

CHAPTER ONE

1

Darkness.

Crushing pressure on his neck. The sour tang of another boy's sweat. The rough fabric of a blazer rasping against his face.

Pain, as a fist thumped hard into his back.

Paul struggled wildly against the headlock. He swung with his arms, hit his attacker a glancing blow. But the other boy was bigger than him, and all he got in return was another punch, right in the kidneys.

Through the blazer that was tangled round his head, Paul heard his classmates shouting, their cries muffled.

Fight! Fight! Fight!

He lashed out, and this time he made a solid connection, driving his knuckles into soft belly fat. His opponent whuffed out his breath, and for a moment the pressure on his head loosened. Paul yanked back violently, punching again, and suddenly he was free.

Daylight. The lake was at his back, sun-bright woods all around, leaves glistening with the memory of rain. Clouds skidded fast across a summer sky.

Paul backed away a step, cheeks flushed and hot. Falling for that headlock had made him embarrassed and angry. Adam glared

at him, fists bunched, his thuggish face screwed up in a fighting scowl. He was bigger than Paul, and more thickly built, but there was no retreat now.

Fight! Fight! Fight!

The students had abandoned their biology assignments the moment the scuffle broke out. The boys chanted like they were the audience to a gladiatorial combat. The girls made a show of their disgust but watched anyway. Paul looked for Erika in the crowd but found only Caitlyn, her narrow, sharp features a picture of concern, bird-bright eyes fixed on him.

“Go on, Paul!”

“Do him in!”

“Come on, Paul!”

Fight! Fight! Fight!

Maddened, Adam charged. Instead of meeting the charge, Paul sidestepped, leaving a trailing leg for Adam to trip on. The bigger kid went down, crashing to the ground. The crowd broke into laughter. They all wanted to see Adam eat dirt. Paul danced away a step, exhilarated, knowing that he'd scored a point.

A sharp, cold gust of wind whipped through the woods, rippling the lake and setting the branches lashing overhead. Paul felt a grin coming. The day felt unsettled, like a storm was on its way. There was chaos in the air.

His kind of day.

Adam began to pick himself up, his small eyes hateful. His ears burned red with rage and humiliation. Paul expected Adam to get to his feet, but Adam surprised him by lunging from a crouch. Paul wasn't ready, and wasn't quick enough to avoid it. Adam wrapped

his arms round Paul's legs and drove into his thighs, knocking him backward.

Suddenly Paul was on the ground, and Adam was on top of him, punching, frenzied. Paul barely felt the hits. He fought back, thrashing like an animal, and managed to shift Adam's weight before he could be pinned. They rolled, and then Paul was on top, raining blows on his opponent. But Adam was too big to keep down: A moment later, they were rolling again. They scuffled and scabbled, a mass of jabbing elbows and knees, trying to land hits on each other in a sweaty, furious tussle. And all the time, the hypnotic chant of the crowd:

Fight! Fight! Fi —

"YOU TWO!"

Mr. Harrison's voice sliced through the morning air, killing the heat of the fight in an instant. The chanting was silenced. The spell was broken: The crowd looked guilty and abashed.

Paul and Adam got to their feet, dusting leaves off their blazers, neither taking their eyes from the other. Mr. Harrison stood at the top of the slope, beyond which lay the school and the sprawling grounds of Mortingham Boarding Academy. The headmaster didn't trouble himself to come through the wood to the lake. He just stood there like some disapproving god gazing down on his wayward flock.

"I'll see you both in my office at the end of this period!" he said in that hammered-steel drill-sergeant voice that every Mortingham pupil had learned to dread. "Is that understood?"

Neither Paul nor Adam said a thing. They just glared at each other, panting.

“Is that understood?” Mr. Harrison barked.

“Yes, sir,” they both mumbled reluctantly.

Just then, Mr. Sutton came hurrying through the trees, led by Erika, who’d apparently run to fetch him from the other side of the lake when the fight started. He took in the scene with a glance and sighed.

“Everything under control here, Mr. Sutton?” Mr. Harrison asked. Nobody missed the pointed sarcasm in his voice.

“Everything’s under control,” Mr. Sutton said. “Isn’t it, boys?” He looked from Adam to Paul, and Paul thought he saw disappointment in that calm gaze. He was surprised by a pang of guilt.

“Yes, sir.”

Mr. Harrison stared down at them for a long moment, then stalked off and out of sight. Mr. Sutton’s gaze swept the assembled crowd.

“Well, what are you all doing here? That biomass won’t weigh itself, you know! I want every worm, every beetle in your sample zone collected up and recorded. Get to it.”

He clapped his hands and the crowd dispersed, heading back to their sample zones. Each zone was staked out with four poles, red thread strung between them, marking out a square meter of undergrowth. One student in each zone was in charge of collecting the insects; one was in charge of recording what they found.

“Come on,” said Mr. Sutton to Paul and Adam. “You’ve had your fun. Get back to work. We’ll talk about this later.”

As he was led away from the others, Paul saw Erika watching him. He flashed her a savage grin. She narrowed her eyes and looked away.