

EPILOGUE

Those kiosks didn't like him, no matter how much he jabbed and muttered at the screens. He checked in at the counter. This one's attendant was a black girl in her mid-twenties, all business. That new breed coming up, like Millie's nieces, who didn't take any mess and weren't afraid to tell you.

"Flying to Tallahassee," Turner said. "Last name Curtis."
"Identification?"

He was due for a new driver's license, now that he shaved his head every other day. He didn't resemble the picture. The old him. Once he got to Tallahassee he wouldn't need this license anyhow. It was history.

When the owner of the diner asked him his name, two weeks out of Nickel, he said, "Elwood Curtis." First thing that popped into his head. It felt right. He used the name from then on when anybody asked, to honor his friend.

To live for him.

Elwood's death made the papers. He was a local boy, you can't escape the long arm of the law, that bullshit. Turner's name in black-and-white newsprint as the other escapee, "a Negro youth." No description apart from that. Another black boy causing trouble, that's all you needed to know. Turner hid out in Jaimie's old stomping grounds—the rail-

road yards in All Saints. He risked one night at the depot and then hopped a freight north. Working here and there—restaurants, day labor, construction—up the coast. Eventually New York City, where he stayed.

In 1970, he went back to Florida for the first time and requested a copy of Elwood's birth certificate. The downside of working with sketchy dudes on building sites and in greasy spoons was that they were sketchy, but they also knew shady things, like how to get a birth certificate for a dead man. Dead boy. Date of birth, name of parents, city. Back then it was easy, before Florida wised up and put all those protections in place. He put in for a Social Security card two years later and it arrived in the mailbox, sitting on top of an A&P flyer.

The printer behind the airline counter chattered and whirled. "You have a good flight, sir," the attendant said. She smiled. "Anything else?"

He woke up. "Thank you." Lost in that old place. His first visit to Florida in forty-three years. The place reached right through the TV screen and yanked him back.

Millie got home from work last night and he gave her the two articles he printed out on Nickel and the graveyards. "That's terrible," she said. "These people get away with everything." According to one of the pieces, Spencer had died some years before, but Earl was still kicking around. Ninety-five years old, all of them wretched. He was retired, and such "a well-respected member of the Eleanor community" that in 2009 the town bestowed their Good Citizen of the Year Award on him. In the newspaper photo the old supervisor was decrepit, leaning on a cane on his porch, but his cold steel eyes gave Turner a shiver.

"Did you ever hit boys thirty or forty times with a strap?" the reporter asked.

"That is simply not true, sir. I swear on my children's lives. Just a little discipline," Earl said.

Millie gave him back the articles. "You know that old cracker beat them boys. *A little discipline.*"

She didn't get it. How could she, living in the free world her whole life. "I used to live there," Turner said.

His tone. "Elwood?" Like testing the ice to see if it'd bear her weight.

"I was at Nickel. That's the place. I told you I was in juvie, but I never said the name."

"Elwood. Come here," she said. He sat on the couch. He hadn't served his time, as he told her years ago, but ran. Then he told her the rest, including the story of his friend. "His name was Elwood," Turner said.

They were on the couch for two hours. Not counting the fifteen minutes, halfway through, that she spent in their bedroom with the door closed: "I have to go, I'm sorry." She returned, her eyes rubbed red, and they picked it up.

In some ways Turner had been telling Elwood's story ever since his friend died, through years and years of revisions, of getting it right, as he stopped being the desperate alley cat of his youth and turned into a man he thought Elwood would have been proud of. It was not enough to survive, you have to live—he heard Elwood's voice as he walked down Broadway in the sunlight or at the end of a long night hunched over the books. Turner walked into Nickel with strategies and hard-won dodges and a knack for keeping out of scrapes. He jumped over the fence on the other side of the pasture and into the woods and then both

boys were gone. In Elwood's name, he tried to find another way. Now here he was. Where had it taken him?

Millie said, "Your falling out with Tom." Moments from nineteen years resolved into fine grain. It was easier to focus on details. Small things stuck and kept her from taking in the entire picture. His fight with Tom, who worked with him at his first moving job. They'd been friends a long time. It was a Fourth of July barbecue out in Port Jefferson, at the man's own house. They were talking about some rapper who just got out of jail for tax evasion and Tom said, "Don't do the crime, if you can't do the time," singing it like in the opening credits to that old cop show.

