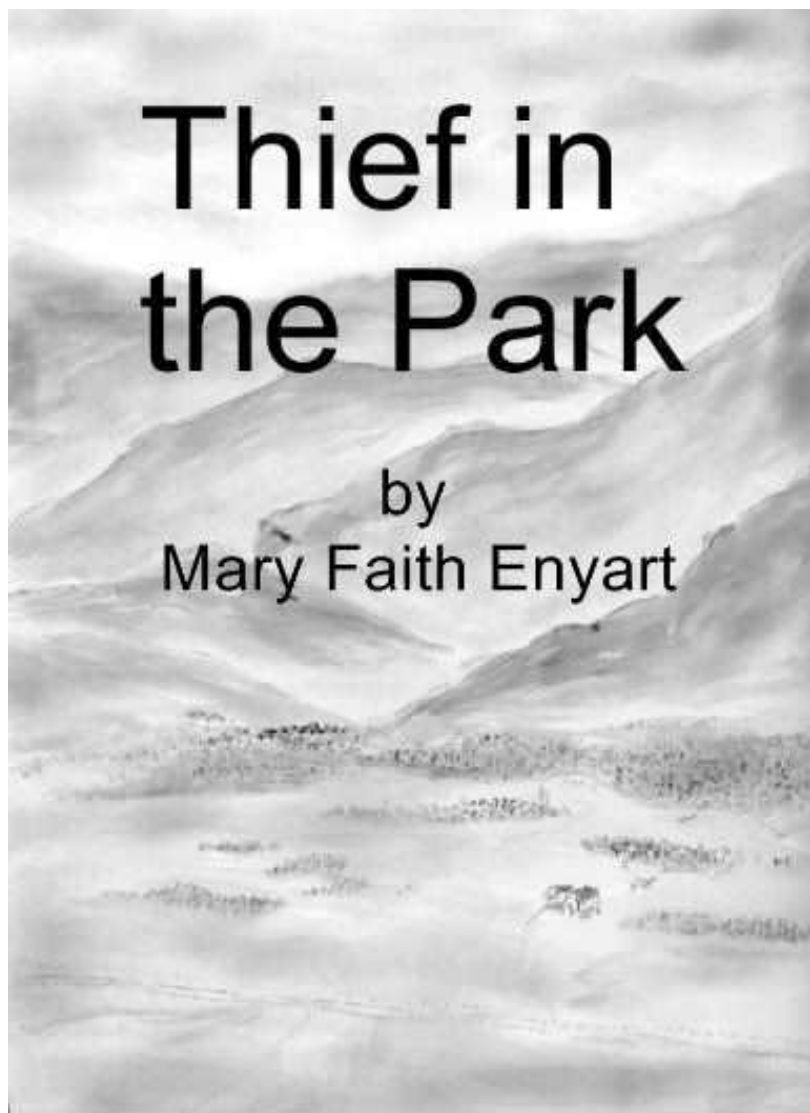


Thief in the Park

by
Mary Faith Enyart





1

Just a Bony Kid

The heavy door opened without a sound, and the four-footed intruder slipped inside. He paused momentarily, then leaped onto the form in the bed.

Immediately the sleeping person sprang to life—twisting, kicking, wrapping strong arms around his attacker. The wrestlers spilled to the floor—a thrashing mass of covers and bodies, each struggling to gain the upper hand.

Finally, one figure lay still. The other halted.

Suddenly laughter erupted, and the attacker licked the victim's face.

“Boone, you're better than an alarm clock!”

Evan Mace sat up and affectionately ruffled his dog's coat, burying his face deep in the silky black and white fur. “Okay, boy,

we gotta roll—big day coming up!”

Two hours later, Mrs. Mace strolled out to the van with her eleven-year-old son, Evan, and his three-year-old Border Collie, Boone. “Ah, a refreshing morning,” she said contentedly, flexing her shoulders and breathing deeply.

Behind them, Evan’s four-year-old sister, Esther, skipped toward the van, waving her sparkling fairy wand overhead. Its rainbow-colored ribbons fluttered like butterfly wings in the cool breezes that wafted off the nearby Great Smoky Mountains. Persimmon, Esther’s honey-colored cat, ran by her side. Neither Esther nor Persimmon paid one bit of attention to the conversation. In fact, at the moment, Esther was in her own imaginary world, where normal and ordinary did not exist—only fanciful adventures.

“Load up,” said Mrs. Mace, opening the van doors.

