

CHAPTER SIX

The white boys bruised differently than the black boys and called it the Ice Cream Factory because you came out with bruises of every color. The black boys called it the White House because that was its official name and it fit and didn't need to be embellished. The White House delivered the law and everybody obeyed.

They came at one a.m. but woke few, because it was hard to sleep when you knew they were coming, even if they weren't coming for you. The boys heard the cars grind gravel outside, the doors open, the thumping up the stairs. The hearing was seeing, too, in bright strokes across the mind's canvas. The men's flashlights danced. They knew where their beds were—the bunks were only two feet apart, and after occasions when they grabbed the wrong ones, now they made sure beforehand. They took Lonnie and Big Mike, they took Corey, and they got Elwood, too.

The night visitors were Spencer and a houseman named Earl, who was big and quick, which helped when a boy broke down in one of the back rooms and had to be put back on course so they could proceed. The state cars were brown Chevys, the ones that roved the grounds all day on simple errands but at night became harbingers. Spencer driving

Lonnie and Black Mike and Earl taking Elwood and Corey, who had been weeping all night.

No one talked to Elwood at dinner, as if what was coming was catching. Some boys whispered when he passed—*What a dummy*—and the bullies gave him angry looks, but mostly there was a heavy pressure of menace and unease in the dormitory that didn't end until they took the boys away. The rest of the boys relaxed then and some were even able to dream.

At lights-out, Desmond whispered to Elwood that once it started, it was best not to move. The strap had a notch cut into it, and it'd snag on you and slice if you were not still. In the car over, Corey made an incantation, "I'm-a hold on and be still, I'm-a hold on and be still," so maybe it was true. Elwood didn't ask how many times Desmond had gone down because the boy stopped talking after that piece of advice.

The White House, in its previous use, had been a work shed. They parked behind it and Spencer and his man took them in through the back. The beating entrance, the boys called it. Passing by the road out front, you'd never look twice. Spencer quickly found the key on his enormous key ring and opened the two padlocks. The stench was fierce—urine and other things that had soaked into the concrete. A single naked bulb buzzed in the hallway. Spencer and Earl led them past the two cells to the room at the front of the building, where a line of bolted-together chairs waited, and a table.

Right there was the front door. Elwood thought of running. He didn't. This place was why the school had no wall or fence or barbed wire around it, why so few boys ran: It was the wall that kept them in.

Spencer and Earl took Black Mike in first. Spencer said, "Thought you'd be done after last time."

Earl said, "Piss himself again."

The roar began: an even gale. Elwood's chair vibrated with energy. He couldn't figure out what it was—some sort of machine—but it was loud enough to cover Black Mike's screams and the smack of the strap on his body. Halfway through, Elwood started counting, on the theory that if he knew how much the other boys got, he'd know how much he'd get. Unless there was a higher system to how many each boy got: repeat offender, instigator, bystander. No one had asked Elwood for his side of the story, that he was trying to break up the fight in the bathroom—but maybe he'd get less for stepping in. He counted up to twenty-eight before the beating stopped and they dragged Black Mike out to one of the cars.

Corey continued to sob, and when Spencer came back he told him to shut his fucking mouth and they took Lonnie in for his. Lonnie got around sixty. It was impossible to make out what Spencer and Earl said to him back there, but Lonnie needed more instructions or admonishments than his partner.

They took Corey in for his and Elwood noticed there was a Bible on the table.

Corey got around seventy—Elwood lost his place a few times—and it didn't make sense, why did the bullies get less than the bullied? Now he had no idea what he was in for. It didn't make sense. Maybe they lost count, too. Maybe there was no system at all to the violence and no one, not the keepers nor the kept, knew what happened or why.

Then it was Elwood's time. The two cells faced each

other, separated by the hallway. The beating room had a bloody mattress and a naked pillow that was covered instead by the overlapping stains from all the mouths that had bit into it. Also: the gigantic industrial fan that was the source of the roaring, the sound that traveled all over campus, farther than physics allowed. Its original home was the laundry—in the summer those old machines made an inferno—but after one of the periodic reforms where the state made up new rules about corporal punishment, someone had the bright idea to bring it in here. Splatter on the walls where the fan had whipped up blood in its gusting. There was a weird thing to the acoustics where the fan covered the boys' screams but right next to it you heard the staff's instructions perfectly: *Hold on to the rail and don't let go. Make a sound and you'll get more. Shut your fucking mouth, nigger.*

The strap was three feet long with a wooden handle, and they had called it Black Beauty since before Spencer's time, although the one he held in his hand was not the original: She had to be repaired or replaced every so often. The leather slapped across the ceiling before it came down on your legs, to tell you it was about to come down, and the bunk springs made noise with each blow. Elwood held on to the top of the bed and bit into the pillow but he passed out before they were done, so when people asked later how many licks he got, he didn't know.