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CHAPTER ONE

'Stand by yer beds!' Evan Williams shouted. 'Lights out in *seven* minutes.'

He was a small Welshman with one big eyebrow. Twenty-four boys lived in his dorm. They hurried barefoot over the cold lino, putting toothbrushes in foot lockers and draping towels over radiators before standing at the end of their metal-framed beds ready for inspection.

Each bed was immaculately made. Belongings had to be packed neatly inside a foot locker, with boots or plimsolls cleaned and resting on top in a ten-past-ten position.

'Attention!'

Each boy snapped into a rigid position. Ankles together, eyes forward, shoulders back. Williams would have liked the boys to wear matching pyjamas, but

clothing was short and newer arrivals wore whatever they'd brought with them.

'Not bad,' Williams said grudgingly as he passed the first pair of facing beds. At the next he reached under the mattress and dug two fingers between the rusted bed frame and mattress.

'In the name of our *lord*!' Williams gasped. His giant eyebrow fired upwards as he jabbed a rusty finger under the nose of a thirteen-year-old with curly brown hair and deep-set eyes.

Troy LeConte knew he was being fitted up: the beds were old and you could reach under any of them if you wanted rust stuck on your finger. It was Williams' way of showing that he could get you, even if you stuck to all of his petty rules.

'Well, LeConte?' Williams demanded. 'Cat got your tongue? What is this?'

Troy didn't know the English word for rust, but reckoned a quick answer beat none at all. 'It's your finger, sir,' he said, with a heavy French accent.

This raised cautious laughter from the other boys and Williams looked irritated.

'I know it's my finger, you stupid frog,' he roared. 'I'm asking you what's *on* my finger.'

Troy went cross-eyed as Williams dabbed his chunky finger against the bridge of his nose.

'I don't know the word,' Troy explained.

'You little retard!' Williams shouted, as he grabbed the neck hole of Troy's string vest, yanked the lad forwards and cuffed him around the head. 'Cold shower, five a.m.,' he barked, before letting go and moving up to the next bed.

Troy rubbed his head before standing crisply back to attention. He hated Williams, but had seen plenty of lads come off worse during inspection. He turned his head as far as he dared, watching the relief on each boy's face when Williams passed them by.

'Mason LeConte,' Williams said, when he was almost at the opposite end of the room. 'Well, well, it seems stupidity runs in the family.'

Troy's brother Mason was only eight, but that didn't stop Williams from twisting his ear and yanking it up until he dangled on tiptoes.

'The blankets are crooked, you *stupid* boy,' Williams shouted, as Mason gave a howl that turned his older brother's stomach.

Troy felt guilty as Williams ripped off his little brother's sheets and blanket. Mason was the youngest in the dorm and Troy usually helped him before inspection, but he'd been sent upstairs to fetch candles by the night matron and had barely had time to make his own bed.

'I've never seen such a shambles,' Williams roared, as he took the metal lid from Mason's foot locker and threw its contents across the floor. 'Are you feeble-minded, boy?'

'No, sir,' the boy sobbed, as Williams upended Mason's metal locker, then shook him violently by the shoulders.

'This shoe-cleaning kit is filthy. *Nothing* is folded properly. Why is there mud on the sole of your plimsoll?'

After each sentence Williams jammed two fingers under Mason's ribs, sending his body into a spasm.

'Report to my office first thing,' Williams yelled. 'And cold showers for a week.'

'No!' Mason wailed, as he tried to wriggle away. 'Leave me alone.'

Troy knew he'd come off badly if he interfered, but what kind of person stood and watched their little brother get bullied?

'Unacceptable!' Troy shouted, using the only appropriate English word he could think of as he stepped away from his bed and strode purposefully down the narrow room towards Williams. A couple of boys whispered cautions, and one even stepped into his path.

'He'll murder you,' the boy warned.

'Keep your head down, mate,' another begged, but Troy marched on.

Troy imagined an heroic gesture: knocking Williams out with a punch to the jaw or slicing his head off with

a sword. But reality found a thirteen-year-old dressed in baggy shorts and vest facing a grown man with fiery eyes and hobnail boots.

'It seems I have a visitor,' Williams said, cracking a demented smile as he shoved Mason back over the end of his bed. 'What can we do for you?'

Troy was quaking, but couldn't walk meekly back to his bed with all the other lads looking on.

