

INSIDE A HOLLOW TREE

A NOVEL BY

KEVIN P. WHITE

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KP White

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Dalton Hobby is no ordinary boy. Made a ward of the State after his mother dies and father disappears, he never smiles... or speaks. Bounced from one foster home to another, his caseworker doesn't know what to do with him. Finally, she gets an idea: send him to an all-boys boarding school.

On a rainy afternoon, Dalton arrives at Capling Hall School for Boys carrying a small suitcase and a large green garbage bag that he immediately hides inside the hollow of a dead tree. One by one, the dark and wonderful secrets that bag holds are exposed, revealing just how extraordinary Dalton Hobby really is.

Kevin P. White's has written four novels, two non-fiction books, 8 children's stories and hundreds of songs. His books have won numerous international book awards.



2011 Readers Favorite Award Winner

*"5 stars - Inside a Hollow Tree is a sad, yet intoxicating story about a young boy who has suffered many life tragedies that most people will never have to go through... This book is **wonderful** and brings you into the mind of someone so different from anyone you have ever known."*

--ReadersFavorite.com



Dedications

I dedicate this book to Lawrence Wardroper, Sandy Wright, Steven Trenholme, and John Smikahl... true friends when I needed them most.

And to my sister Karen, who was my very best friend while I was growing up.

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CHAPTER ONE

Dalton Hobby was no ordinary boy. This was apparent to his most recent caseworker, Susan Ripley, virtually the moment she laid eyes on him. It wasn't anything visible that made him different. It was just that there seemed to be a sense of hollowness about him, as if he was no more than a mannequin. Small for his age, both in height and weight, with short blonde hair and large, dark-rimmed glasses, in some ways he looked more like a doll than a child. But, unlike most dolls, there was no smile on his face or gladness in his eyes.

Dalton was an orphan, made a ward of the court after his mother died and his father disappeared just before Dalton turned eleven. Bouncing from one foster home to the next, he was labeled a 'problem child' and 'deeply disturbed', and had spent much of his time in group homes. He'd had several case workers, and most had been frustrated by their lack of progress with him.

It wasn't that Dalton was a 'bad' kid. He wasn't a trouble-maker. It was just that, for some reason, he just never, ever fit in.

Never in the almost two years during which Susan Ripley had known him had Dalton ever done anything terrible. But neither had he ever done anything that might endear himself to her or anyone else.

He rarely spoke.

He never smiled.

He never, ever laughed.

And those few who had ever ventured to hug him over the past few years all had felt how his entire body immediately tensed up, as if he was preparing to ward off a blow.

And yet, there was something about him that prompted Ms. Ripley one day to ask the question: 'What if?'

What if he wasn't kept in the revolving door system of foster and group homes, never knowing for sure where he would be in a month or even a week? What if he was given some stability? What if he was given a chance?

And then, out of the blue, chance presented itself. Unexpectedly having access to a cache of pre-election money, Dalton's caseworker started making phone calls, first to her superiors to obtain permission to do what she had thought of, and then to boarding schools throughout the state, where she believed Dalton might, at the very least, get some stability in his life. Even if he went to different homes each summer, at least his school would remain the same. And perhaps some foster family might find it in their hearts to take Dalton every summer, if they knew he had a place to go every school year. It could work.

And so it was that, on a drizzly afternoon in early September, 1978, a smallish blond boy of fourteen boarded the ferry in Seattle wearing a Supersonics hat and carrying one small suitcase, a large green garbage bag, and a letter of explanation.

Someone would meet him on the other side, Susan said. A school bus would drive him from Bremerton to the school. He would love it there.

Capling Hall was a fine school, with almost 350 boys. It had a long history of excellence. It had wonderful facilities. It was on a beautiful lake. Everything would be all right.

And then she hugged him, something she had been told she ought not to do, but which seemed necessary, at least with her sending him away like this.

“Everything will be okay,” she repeated, perhaps more to convince herself than him.