"That's why they get away with it," he said to Tom, "because people like you think they deserve it." Why was he—who? Elwood? Turner? the man she married—defending this deadbeat? Blowing up like that. Yelling at Tom in front of the whole party while he flipped burgers in that silly apron. They drove all the way back to Manhattan in silence. Other small things: Him walking out of movies with no explanation beyond "I'm bored" because a scene—of violence, of helplessness—abducted him and took him back to Nickel. He was always so calm and even then this darkness crept up on him. His rants about cops and the criminal justice system and predators—everyone hated cops, but it was different with him and she taught herself to let him vent when he got on one of his jags because of the feral thing that snuck into his face, the vehemence of his words. The nightmares that tormented him, the ones he claimed not to remember—she knew his reform school had been bad but she didn't know it had been this place. She took his head into her lap as he wept, running her thumb

over that stray-cat notch in his ear. The scar she never noticed but was right in front of her.

Who was he? He was him, the man he had always been. She told him that she understood, as much as she was able to understand that first night. He was him. They were the same age. She had grown up in the same country with the same skin. She lived in New York City in 2014. It was hard to remember sometimes how bad it used to be—bending to a colored fountain when she visited her family in Virginia, the immense exertion white people put into grinding them down—and then it all returned in a rush, set off by tiny things, like standing on a corner trying to hail a cab, a routine humiliation she forgot five minutes later because if she didn't, she'd go crazy, and set off by the big things, a drive through a blighted neighborhood snuffed out by that same immense exertion, or another boy shot dead by a cop: They treat us like subhumans in our own country. Always have. Maybe always will. His name didn't matter. The lie was big but she understood it, given how the world had crumpled him up, the more she took in his story. To come out of that place and make something of himself, to become a man capable of loving her the way he did, to become the man she loved—his deception was nothing compared to what he had done with his life.

"I don't call my husband by his last name."

"Jack. Jack Turner." No one had ever called him Jack except his mother and his aunt.

"I'll try it on," she said. "Jack, Jack, Jack."

It sounded okay to him. More true each time it came out of her mouth.

They were wrung out. In their bed she said, "You have to tell me all of it. This isn't just one night."

"I know. I will."

"What if they throw you in jail?"

"I don't know what they're going to do."

She should go with him. She wanted to go with him. He wouldn't let her. They'd have to pick it up after he had done this thing. No matter which way it ended up down there.

They didn't speak after that. They didn't sleep. She curled into his spine, him reaching back for her rump to make sure she was still real.

The gate lady announced his Tallahassee flight. He had the row to himself. He stretched out and slept, he'd been up all night, and when he woke on the plane he picked up his argument with himself over betrayal. Millie had changed everything for him. Unbent him from who he had been. He betrayed her. And he had betrayed Elwood by handing over that letter. He should have burned it and talked him out of that fool plan instead of giving him silence. Silence was all the boy ever got. He says, "I'm going to take a stand," and the world remains silent. Elwood and his fine moral imperatives and his very fine ideas about the capacity of human beings to improve. About the capacity of the world to right itself. He had saved Elwood from those two iron rings out back, from the secret graveyard. They put him in Boot Hill instead.

He should have burned that letter.

From what he read in Nickel articles the last few years, they buried dead boys quick to head off any investigation, not even a word to their families—but then who had the money to bring them home and rebury them? Not Harriet. Turner found her obituary in the online archive of a Tallahassee paper. She died a year after Elwood, survived by her daughter, Evelyn. It didn't mention if the daughter had

shown up for the funeral. Turner had the money now to bury his friend properly, but any redress was on hold. Like with what he'd say to Millie to show her who he was—he couldn't see anything past his return to Nickel.

In the taxi line outside the Tallahassee airport Turner wanted to bum a cigarette from the desperate smoker lighting up after being cooped up in the plane. Millie's stern face warned him off and he whistled "No Particular Place to Go" to distract himself. Once he was on the way to the Radisson, he checked the piece from the *Tampa Bay Times* again. He'd looked at it so often that his fingers smudged the printout—he had to complain to Yvette about the toner or whatnot when he got back, whenever that was. Ace Moving had a future, or it didn't.