Evan and Boone climbed in the side door and maneuvered their way toward the back. There Evan parked himself and buckled up. Boone lay down on the floor between the two middle bucket seats.

“Mommy,” said Esther, plopping herself onto her booster cushion, “I’m the ‘Boss of All the Fairies!’”

“Really?” said Mrs. Mace, snapping Esther’s seatbelt and tightening the straps.

“Yes, really,” said Esther, vigorously nodding her chin up and down, her eyes flashing with excitement. “And I’m going to lead Nandan through *Scaredy-Cat Land*—through *lions* . . . and *tigers* . . . and *volcanoes* . . . and *tornadoes*! Won’t he be happy?” Nandan was the four-year-old brother of Evan’s best friend, Mica.

“No doubt,” said Mrs. Mace with a chuckle. “Nandan will be happy and safe.”

In the backseat, Evan smiled at his little sister’s antics.

Mrs. Mace cautiously steered the vehicle out of the driveway.

Behind her, Esther happily waved her wand, allowing its ribbons to tickle Boone's nose; he sneezed.

A minute later they pulled into the Habber's driveway, and saw Nandan sitting on the front steps. He took one quick look at Esther and flew away across the front yard, his superhero's cape flying in his wake.

"Nandan, I'll save you!" shouted Esther, escaping the van and chasing him around the house.

"Good morning, Camilia," said Joan Mace to Mrs. Habber, who had come out to greet them. "I hope Esther doesn't get Nandan in trouble! Thanks for keeping her. We should be back in a couple hours." Evan and his mom rode in welcomed silence all the way to Neelburg, the closest little town, where Joan parked in front of the supermarket.

"Okay, Evan," she said, gathering her purse and shopping list. "you get your hair cut. I'll purchase what I need and then meet you outside the bank. Remember, the only building Boone can enter is the barbershop. Thank goodness Mr. Cutter likes dogs. If you get done early, wait for me on the bench in front of the bank. See you there."

"Got it," said Evan, enjoying the greater independence his parents had given him this summer.

Evan felt a surge of manliness—confronting the barbershop alone. He squared his shoulders, stretched to his full height, and strolled confidently to the corner, where he and Boone waited for the light to change. Just as he started across Main Street, the barbershop door opened and out stepped the last person he wanted to see.

"Putrid pickles!" mumbled Evan, feeling his emerging sense

of manliness evaporate.

Wearing a nasty smirk, Bruce, “the Moose,” Meckel swaggered toward Evan, met him in the street, and blocked his forward progress. “Well, if it isn’t Drip—all alone,” he scoffed. “Where’s

your mommy? Don’t you need her to guard you from the big bad world?”

Evan looked Moose in the eye, but said nothing. What was there to say?

Moose laughed. “By the way, I’ll be driving my four-wheeler over your way anytime now. Watch out!” he hissed, leaning into Evan’s personal space. “I wouldn’t want to run over you or your mangy dog!”

The husky, thirteen-year-old cuffed Evan’s shoulder, knocked him off-balance, and then strolled down the center of the street like he owned Neelburg.



“Someday . . . !” thought Evan, shaking his head.

Boone growled.

Moose was a tall, muscular, big-bellied teenager, with *attitude*. He wore his nickname like a badge and strutted around with a perpetual sneer on his face. When Moose was near, smaller kids avoided him. It was easier to step aside and remain unnoticed and unharmed, if possible.

For years now, Moose had bragged about his daring deeds and extreme sports prowess, and often showed up uninvited. Then, this summer, to make matters worse, Moose’s dotting parents had given him an all-terrain vehicle for his thirteenth birthday. They put no restrictions on him whatsoever. So, Moose roamed wherever he pleased, audaciously ignoring property rights and public safety.

Evan shook his head. Would he ever have enough size and strength to face Moose as an equal? Would he someday stand his ground and defend himself against Moose? Perhaps, but not today.

“Come on, Boone,” he said, gloomily patting his dog’s head.

When they entered the barbershop, Mr. Cutter was buzzing the head of a high school football player whom Evan recognized. Two other men sat in chairs waiting their turn.

“Hey, look who has graced our premises!” said the barber, as Evan closed the door. “Fellows, meet our locally famous, rescue dog, Boone, and his valiant owner, Evan Samuel Mace. How are you doing, Ev? Any more dangerous, midnight, mountain exploits?”

“Hi,” said Evan, feeling self-conscious. He took a chair with the others, while Boone lay obediently at his feet. “No, nothing much going on.”