But Dalton was not like other boys of fourteen. His life had not been filled with many ‘okays’. He no longer expected them. He turned from his caseworker and boarded the ferry with the same grim resolve that prisoners board buses to their execution. This had happened to him before. He had been through this before.

It would not be all right.

The trick was just to survive.

And so he found a quiet spot on the deck of the ferry where, because of the rain and the sea mist, it was too cold for other boys or anyone else to want to go. He stayed there for the whole duration of the one-hour trip across Puget Sound. He then boarded the school’s chartered bus and sat directly behind the driver where there was only one seat, and he just stared out the window. Most of the other boys on the bus were returning students, and their interest was in old acquaintances and friends, not some small, odd, silent boy sitting by himself in the front.

Dalton thought he heard some derisive comment or two about him sitting all alone and not speaking to anyone, but he had learned that pretending that

others did not exist was a defense that sometimes worked. He continued just to watch the road passing by outside.

The bus trip north towards Port Angeles and then southwest again to Lake Heatherington took almost two hours. To him it seemed like two days. And it rained the entire way, a kind of drizzly rain that was somewhat atypical for the east side of the peninsula, which was normally protected from rain by the huge Olympic mountains. Several of the boys, especially the newer ones, gazed out at the mountains as the bus wound its way north... but not Dalton, who merely leaned his head against his own window, lost inside himself.

Finally the bus rounded a corner to reveal the elaborate black iron gates that adorned the entrance to Capling Hall School for Boys. Latin words etched into the gate read *Patefacio Pens Patefacio Ianua*, which means 'Open Minds Open Doors'. But Dalton saw no opening here. These gates were a sign of doom. And whether these gates remained open or slammed shut once the bus passed through was irrelevant. This would be yet another prison for him. Of that, he was certain.



Ronald Cummings had heard a rumor that his new roommate was from Southern California, which created great expectations for all the returning members of the house. Bates House had one other Southern Californian, Jim Everett, who was from San Diego and as stereotypically Californian as anyone

could be... long blonde hair, blue eyes, a muscular build and a tan... friendly, but with somewhat of a devil-may-care, rock-n-roll attitude. Girls from Wakefield School, three miles further around the lake, flocked to him. A 'Greek God', some fellow classmates called him.

Jim also was a natural athlete: an amazing swimmer, on the first fifteen in rugby, a starter in basketball, on the first eight in rowing, and a sprinter in track; and all this helped not only the school, but Bates House as well. Jim seemed to be a starter on virtually every House team in inter-house competitions. Last year, in grade eleven, he had helped Bates to win House competitions in the round-the-lake relay, swimming and rugby, and to place second in basketball, rowing and track. Even in tennis, he had helped his House place a respectable third. What Bates House needed was another Californian like Everett. And everyone believed that Dalton Hobby might be it.

In truth, Dalton had lived in and around California, but only for a relatively short time. Originally from northern Texas, after his parents separated he lived for about six months with his father and step-mother in Reno; seven months in San Francisco; and, finally, for a little less than a year, about one hour's drive east of Los Angeles. But after his mother fatally overdosed and his father divorced a second time, his father decided to move to Washington with Dalton, moving briefly to Spokane before disappearing one day when Dalton was at school. Dalton came home on the bus to find the house empty – moving vans had come during the day

and taken everything. Dalton's father had not been seen since, presumably having moved back to California with his most recent of several girlfriends who, Dalton had known from the start, had never liked children.

So, despite having spent almost two years there, Dalton could hardly be called a Californian. And he was nothing like Jim Everett. This was immediately apparent to anyone the minute they met him.