'He's eight years old,' Troy said. 'Why not help, instead of hurting him?'

'Or you'll do what, big man?' Williams taunted. 'This is my dormitory. I make the rules.'

Troy had fought a few times in his thirteen years. He'd won more than he'd lost, but the punch he threw now wasn't his best. It glanced off the fleshy part of Williams' arm with barely enough force to rustle his shirt.

'You dare raise a hand to me!' Williams roared, as Troy found himself being thrown forwards over the end of Mason's bed, with Williams wrenching his arm tight behind his back and his brother's legs trapped beneath him. 'George, Tom, deal with him.'

George and Tom were stocky lads of fifteen. They acted as snitches and enforcers for Williams, who let them bully and extort the younger lads in return.

'Put them both down,' Williams ordered, before

pointing at Troy. 'And make *his* trip an uncomfortable one.'

Troy didn't know what being *put down* meant, but there were sadistic grins on George and Tom's faces as they grabbed his arms and bundled him outside. After dragging Troy ten metres down a freezing corridor, they turned into an unlit cloakroom and shoved him in a corner with a coat hook digging into his back.

'Fists up, you French weed,' George grinned, as he made a boxing stance. The fifteen-year-old was bigger than his pyjamas and his muscular torso showed where his top was too small to button over his chest.

Troy raised his hands, but George was too strong. His first punch batted Troy's defences aside. The second was an uppercut that smacked his lower jaw and made his teeth clatter.

'I've got plenty more where that came from,' George laughed, as he grabbed Troy around the neck, bent him over and brought his knee up into his guts.

Troy groaned and belched as his throat filled with burning stomach acid. George backed away after a couple more punches, only for Tom to drag Troy out of the corner and hook his ankle, sending him sprawling across the floor.

'Stings, don't it, froggy?' Tom smiled.

Troy groaned as he rolled on to his back, then sat up,

clutching his stomach and coughing.

'We can do what we like to you now,' George added. 'Fancy raising your hands to Williams! You just signed your own death warrant.'

Troy was defenceless, lying in the dark with two heavyweights looming. He hurt in a dozen places and blood drizzled from his nose. Out in the corridor he heard wailing and saw Mason's legs as Williams dragged him past the doorway.

George hitched Troy off the gritty lino, intending to knock him down again, but Williams called from the far end of the corridor.

'Get Troy out here. I want to be in my room before *Book at Bedtime* comes on.'

A metal bolt thunked. With one hand grasping Mason's neck, Williams booted a door open and bitter outdoor air rushed into the corridor. Troy finally understood what being *put down* meant as he was dragged barefoot on to the icy courtyard behind the building.

'I'm not going down there,' Mason sobbed as Williams lifted the hinged wooden flap that covered the entrance to the coal cellar. '*Please* don't make me.'

'It's the only way you'll learn,' Williams shouted. 'Now, sit on the edge and jump or I'll throw you down.'

The coal was piled high at one corner of the cellar.

Mason made the short drop on to the highest part of the mound and scrambled down over churning coal to an area of bare floor in the far corner.

'Watch out for the rats,' Tom teased. 'They'll gnaw your toes if you fall asleep.'

George was ready to shove Troy down into the cellar. 'Hold up,' Williams ordered. 'Let's have a look at him.'

Tom clamped a muscular arm around Troy's waist. Williams moved up close and smiled, as Mason's sobbing echoed out of the cellar below them.

'I never did like Frenchies,' Williams said, before slapping Troy hard across his right eye. 'Throw him down.'

Troy's head swirled from the blow as Tom let him go. George kicked Troy behind the knees, buckling his legs and sending him face first into the mound of coal. The wooden cellar door banged shut over his head, and Williams fixed a joist over the flaps to lock it.

'Sleep tight, boys,' Williams said nastily.

'But don't forget the rats,' George added.

Mason stood with his back against an unplastered wall. It was pitch dark, his feet were in icy water and he shuddered, imagining bugs and spiders crawling all around him.

'Troy?' he said quietly, before erupting into a coughing fit as coal dust tickled the back of his throat.

Mason waited for the voices above to disappear before

feeling his way back up the mound of freezing coal lumps. He sniffled as he rested a hand on Troy's back, between his shoulder blades.

'Troy?' he said, tapping his hand warily. 'What's the matter, Troy? Are you dead?'