“Well, your rescuing that little girl was big—I mean *really* big news around these parts. Guess you know you’re famous. In this shop we’ve been jawing on that rescue for two weeks.”

“Otto Cutter, what are you talking about?” guffawed a large man in overalls, as he leaned forward and doubtfully scrutinized Evan from head to toe. “He’s just a bony kid!”

“Fred, you’re out of touch, as usual,” said Mr. Cutter. “You ought to read the newspaper. This young man and his dog, along with two other friends, rescued a lost four-year-old girl in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Saved her life, they did.”

“Otto, are you telling the honest truth?” asked the other man, also eyeballing Evan.

Evan blushed, wishing the men would talk about something else—but no, once Mr. Cutter got on a subject, he liked to finish it good and proper.

“You bet. The whole story and their picture were all over the front page of the *Knoxville News Sentinel*. Evan’s dad is a Ranger in the Park, and he brought in a Search and Rescue Team. Evan’s grandpa, Doc Mace, got in on the act, too.”

“Well, I’ll be!” exclaimed Fred, raising his bushy eyebrows and reassessing Evan. “Mighty fine deeds, that’s for sure.”

“Boone was the real hero,” said Evan, patting his dog and thinking about THE STICK’s help—but *that was a secret*—known only by Mica, Charu, and himself.

“Yeah,” said the football jock in the barber’s chair. “Cool, Evan! Coach Habber told us guys all about the rescue. Awesome, Dude!”

“Thanks,” said Evan, smiling for the first time since arriving at the barbershop.

“Yep, we’re proud of you!” said Mr. Cutter with a nod. Evan relaxed, and his former sense of manliness returned.



2

The Stick Flies Again!

After his haircut, Evan and Boone walked down the sidewalk to the Neelam County Bank and peered within.

“Hey, Ev! How ya doin’?” said the security guard, Mr. Shield, who was leaning back in an old chair just inside the door. “Whoa, there!” he added, dropping the chair with a thud and stretching his leg across the doorway just as Boone stuck his nose across the threshold. “No dogs allowed in this establishment, partner.”

“We aren’t coming in,” said Evan, pulling back on Boone’s

collar, “just waiting for Mom.”

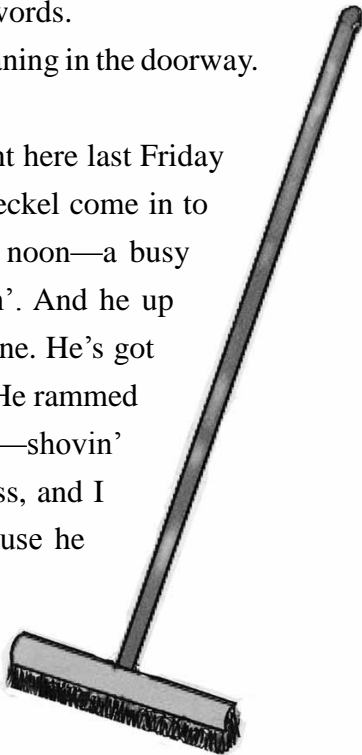
“Sorry, she ain’t here,” said Mr. Shield, stepping outside to scratch Boone’s head. “Boy, oh boy, this is *some* dog! And that rescue you and Mica and Charu went on! Hoo-eee! Wish I’d been with ya! I been guardin’ this bank nigh onto forty years, and the onliest excitement ever is mice. Wish I could catch me a live bank robber—wouldn’t that be somethin’?”

“We really do have us a terrible mouse problem though, and they terrify the ladies somethin’ fierce. It’s the old barns close by that attracts ‘em; the mice come to eat the grain. Then they wander in here lookin’ for dessert. Can’t have mice in a bank, so I use my broom on ‘em. No use wastin’ a bullet on a mouse, I always say. Looky here. I keep my broom just behind the door—ready and loaded, ya know,” he said, laughing at his own play on words.

“Oh, yeah, I see it,” said Evan, leaning in the doorway. “It’s a mean looking broom alright.”

“We did have us some excitement here last Friday though,” said Mr. Shield. “Moose Meckel come in to do somethin’ for his dad ‘round noon—a busy time, ya know—lots of folks waitin’. And he up and tried to push to the front of the line. He’s got bad manners just oozin’ out his skin. He rammed his way in, shoulderin’ and elbowin’—shovin’ this way and that. I seen his meanness, and I wuz tryin’ to decide what to do, ‘cause he wasn’t really breakin’ no law, just bein’ rude.

“Well, anyways, that little old retired teacher, Ms. Charm, couldn’t tolerate bein’ elbowed—no siree!