Ron had been assigned to meet Dalton when the new boy arrived on the bus from the ferry. Ron waited on the steps of the Main Building, under the large overhang to be out of the rain. He stood there with Trent Malcolm, a fellow grade ten and all-but-certain future Head Boy from rival Stanley House. Trent, too, was intrigued to meet this new Californian. Admittedly, he would have preferred him to be entering his own house. Nonetheless, Trent had been captain of virtually every junior school team the year before. Another boy even remotely like Jim Everett would help the school in its athletic endeavors, even if only providing more intense rivalry in inter-house sports.

The two boys played the game so many people do when waiting for a stranger getting off a bus, train or plane. They tried to guess which boy was Dalton.

Besides him being in grade 10, they knew that he was blond. The school application form, besides requiring essentials like birth date and parent's names, also required some physical description.

The first unknown blond boy to get off the bus clearly was too young, almost certainly a grade eight.

The next few all were returning students. And then Dalton stepped out: smaller than average; wiry; with eyes that were suspicious and dead; wearing brown-rimmed glasses and a cap; holding one small suitcase and a garbage bag.

Ron and Trent glanced at each other. This couldn't possibly be him! But, when no other blond emerged, Ron accepted the grim possibility. He faked an enthusiastic smile as he went over to greet the new arrival, whom he hoped upon hope was NOT his new roommate. Maybe Dalton was arriving later.

"Hi. Are you Dalton?" he said, hoping that the answer would be 'No'.

But there was no answer. Dalton slowly turned his face towards the voice and then eyed Ron's face suspiciously.

"I'm Ron. Are you Dalton?" Ron asked again.

Dalton just nodded slowly.

"I'm you're roommate," Ron said, hoping for some acknowledgement.

But Dalton's eyes were elsewhere, scanning the new prison to which he had come.

"Do you have any other suitcases?" Ron asked, still trying for some answer, to anything.

Dalton slowly shook his head.

Exasperated, Ron said: "Let's go!" and started to lead Dalton into the building. This was not turning out the way he had expected.

Dalton followed quietly up fifteen broad front stairs, through the huge arched front doors into the main foyer. They turned left down a long, wide and somewhat darkened hall, then right up a long winding

set of stairs to the second floor. Ron was talking, presumably giving the new boy a half-hearted mini tour. But Dalton was not listening. His mind was elsewhere.

They passed a couple of students coming down the stairs, both presumably in the senior grades. Both of them said 'Hi!' to Ron, but merely gave Dalton strange looks. He was used to this.

On the second floor, the halls were lined with lockers. On the wall to his right, the lockers were painted dark green; on the left, they were light blue, with numbers on each side running from one through fifty, excluding the numbers thirteen and, oddly enough, twenty-seven. Dalton was puzzled by the latter omission.

The hall eventually came to a T, and they turned left. A sign above the double door they passed through said: Bates House. Dalton glanced back. Above the opposite door, the sign said: Stanley House. This was a different scheme for naming houses than the boarding school previous foster parents had sent him to near Bellingham, an experiment that only had lasted for one week when he was twelve, where the four houses were named after Washington mountains; he had been in Rainier House. He assumed that Capling named houses after people. If he stayed at this school long enough, someone probably would tell him who Bates was. If.

All of the rooms appeared to be on the right side of the hall; the left wall was scattered with windows looking out onto a paved parking lot, two floors down, each window having a black metal fire escape. As he passed the second door, Ron pointed out the

bathroom. Dalton glanced in. A long row of sinks lined one wall, opposite several stalls and everything else.

The fifth door belonged to their room, a large, square room with light blue walls and two bunk beds. Three beds already were made. Dalton was to get the bottom bunk closest to the door; sheets and blankets were folded at the end.

The far wall had two windows looking outside. Dalton again noted a fire escape. Under the windows and running from one wall to the other was a wooden surface, about 30 inches deep and having four chairs spread across its width, a surface that obviously was meant to function as a conjoined desk for the four boys. The desk areas in front of the two windows were taken, with books already set up. The area in the far left corner had a back pack on it. The far right area was clear. Dalton had his desk.

“Do you have any questions?” Ron was saying.

Dalton shook his head.

