

CHAPTER I

Seventh grade is a series of multiple-choice questions. I'm not just talking about quizzes or choices in the school cafeteria, which are more like choices between types of torture than types of food.

I'm talking transportation. Do you: (A) walk, or (B) ride your bike? (Bike.)

I'm talking ethics. Do you: (A) tell your middle school principal that her records are completely vulnerable, or (B) hack them? (Hack, though Davy is better at it than I am.)

I'm also talking personal safety. Do you: (A) take Davy's bet and wade along Blue Harbor's toxic shoreline or (B) avoid it like the plague? (Take the bet. And I didn't get the plague or even toe fungus. But I did get a weird respiratory thing that kept me out of school for two weeks. Davy blamed himself, for mentioning it.)

Social situations require more letters of the alphabet.

For instance, say it's a Friday afternoon and you witness your so-called friends hanging out with your so-called enemy. Do you:

(A) Pretend it doesn't bug you that your friends are talking to Derek Ripley, a guy who's hated you since second grade?

(B) Keep walking and pretend you don't see them?

(C) Go right up to them and ask why they're even hanging out with Derek Ripley when they know he still calls you Slime Boy?

Strategically, B has worked for me the most often, so I stepped into the courtyard and stared up at the clouds, which were white and fluffy but still somehow ominous against the painted afternoon sky.

This is not a metaphor: The sky was literally painted on the underside of the awning that covered every centimeter of the courtyard at Blue Harbor Middle School. The awning was supposed to protect us from what Principal Brown called "The Elements." Basically, it meant that school authorities had decided the best way to preserve student health was to put up the equivalent of a giant umbrella.

"Yo, Goldstein." Derek noticed me first. His voice was tough and low, as if he was trying out for Detective No. 2 in the school play.

I pretended I was shocked and surprised to see them all standing there. "Yo," I said, even though I'm not the yo type.

"Did you hear?" Derek said. "Varney found a lobster."

"So?" We were always finding lobsters, or pieces of them, along the banks of what we still called Blue Harbor. The

original harbor was washed out before I was born, when the ocean swelled up and swallowed half our town—and every other town along the East Coast. It moved our shoreline to where Main Street used to be. We could see slabs of pavement below the surface when the sand shifted, which was pretty much all the time. There were still calm spots, but the waves mostly came at the shore like they were looking for a fight.

Sometimes the waves brought shells with them, or lobster claws, always detached. I had a jar of them at home, dry and light as dust.

“So?” Derek mimicked. “You wouldn’t say that if you knew what I knew.”

“Oh, just tell him, Derek,” said Delphinium Perez, her face glowing, her mouth looking like it wanted to tell. Under normal circumstances, Delphinium would have told—she talked to me more than any other girl in Blue Harbor, including my own sister. But Derek was king of the moment. I walked toward him, a magnet compelled, and I understood why my two best friends had stopped to listen. I almost forgave them: Delphinium with her skinny arms and sneaky smile, and Davy Hudson, who memorized Latin phrase books and was shorter than everyone else because he’d skipped a grade. I could have skipped a grade, too, but my mother didn’t want me to be too far away from what she called my “socially correct peer group.” I pictured the seventh graders

I knew. There wasn't anything socially correct about a single one of us.

"Just tell me, Derek," I repeated. "What's the big deal?"

"It's alive!" Davy crowed, forgetting all about Derek's kingly status.

"For real?"

"For real, Slime Boy. It was moving its claws and everything. I'll bet it weighed a pound and a half."

"Is that a lot?" asked Delphinium. She had been named, like her sisters, after New England's recently extinct wildflowers. Indigo was the luckiest in her family; Lupine, which sounded like the scientific name for "port-a-potty," came off the worst.

"It weighs more than a softball," I said. Despite her skinny arms, Delph pitched for the school softball team. Davy liked to calculate her ERA, which was currently at 1.89. "More like three softballs. That'd be the equivalent of 680 grams."

"I know what a pound and a half is, thank you," said Delphinium, who was also good at math. I kept trying to get her (and everyone else) to use the metric system, like every other country in the world. No luck. "I meant: Is that a lot *for a lobster?*"

"Anything's a lot for a lobster, if it's alive." I looked at Derek. "You're sure Leroy wasn't joking? He wasn't just wiggling it around?"

“I saw it myself,” Derek said. “I held it. Almost got pinched, too. Had to get all the details for my dad.”

Derek’s father worked for the EPF, which officially stood for Environmental Police Force. Unofficially, it stood for Police Farce. And sometimes Police Farts. They were a government agency, sort of new and already corrupt, set up to satisfy a group of scientists who were still worried about climate change.

I suppose I should be glad that the government had finally acknowledged that the climate *was* changing, and had been, faster than anybody had imagined. When my dad was my age, the government said it was all a lie. Which may be one reason that he could never get used to the new restrictions, which, okay, were probably created so the EPF could give out fines. Those were used to give bonuses to the EPF workers so they could take their families on nice vacations. They didn’t seem to be using the money to fund research or do anything that would make the environment better.

Along with issuing fines, the EPF had a game division, which transported “fragile species,” a designation that made it sound like it was the animals’ fault they were dying, to the Center for Species Rehabilitation in New Arcadia. Our science class was supposed to take a virtual field trip there. Mr. Kletter, our science teacher, had already suggested that we “manage our expectations.”

“Does Leroy still have it?” I gave up trying to hide my excitement.

“Doubt it,” Derek said. “I told my dad as soon as I put the thing back in the bucket. He’s probably bringing Varney to headquarters right now. The Blue Harbor EPF has the most efficient—”

I was already halfway to my bike. “Come on!” I was addressing my actual friends, but Derek went for his bicycle, too. I pulled my One out of my pocket, mounted it on my handlebars, and said Leroy Varney’s name. A projection beamed back at me, mapping my way to his house. Left on Rockaway, right on Gull, that was the shortest route. It took us away from the town’s air-conditioned bike path, but I didn’t care.

“No fair, Ahab.” Davy pedaled hard behind me. His hair was cut short and close, in a fade, but that didn’t stop the sweat from dripping down his neck. “Ever hear of breathing?”

I pedaled harder and held straight for two more blocks until Beacon, my own sweat coating my chest like oil. Heat rose from the pavement and blurred the horizon. Every now and then, we passed a yard that looked lush and green, as if it had come out of a catalog, which it probably had. The other yards were ashy brown. Spring in Maine. What a joke.

I’d heard my mother wax poetic about the springs of her childhood, where people hunted for snowdrops or the first

purple crocus. You'd have to be blind, deaf, and anosmic to think that this—the code reds and an ocean that the media had nicknamed the New Dead Sea—was the way the world was supposed to be. But that's the world I pedaled through to get to Leroy's.