She took her jumbo-sized purse—heavy as a fat hog, I’d reckon—and she swung that big ole thang up in the air—twisted her whole self around in the job—and ‘BAM!’ she landed it right up the side of Moose’s head!”

“Really?” laughed Evan.

“Yeah, I saw the whole thang with my own eyes. Moose grabbed his noggin and high-tailed it out’a here. Didn’t arrest Ms. Charm or nothin’, though. She’s too old. Besides, I figure Moose needs a good boppin’ ever so often. His mom and dad let him off too easy, I say, or he’d be actin’ better.”

“Homer! Homer Shield!” hollered an authoritative voice from within the bank. “Get yourself back inside and do some guarding, like you’re supposed to!”

“Gotta go,” said Homer. “Nice talkin’ to you and Boone.” With that Mr. Shield adjusted his belt and holster, and returned to his post just inside the door.

Evan sat down on the iron bench near the bank and watched the people go in and out of various mercantile shops along Neelburg’s Main Street. Boone drifted to the grassy area behind the bench, where he began sniffing expectantly. Pretty soon Evan saw his mother approaching, and Boone dashed to meet her.

“Hey, Mom! You ready to go?” called Evan.

“Almost,” she said, stroking Boone’s furry back. “I have some business in the bank; then we’re off. Be patient just a little longer.” The bank’s ornate door closed behind her.

Evan sat down and rubbed his back against the bench. “A haircut gives me the itch, Boone. It’s like having chigger bites all over.”

Impatient with the inactivity, Boone began snooping under the bench again, and soon reappeared sneezing and swiping his dirty nose on Evan’s pants. “That’s what you get for poking into cobwebs

filled with dried bugs,” said Evan. He wiped Boone’s face with his hand and rubbed the matted webbing onto the grass.

Suddenly, from inside the bank, he heard a crash, a gunshot, and an angry bellow, “*EVERYBODY, . . . DOWN! HIT THE FLOOR!*”

“Mom!” he cried, jumping to his feet. Boone darted toward the bank entrance. At the last second, Evan grabbed him. “No, Boone!” hissed Evan, forcefully closing the dog’s mouth with his hand. “Stay!”

High pitched screams echoed through the bank’s brick walls. Evan heard bodies dropping to the wooden floor, and fearful murmurings—then silence.

“*This is a hold up!*” shouted the same rough voice. “*Do what I say, and no one will get hurt!*”

“*Tellers, get up. Bag all your cash. NOW!*”

Evan, fearing for his mother’s safety, wondered what he should do. He dare not try to sneak inside to take a look. He might startle the robber and cause a shooting spree. “Where are the police?” he wondered. Earlier he had seen a squad car drive by.

The angry robber shouted at Mr. Shield: “*Hey, old man! Drop that weapon, or you’re dead!*”

Desperate for help, Evan studied the streets of Neelburg. There wasn’t a soul in sight. All was quiet. White puffy clouds drifted lazily across the clear, blue sky, as though it were any other day. The town’s dreamy summer tranquility had been violently disrupted, and no one outside the bank knew—except Evan—and, wouldn’t you know it, he had left his cell phone in the van.

Evan wished for someone—anyone to come along. Even old Moose would be welcome. No such luck; Evan felt helpless.

“Thanks,” the unknown robber mocked. “You folks are downright agreeable! I guess you value your lives more than your money. Keep it that way!”

Evidently the tellers had complied. Footsteps thumped toward the door.

“Okay, folks, listen up!” the man resumed his shouting. “ALL OF YOU—stay on the floor for a count of sixty, and no one will get hurt. START COUNTING—SLOW AND LOUD—COME ON, LET ME HEAR YOU!”

Evan heard nervous, wobbly voices: “One . . . two . . . three . . .”

“SLOWER! LOUDER! Start over!”

Again the counting: “One two
. three”

Evan knelt behind the bench, his hand gripping Boone’s collar, restraining the dog’s desire to attack.

Slowly the bank’s door opened, and a large man inched his way backwards out the doorway. Mr. Shield must have moved, for the robber bellowed: *“FREEZE, old man! Touch that broom, and you won’t live to tell the story!”*

“I wish I could sneak up behind that robber and trip him,” thought Evan.

At once, Evan felt THE STICK leave his pocket. “Yes!” he whispered, as he watched it streak toward the robber and strike a heavy blow behind his knees.