“Okay,” Ron said with a note of disgust. “Supper is at five. You’ll hear a loud bell and lots of people running. I’ll come get you. Okay?”

But Dalton already had put his suitcase onto his desk and was staring out the window. Ron shook his head and left. As he walked down the hall to find Trent again, it struck him that his new roommate hadn’t said a single word.

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CHAPTER TWO

If there is a definitive picture of chaos, it almost certainly includes, somewhere within it, 350 teenage boys eating a meal together. Not that the meals at Capling Hall School for Boys were entirely chaotic. In fact, amid the bustle and roar, if you looked hard for it, there was an undercurrent of extreme order, like a finely-tuned machine. It was just that this finely-tuned machine and all the chaos that surrounded it, both were loud.

Each meal started with students lining up either outside, for the four houses on the hill, or at the top of the stairs, for the two houses in the Main Building. Then the bell sounded, and students filed towards and into the dining hall in as orderly a fashion as the extreme hunger of teen-hood would allow. Once there, boys were to proceed to one of the tables in their designated house and stand silently behind a chair until the Head Boy and teacher on duty processed in.

A second, much softer bell would sound from the Head Boy's hand, and this second bell would bring the entire room to complete silence. The Head Boy then would lead the room in a prayer. And then the bustle would start.

The game was to empty all platters of food onto one or two plates as quickly as possible, and then hand the empty platters to whichever boy from each cluster of two tables had been assigned to be that day's server. Servers then would race to the kitchen

for more, while all the food at the table was distributed. As soon as the servers returned, the process would repeat, so that that it was like a relay race between servers. Empty the platters, race for more food, return to the tables, empty the platters, return for more food, and so on. With servers running from one table to the next and then off to the kitchen and back, from above it must have looked like mice running in a maze or bees scrambling about in a hive. Never really getting anywhere, but running feverishly nonetheless.

Of course, all prefects and grade twelves were exempt from serving duty. Their responsibility was to sit at the head of each table to supervise the younger boys. On this, the first meal of the new school year, an additional role of the Head Prefect of each house was to go to each table and take roll call. Returning students would know to be here. But there always was the risk that a few newer boys might not know about meal times and could be off in their room napping or doing something else. This rarely happened, however, because the machinery of mealtimes was a loud one, and new boys usually were swept up by the movement and sound and carried along with it, even when they knew nothing of what was going on.

One's first meal in a room of 350 boys and 350 strangers could be intimidating for students who were new to boarding school, especially for the younger ones. Some, of course, desperately missed home and family. Others just were intimidated by all the activity and sound. Yet others seemed to fit in

joyously, happy to be among boys their own age and away from the watchful eyes of their parents.

If Dalton Hobby had been at this first supper at his new school, he likely would have remained so quiet as to be almost unseen. But he was not there. Not that he had not been hungry. Not that he had intentionally wanted to miss the meal. It was just that he had something else to do.

As luck would have it, his absence was not discovered until near the end of the meal, given that the only person he had spoken to was Ronald Cummings, and that Ron himself had taken such little heed of him as to have almost totally forgotten his existence by the time the meal bell had sounded. This was compounded by the minor error of one too few place settings being set at one of the Bates House tables, so that all the chairs were full. In fact, it was not until Tom Larsen, the Bates Head Prefect, had circulated to all the tables, sat down to eat his own meal, and then taken a second quick glance at his list for another purpose, that he noticed Dalton's name without a check mark by it.

As dessert was being served, he reluctantly returned to all of the Bates House tables looking for the missing boy. Dalton was nowhere to be found. Even more reluctantly, given that the first meal's dessert usually was something better than the usual fare, Tom started to go to tables from the other houses. There still was no sign of Dalton Hobby. A hum started to circulate through the room.

"One of the new boys is missing."

Seventeen minutes after the meal had begun, the meal ended with the usual third bell, at which time

the School Head Boy stood up to deliver start of term announcements.