The press conference was at eleven a.m. According to the paper, the sheriff of Eleanor was going to give an update on the investigation of the grave sites and an archaeology professor from the University of South Florida would speak on the forensic examinations of the dead boys. And some of the White House boys were going to be there to testify. He'd kept tabs on them through their website the last couple of years—the reunions, the stories of their life at the school and after, their attempts to be recognized. They wanted a memorial and an apology from the state. They wanted to be heard. He'd thought them pathetic, moaning about what happened forty, fifty years ago, but recognized now it was his own pitiable state that revolted him, how scared he got seeing the name of the place and the pictures. No matter the front he put up, nowadays and back then, his bravado in front of Elwood and other boys. He'd been scared all the time. He was scared still. The state of Florida closed the

school three years ago and now it was all coming out, as if everyone, all the boys, had to wait for it to be dead before they told the tale. It couldn't hurt them now, snatch them up at midnight and brutalize them. It could only hurt them in the old familiar ways.

All the men on the website were white. Who spoke for the black boys? It was time someone did.

Seeing the grounds and the haunted buildings on the nightly news, he had to go back. To speak about Elwood's story, no matter what happened to him. Was he a wanted man? Turner didn't know the law but he had never underestimated the crookedness of the system. Not then, not now. What happens will happen. He'll find Elwood's grave and tell his friend of his life after he was cut down in that pasture. How that moment grew in Turner and changed his life's course. Tell the sheriff who he was, share Elwood's story and what they did to him when he tried to put a stop to their crimes.

Tell the White House boys that he was one of them, and he survived, like them. Tell anyone who cared that he used to live there.

The Radisson sat on a downtown corner of Monroe Street. It was an old hotel they'd added a bunch of floors to. The dark modern windows and brown metal siding of the new parts clashed with the red brick of the bottom three stories, but it was better than demolishing the place and starting anew. There was too much of that these days, especially in Harlem. All those buildings that had seen so much, and they go ahead and raze them. The old hotel made for a good foundation. It had been a long time since he'd seen that Southern architecture of his youth, with the open

porches and white balconies running around the floors like ticker tape.

Turner checked into his room. His stomach growled after he opened his suitcase and he went back down to the hotel restaurant. It was an in-between time and the place was empty. The server slouched by the wait station, a pale teenage girl with dyed-black hair. She wore the T-shirt of a band he never heard of, black with a laughing green skull overlaid. Some heavy metal thing. She put down her magazine and said, "Sit anywhere you like."

The chain had redone the dining room in contemporary hotel style, with a lot of wipeable green plastic. Three tilted television sets nattered the same cable news station at different angles, the news was bad and ever was, and a pop song from the '80s blipped from hidden speakers, an instrumental version with the synthesizers out front. He looked the menu over and decided on a burger. The name of the restaurant—Blondie's!—poured forth on the front of the menu in puffy gold script, and below that was a brief paragraph on the history of the place. Formerly the Richmond Hotel, it was a Tallahassee landmark and great care, they said, had gone into preserving the spirit of the grand old establishment. The shop by reception sold postcards.

If he had been less tired he might have recognized the name from a story he heard once when he was young, about a boy who liked to read adventure stories in the kitchen, but it eluded him. He was hungry and they served all day, and that was enough.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is fiction and all the characters are my own, but it was inspired by the story of the Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida. I first heard of the place in the summer of 2014 and discovered Ben Montgomery's exhaustive reporting in the *Tampa Bay Times*. Check out the newspaper's archive for a firsthand look. Mr. Montgomery's articles led me to Dr. Erin Kimmerle and her archaeology students at the University of South Florida. Their forensic studies of the grave sites were invaluable and are collected in their *Report on the Investigation into the Deaths and Burials at the Former Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida*. It is available at the university's website. When Elwood reads the school pamphlet in the infirmary, I quote from their report on the school's day-to-day functions.

Officialwhitehouseboys.org is the website of Dozier survivors, and you can go there for the stories of former students in their own words. I quote White House Boy Jack Townsley in chapter four, when Spencer is describing his attitude toward discipline. Roger Dean Kiser's memoir, *The White House Boys: An American Tragedy*, and Robin Gaby Fisher's *The Boys of the Dark: A Story of Betrayal and Redemption in the Deep South* (written with Michael O'McCarthy and Robert W. Straley) are excellent accounts.