Suddenly confusion reigned. The robber’s legs collapsed, he fell backwards out the bank door, his weapon slid down the sidewalk, and money bags spilled their contents



over the steps.

At that moment, Mr. Shield sprang to the spot, swinging his broom like a battle-axe.

“Hi-yah!” roared the old security guard, as he smacked the robber a mighty, scratchy blow to the head.

The robber growled, rolled over, and began crawling toward his gun a few feet away.

“Don’t even think about it, you scumbag!” roared Mr. Shield, voicing all the thunder he’d been restraining for forty years. With both hands, he poked his own retrieved weapon into the fallen robber’s side, and stood over him.

Evan struggled to suppress a laugh. The rumor around Neelberg was that Mr. Shield never even loaded his gun.

“I gotcha, you no good, filthy thief! Ha! And you thought I was too old!” Mr. Shield shifted his gun to one hand and snatched his broom off the ground with his other. He poked the dirty bristles up the robber’s nostrils. “And just think, Mr. Scumbag, those broom straws are coated with mouse guts! Smell tasty, don’t they?”

Sirens roared and police cars screeched to a halt in the street. Alarmed citizens streamed out of businesses, and a crowd—including the men from the barbershop—gathered around the scene.

Otto Cutter shouted, “What happened?”

Another man said, “Got us a bank robbery! Homer looks ferocious!”

Evan felt THE STICK stealthily weave its way back into his pocket. “Thanks,” he whispered to his secret helper.

He moved close enough to the bank door to check on his mother. She was still inside, standing with a group of bank employees and customers. When she saw Evan, she smiled and waved. She was unhurt. What a relief!

“Hey, Ev!” shouted Mr. Shield. “I caught me a rat this time! Pretty sight, ain’t he?” Homer hooted so heartily, that the whole crowd erupted with laughter and back slapping. The robber, not amused in the least, closed his eyes and moaned.

“Homer Shield!” yelled someone from the crowd. “*You’re the man!*”

The crowd began to chant: “Ho-mer! Ho-mer! Ho-mer! Ho-mer!”
Mr. Shield stood taller and beamed.



3

What Smells?

As soon as Evan and Boone settled in the van with his mom, Evan grabbed his cell phone and texted Mica and Charu:

THE STICK halts robbery

The Rock

1:00

CU

Ev

Mica Joel Habber and Evan were best friends—had been ever since they were toddlers. Mica was a tall, lean, African American who loved science, the outdoors, and sports. He outran all the kids near his age—resulting in his nickname, “Lightning.” His dad, Coach Habber, taught science and coached football at Neelam County High School, where Mica’s sixteen-year-old brother, Marcus, was an honor student and a star running-back on last season’s undefeated football team. Mrs. Habber, Camilia, was a close friend of Evan’s mom, and taught fifth grade at the local elementary school. The youngest member of the Habber family was four-year-old Nandan, who often played with Esther.

Mica’s family lived on one side of Evan’s grandparents, Samuel and Lizetta Mace, and Evan’s family resided on the other. Both boys thought this was perfect. After all, Gran loved baking chocolate chip cookies for hungry boys. Gramps was a retired veterinarian whom everyone called “Doc.” He kept a menagerie of needy animals on his farm, and the boys often assisted with their care.

Right after this school year ended—just when the boys were on the brink of a fantastic summer—a girl had moved into the Hickory Creek Cove community and rocked their world. Charu Elina Roundtree and her parents settled into the new house across the road from Doc and Gran. Her family now owned and operated the Hickory Creek Market on Overview Parkway.

Initially, Mica and Evan fervently opposed having this former city girl enter their domain—so much so, that they tried to repel her offers of friendship. But their efforts didn’t scare Charu away; she demonstrated that she was more than adequate for their

challenges, even joined their mud fights in Hickory Creek. And, to prove herself to the boys, she not only held the giant frog, Uggly Muggly, *she kissed him*. In the end, the boys found her to be a true and fun-loving friend. Also, though the boys might not admit it, she sometimes served as a conscientious monitor of appropriate behavior and parental boundaries.

In short, they liked her. And so it happened: Evan, Mica, and Charu became a tight threesome—all eleven years old, all rising sixth graders.

They had one other significant thing in common—they all shared a mysterious secret—THE STICK. They alone knew of THE STICK's existence; they alone had experienced its amazing feats.

Evan's text message called his friends to their usual meeting location, The Rock. It was their ultimate haven—private, safe, and almost equidistant for each—about a half mile, if they took shortcuts. This large triangular boulder protruded into Hickory Creek in back of Doc's farm. It was a smooth oasis in a gushing mountain stream.