New boys were to report to their common rooms immediately after the meal to meet with their house prefects and hear about house rules.

All boys in grades eight through ten were to be in their houses by 8:45 and in bed by 9:15. Grade elevens were to be in their houses by 9:15 and in bed by 9:45. Grade twelves had to be in their houses by ten or have a signed permission slip allowing them otherwise.

Wake up call was at 6:30. Breakfast was at 7:15.

All boys in grades 8 and 9 were to be at the docks in bathing suits by eight o'clock. Don't be late. Grade tens at nine. Elevens at ten. And so on.

And then, his final announcement was: "If you are here, could Dalton Hobby please report to the head table!"

But Dalton did not report to the head table. He was off on his own, unaware that he was being sought. Once his new roommate, Ronald, had left him in their room alone, Dalton had climbed out of his window onto the fire escape, clinging to his green garbage bag. Then he had climbed down to the grass below.

The worst of the rain had stopped, but still it was misty and the grass was wet. It was past four fifteen. By now, virtually every other student was indoors, unpacking or meeting with old friends in rooms and common rooms. Teachers were meeting in the Teacher's Lounge. Undetected, Dalton walked away

from the Main Building and started to wander. There was something he wanted to find. And something he wanted to hide.

From the bottom of the fire escape, he somehow knew to go straight and not left or right. To the left he had seen the four other dormitories. To the right, there seemed just to be forest. He wandered first to the chapel on the top of the hill. He had been raised Roman Catholic, not by his father who really didn't care, but by his mother, who was zealous in her faith. She'd even told him, a time or two, that she wanted Dalton to become a priest.

"I'd be so proud of you," she'd said, the only time Dalton ever could remember her saying that she ever could be proud of him, for anything.

Dalton might have wandered to the Chapel to see if he might find a God there who wasn't so condemning and critical as the God he had been raised to know, or possibly just to find a quiet place. Dalton liked quiet places, dark places, where he could be alone. But, on this occasion, what he most wanted was the hill itself, some high place from which he could look around him.

He chose not to enter the Chapel, lest someone inside would tell him to go back to his house. Instead, he just stood on the steps and let his eyes wander. He saw the tennis courts off beyond the classroom block, and figured that what he wanted to find would be there or near there. He came down off the hill and walked towards them.

He almost was seen by two seniors who were walking down from the classroom block, but he

ducked behind a tree to hide from them, and they passed by without incident.

After supper had ended, a school-wide search lasting almost half an hour resulted in Dalton Hobby being found wandering through the rugby fields up on the upper-most level of the grounds.

“Are you Dalton?” a prefect from Hewitt House asked him.

He nodded.

“Where the hell have you been?” he was asked. “Everyone’s been searching all over for you.”

Dalton just shrugged, which really annoyed the prefect.

By six twenty-five, Dalton was in the office of his Housemaster, Mr. Hill, who was irate, pacing about the room while Dalton sat in a small wooden chair.

“This is NOT a good start,” the Master said firmly. “NOT a good start.”

He leafed through Dalton’s file which was unusually thick, filled with reports and letters from his caseworker.

“The school is sticking its neck out for you, Mr. Hobby,” he was told. “We expect you to live up to your end of the bargain.” The teacher stared down at him. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“I... I’m sorry?” he said quietly.

Mr. Hill immediately picked up on the tone. “Is that a question or an answer?” he asked accusingly.

“I’m sorry,” Dalton said, still unsure.

“I damn well hope you are. This is NOT a good start to your time here, young man. Not a good start at all.”

Then Dalton was dismissed.

Outside Mr. Hill’s office, Thomas Larson was waiting, a grim look on his face.

“You missed the House meeting for new students,” Dalton was informed. “I’m going to have to have one of the other prefects sit down with you.” Then he added: “Your thoughtlessness has inconvenienced everyone.”

