## CHAPTER FOUR

After the judge ordered him to Nickel, Elwood had three last nights at home. The state car arrived at seven o'clock Tuesday morning. The officer of the court was a good old boy with a meaty backwoods beard and a hungover wobble to his step. He'd outgrown his shirt and the pressure against the buttons made him look upholstered. But he was a white man with a pistol so despite his dishevelment he sent a vibration. Along the street men watched from porches and smoked and gripped the railings as if afraid of falling overboard. The neighbors peeked through their windows for a view, connecting the scene to events from years before, when a boy or a man was taken away and he was not someone who lived across the street but kin. Brother, son.

The officer tossed a toothpick around in his mouth when he talked, which was not often. He handcuffed Elwood to a metal bar that ran behind the front seat and didn't speak for two hundred and seventy-five miles.

They got down to Tampa and five minutes later the officer was in a fight with the clerk at the jail. There had been a mistake: All three boys were headed for the Nickel Academy, and the colored boy was supposed to be picked up last, not first. Tallahassee was only an hour away from the school

after all. Didn't he think it strange that he was driving the boy up and down the state like a yo-yo, the clerk asked? At this point his face was red.

"I just read what's on the paper," the officer said.

"It's alphabetical," the clerk said.

Elwood rubbed at the mark the cuffs cut into his wrists and could have sworn the bench in the waiting room was a church pew, it was the same shape.

Half an hour later they were on the road again. Franklin T. and Bill Y.: alphabetically distant and temperamentally even farther. Elwood took the two white boys next to him for rough characters from the first scowl. Franklin T. had the most freckled face he'd ever seen, with a deep suntan and crew-cut red hair. He had a downcast look, head sunk, staring at his toes, but when he lifted his eyes to other people they were invariably vesseled with fury. Bill Y.'s eyes, for their part, had been punched black, purple, and lurid. His lips were puffed and scabbed. The brown, pear-shaped birthmark on his right cheek added another hue to his mottled face. He snorted when he got a look at Elwood, and whenever their legs touched on the drive, Bill pulled back as if he'd leaned against a hot chimney stove.

Whatever their life stories, whatever they'd done to get sent to Nickel, the boys were chained together in the same fashion and headed to the same destination. Franklin and Bill exchanged notes after a while. This was Franklin's second visit to Nickel. The first time was for being recalcitrant; he was back for truancy. He got a licking for eyeballing the wife of one of the house fathers, but other than that the place was decent, he supposed. Away from his stepfather at least. Bill was being raised by his sister and fell in with a



bunch of bad apples, as the judge put it. They broke the front window of a pharmacy, but Bill got off easy. He was going to Nickel because he was only fourteen, while the rest were heading up to Piedmont.

The officer told the white boys that they were sitting with a car thief and Bill laughed. "Oh, I used to go joy-riding all the time," he said. "They should have pinched me for that, not some dumb window."

Outside of Gainesville they drifted off the interstate. The officer pulled over to let everyone piss and gave them mustard sandwiches. He didn't cuff them when they got back in the car. The officer said he knew they weren't going to run. He skirted Tallahassee, taking the back road around it like the place didn't exist anymore. I don't even recognize the trees, Elwood told himself when they got to Jackson County. Feeling low.

He got a look at the school and thought maybe Franklin was right—Nickel wasn't that bad. He expected tall stone walls and barbed wire, but there were no walls at all. The campus was kept up meticulously, a bounty of lush green dotted with two- and three-story buildings of red brick. The cedar trees and beeches cut out portions of shade, tall and ancient. It was the nicest-looking property Elwood had ever seen—a real school, a good one, not the forbidding reformatory he'd conjured the last few weeks. In a sad joke, it intersected with his visions of Melvin Griggs Technical, minus a few statues and columns.

They drove up the long road to the main administration building and Elwood caught sight of a football field where some boys scrimmaged and yelped. In his head he'd seen kids attached to balls and chains, something out of cartoons,

but these fellows were having a swell time out there, thundering around the grass.

"All right," Bill said, pleased. Elwood was not the only one reassured.

The officer said, "Don't get smart. If the housemen don't run you down, and the swamp don't suck you up—"

"They call in those dogs from the state penitentiary, Apalachee," Franklin said.

"You get along and you'll get along," the officer said.

Inside the building the officer waved down a secretary who took them into a yellow room whose walls were lined with wooden filing cabinets. The chairs were in classroom rows and the boys picked spots far apart from one another. Elwood took a place in the front, per his custom. They all sat up when Superintendent Spencer knocked the door open.

Maynard Spencer was a white man in his late fifties, bits of silver in his cropped black hair. A real "crack of dawner," as Harriet used to say, who moved with a deliberate air, as if he rehearsed everything in front of a mirror. He had a narrow raccoon face that drew Elwood's attention to his tiny nose and dark circles under his eyes and thick bristly eyebrows. Spencer was fastidious with his dark blue Nickel uniform; every crease in his clothes looked sharp enough to cut, as if he were a living blade.