At the start of the summer, the Maces, Habbers, and Roundtrees had granted their eleven-year-olds permission to roam considerable forested acreage on their combined land. However, without an adult, the kids were not allowed to cross Hickory Creek and go into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Evan's grandparents, Doc and Lizetta Mace, owned farmland that encompassed an infirmary, a barn, pastures, an orchard, a huge amount of undisturbed forest, even the original Mace log cabin. Also Doc had two other fascinating sites—Chestnut Pond and Elijah's Cave—but both were off limits due to potential hazards.

The kids respected these restrictions, knowing they would lose their freedoms if they disobeyed. In actuality, they had entered the Park a couple weeks back to help rescue a little girl. But their parents had made it perfectly clear that this was a onetime exception to the rules, and it was not to be repeated!

In route to The Rock, Evan, Mica, and Charu usually met each other somewhere along the old farm lane, and that was just what happened about 1:00 on this day.

“Yo!” said Mica, running to join the others.

“Hey, yourself!” said Charu, flopping down on the grass to scratch Boone behind the ears. “What's up, Ev?”

“THE STICK has done it again!” announced Evan.

“Sweet!” said Mica. “What happened?”

Evan told the dramatic details: the robber's taunts, THE STICK's blow which tripped the culprit, and Homer's heroic feats.

“Way to go, Homer!” said Mica. “I don't understand THE STICK, but it sure is useful.”

“You can say that again,” said Charu. “Though, there is the one, teensy tiny drawback: it only obeys Evan—who found it in the first place.”

“Or more accurately, *it found me!*” said Evan.

The threesome followed the well-worn forest path toward Hickory Creek. Near The Rock, they became aware of an unpleasant odor.

“What smells?” said Charu, gazing at the surrounding woods. The closer they drew to Hickory Creek, the stronger the stench.

“Maybe it’s a decomposing animal,” said Mica.

“Whatever it is, it reeks!” said Evan, holding his nose. “Boone, what do you think?”

Boone, already shifting his nose from side to side, lowered his head to the ground and advanced swiftly along the path. Evan, Mica, and Charu glanced at each other and ran after Boone. As they emerged into the clearing by Hickory Creek, Boone dashed ahead to The Rock, barked, and turned to face them.

“The Rock?” said Charu in disbelief.

Mica sprinted to The Rock, swiped a finger across its coated surface, and exclaimed, “It’s hog manure!”

“Hog manure?” said Evan. “Gramps doesn’t have any hogs. No one upstream has hogs. That manure didn’t just wash down and coat The Rock all by itself!”

“You’re right,” said Mica. “Look closely. Someone has spread this hog muck like icing on a cake.”

Suddenly, Charu pointed: “Look. There’s a large ‘M’ scratched in the manure!”

“No mystery intended,” said Mica. “The Moose takes credit for his foul deed.”

“Signing manure—yuck!” said Charu, raising one eyebrow. “What’s the message?”

“Well, it’s not, ‘Have a nice day!’” said Mica.

“For sure,” said Evan. “More like ‘Remember who’s got the power around here, you lowly wimps!’”

“Ooh!” said Charu heatedly. “I’d like to smear this manure on his face!”

“No need,” said Mica with a grin. “Think about it. In order to paint this rock with dung, Moose had to crawl around and get it all over himself. Now *that* is a happy thought!”

“Yeah!” laughed Evan. “Imagine him working so hard just to harass us—filling up buckets of manure, hauling it down here on his swanky new ATV, and crawling around to spread the stuff.”

“So . . . I guess *we* get to clean it,” said Charu.

“Ev, do you think . . . I mean . . . might THE STICK do the job for us?” asked Mica.

“It’s worth a try,” said Evan, pulling the forked object out of his pocket and laying it in his open palm. “Here goes. I wish THE STICK would clean the manure off The Rock.”

Evan, Mica, and Charu waited, hoping to see THE STICK zoom over The Rock with one magical clean-up swoop. But nothing happened. It lay immobile in Evan’s hand, unreceptive to his wish.

“Somehow I didn’t think it would,” said Charu, laughing in spite of the revolting task they faced. “Guess we’ve got to fetch buckets and scrub brushes. Ev, does Doc have what we need in the infirmary?”

“Sure,” said Evan, heading back up the path. “Let’s get to it. Come on, Boone.”

After the threesome left, a large, laughing head popped out from behind the bushes. “Yes!” he said, pumping the air. “The Moose strikes again!”