Dalton truly did not know what to say. He truly was sorry. He had not intended to miss supper. But he had not been wearing his watch. In fact, he virtually never did, because it was a special watch and he feared it would become damaged or be taken from him. And he had lingered a bit longer because he had wanted to see the grounds, something he did in every new place he had gone. He needed to know his surroundings. He needed to know which way to run.

He wanted to say he was sorry, but he really did not know if he should. Having lived in so many places with so many people, and having had a mother like she was, there had been no consistency in his life. With one person, saying he was sorry would lead to at least momentary forgiveness. With another, it would lead to - “You’d better be sorry!” - and more berating. And with another, a firm beating was the end result.

What should he say here?

He truly didn’t know. So he didn’t say anything to Thomas the Head House Prefect. And so, yet another person shook his head in disgust at him.

“Come with me,” Tom said gruffly, leading him upstairs.

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Unlike before, when Ron had shown him his room, this time the halls were filled with students just milling around and chatting. They all stopped and stared when Dalton appeared.

In a school such as this, bad news travels fast. News of misdeeds and punishment travels faster. Everyone was curious to see what this first day offender looked like.

No one said: “Welcome to the School!”

No one said: “Glad you were found!”

Any words that were spoken were whispered and not for his ears. He walked past the whispers, dutifully following the prefect.

“Why don’t you wait in your room,” Tom said. His tone had softened a bit, realizing suddenly how terrible it must feel to be in Dalton’s shoes at that very moment. “It’ll be okay, Buddy,” he offered, lightly touching one of Dalton’s shoulders.

Dalton winced and jerked away.

This took Thomas by surprise. A bit shaken, he repeated: “Just wait in your room, okay.” And then he watched sadly as the new boy walked down the hall to his room. He was sure that no one had intended things to start out this way.

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Dalton had hoped that his room would be empty, but it was not. All three roommates were there, plus Trent and another grade ten named Shane Kolechi.

Like everyone else, they stopped talking when Dalton appeared.

Dalton was to have two roommates, in addition to Ron. One of them was Bradley Cowlett, a larger and stronger than average boy who generally was well-intentioned, but somewhat dim-witted and easily manipulated into playing bully. On his own, however, he did not like to bully. He just wanted to get along.

The same could not be said for Dalton's third roommate. Peter Wong had been born and raised in Tacoma, though his parents were mainland Chinese. Perhaps to rebel against their conservative and quiet ways, Peter had decided that he wanted to be as unlike them as he could be. His voice was loud. His manner was loud. He was not large but, from years of lifting weights, he had become formidably strong. He believed that if you did not bully, you would be bullied. And he chose to bully.

What made Peter most vicious was not his strength or his wit, though both were formidable. What made him so vicious was that he had no conscience. He would do whatever he felt served his purpose, irrespective of consequences for anyone else. He lied. He cheated. He would turn on a 'friend' in a second. As he first eyed Dalton coming into his room, he decided that it served his purposes to make this newcomer squirm. He would do everything in his power to make Dalton 'whatever his name was' rue the day he came to Capling Hall. Not for any reason. Just because he wanted to.

Dalton knew this instinctively. He had been bullied all of his life. He knew the look. He knew the voice.

“Hey!” Peter said. “If it isn’t the little lost boy!” And then he laughed and looked about the room to signal others to do the same. On cue, Ron, Bradley and Shane joined in.

Trent just smiled. He was not a bully by nature, but even in grade ten he seemed to be garnering public opinion for the day he knew he would become the school’s Head Boy.

“California’s thataway, Dalton,” Peter said, pointing south.

Dalton’s head sank even lower as he trudged past them and lay down onto his bunk. He closed his eyes and waited for some prefect to come and temporarily rescue him. He heard Peter and Ron and Brad, and to a lesser extent Trent and Shane, mocking him. He tried thinking back to when he had been standing alone on the deck of the ferry, but the voices kept mocking him. It was of no use.

This day seemed to be going according to the usual plan.



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