured past the treeline. Their parents always said it was dangerous in the woods. Dylan’s mother claimed there was a scary man with wooden branches for arms and twigs for fingers, waiting to attack him and turn him into a tree. Dylan kept that to himself so his friends wouldn’t laugh at him.

“I bet there’s a candy factory in there,” said Tyler, tossing rocks past the trees. “That’s why they want to keep it secret.”

“You can’t be serious,” laughed Leon. “We’d see candy-colored smoke rising from the trees if there was a factory.”

“Why don’t you tell me what’s in there, then?”

“I bet if you go deep enough, the trees clear away and there’s a shimmering lake.” Leon closed his eyes with a smile, visualizing it. “We could swim in it for hours and go fishing.”

Tyler and Leon have such a unique way of seeing the world. Sometimes, Dylan feels jealous he doesn't see things like they do. He cares about his friends, and most of the time he's happy with them. But every once in a while, Dylan craves a friend who truly understands him. Not just accepting him or caring for him, but getting him.

“That would be sick,” said Tyler, looking at Dylan. “What do you think is in there, lobster claw?”

Dylan took a shaky step towards the trees. He looked in between their long trunks, holding his breath. Nothing jumped out at him, so he took another step. A low-hanging branch swayed near his head, the leaves brushing his head. That's when something rustled deep in the woods. Dylan heard the sound of crunching wood. He yelped and ran back to his bike.

"There's nothing good in those woods," he said, cowering.

"Don't be a scared little seahorse," Tyler laughed. He liked to be original in his insults, even if they made no sense. "Come on, we should check it out."

"No," said Dylan, knees shaking.

But once Leon stepped into the woods, it was decided. If one of them did something, they all did. That's how they worked.

Tyler ran into the woods after Leon, and Dylan was left alone. As afraid as he was of the woods, he feared being alone by the bikes even more. Pushing his mother's words out of his head, Dylan ventured through the trees.

"Boo!" screamed Tyler, jumping from behind a tree at Dylan.

Dylan screamed, much higher than he wanted to. He frowned as Tyler laughed like a hyena.

"Hey, chill out," said Leon, checking on Dylan. "Are you okay? Dude, there's nothing to be afraid of. See for yourself."

The sun began to set, so the trees left long shadows. They looked like they were trying to reach out for Dylan, grabbing him. But Leon put an arm around him as they walked, and Dylan wasn't so scared anymore.

“Not seeing any candy,” Leon teased Tyler.

“Shut up. If we find it, you’re not getting any!”

Leon only laughed at the empty threat. “See, Dylan? It’s not so—”

All three boys stopped.

Before them, sticking out of a pile of leaves was something shiny and silver. In the faint sunlight, it shimmered like the lake Leon described. Dylan locked his feet to the ground as Tyler and Leon moved closer.

“What in the wet, wild world is that?” asked Tyler. Grabbing a stick, he poked it.

“Don’t,” said Leon, holding up both hands. For the first time that day, he looked scared. Leon took the stick from Tyler and used it to push away the covering leaves. Clearing the way, he revealed a metallic arm. At least it started out as metal, from the elbow. Near the middle of the arm, toward the wrist, flesh covered the arm. The same kind of skin Dylan, Tyler, and Leon all had.

“That’s not...” Tyler’s voice trailed off.

Moving slow and careful, Leon leaned closer. He cleared the leaves at the top of the arm, exposing a hand.

Leon and Tyler both screamed, running back. But Dylan didn’t. He stood his ground, staring at the hand. He moved closer, ignoring the alarms going off in his head.

Kneeling towards the hand, Dylan saw it only had three fingers.

It was his arm.

Dylan recognized it immediately. The same skin tone, the same freckles, the same fingernails. And of course, the same number of fingers, identical to his.

Once he realized what he was holding, Dylan dropped the arm and ran. He caught up with Tyler and Leon outside of the woods, as they panted and caught their breaths.

“What the gummy worms was that?” asked Tyler, on the verge of tears.

“That was no candy,” panted Leon, eyes wide.

Dylan turned back to the woods, trembling. “It’s no lake, either.”

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