Spencer nodded at Franklin, who grabbed the corners of his desk. The supervisor suppressed a smile, as if he'd known the boy would be back. He leaned against the blackboard and crossed his arms. "You got here late in the day," he said, "so I won't go on too long. Everybody's here because they haven't figured out how to be around decent people. That's okay. This is a school, and we're teachers. We're going to teach you how to do things like everyone else.



"I know you heard all this before, Franklin, but it didn't take, obviously. Maybe this time it will. Right now, all of you are Grubs. We have four ranks of behavior here—start as a Grub, work your way up to Explorer, then Pioneer, and finally, Ace. Earn merits for acting right, and you move on up the ladder. You work on achieving the highest rank of Ace and then you graduate and go home to your families." He paused. "If they'll have you, but that's between y'all." An Ace, he said, listens to the housemen and his house father, does his work without shirking and malingering, and applies himself to his studies. An Ace does not roughhouse, he does not cuss, he does not blaspheme or carry on. He works to reform himself, from sunrise to sunset. "It's up to you how much time you spend with us," Spencer said. "We don't mess around with idiots here. If you mess up, we have a place for you, and you will not like it. I'll see to it personally."

Spencer had a severe face, but when he touched the enormous key ring on his belt the corners of his mouth twitched in pleasure, it seemed, or to signal a murkier emotion. The supervisor turned to Franklin, the boy who'd come back for a second taste of Nickel. "Tell them, Franklin."

Franklin's voice cracked and he had to fix himself before he got out, "Yes, sir. You don't want to step over the line in here."

The supervisor looked at each boy in turn, took notes in his head, and stood. "Mr. Loomis will finish processing you," he said, and walked out. The ring of keys on his belt jangled like spurs on a sheriff in a Western.

A sullen young white man—Loomis—appeared minutes later and led them to the basement room where they kept the school uniforms. Denim pants, gray work shirts, and

brown brogues in different sizes filled shelves on the walls. Loomis told the boys to find their sizes, directing Elwood to the colored section, which contained the more-threadbare items. They changed into their new clothes. Elwood folded his shirt and dungarees and put them in the canvas sack he'd brought from home. He had two sweaters in the bag, and his suit from the Emancipation Day play, for church. Franklin and Bill hadn't brought anything with them.

Elwood tried not to stare at the marks on the other boys' bodies as they dressed. Both of them had long lumpy lines of scars and what looked like burn marks. He never saw Franklin and Bill after that day. The school had more than six hundred students; the white boys went down the hill and the black boys went up the hill.

Back in the intake room, the boys waited for their house fathers to fetch them. Elwood's arrived first, a chubby, white-haired man with dark skin and gray, mirthful eyes. Where Spencer was severe and intimidating, Blakeley's personality was soft and pleasant. He gave Elwood a warm handshake and told him that he was in charge of his assigned dormitory, Cleveland.

They walked to the colored housing. Elwood's posture unscrewed. He was scared of a place that was run by men like Spencer and what that meant for his time there—to be under the eyes of men who liked to make threats and relished the effect of their threats on people—but perhaps the black staff looked after their own. And even if they were just as mean as the white men, Elwood had never permitted himself the kind of misbehavior that landed others in trouble. He consoled himself with the notion that he just had to keep doing what he'd always done: act right.



There weren't many students out and about. Figures moved in the windows of the residential buildings. Dinnertime, Elwood supposed. The few black boys who passed them on the concrete walkway greeted Blakeley with respect and didn't see Elwood at all.

Blakeley said he'd worked at the school for eleven years, from the "bad old days up to now." The school had a philosophy, he explained, in that they put the boys' fates in their own hands. "You boys are in charge of everything," Blakeley said. "Burn the bricks in all these buildings you see here, lay the concrete, take care of all this grass. Do a good job, too, as you can see." Work keeps the boys level, he continued, provides skills they can use when they graduate. Nickel's printing press did all the publishing for the government of Florida, from the tax regulations to the building codes to the parking tickets. "Learn how to execute those big orders and take your corner of responsibility, that's knowledge you can draw on for the rest of your life."

Every boy had to attend school, Blakeley said, that was a rule. Other reformatory schools might not strike that balance between reform and education, but Nickel made sure that their charges did not fall behind, with classroom instruction every other day, alternating with work details, Sundays off.

The house father noticed the change in Elwood's expression. "Not what you expected?"

"I was going to take college classes this year," Elwood said. It was October; he would have been deep into the semester.

"Speak to Mr. Goodall about it," Blakeley said. "He teaches the older students. I'm sure you can come to an

arrangement." He smiled. "You ever worked a field?" he asked. They grew multiple crops on the 1,400 acres—limes, sweet potatoes, watermelon. "I came up on a farm," Blakeley said. "A lot of these kids, it's their first time taking care of anything."

"Yes, sir," Elwood said. There was a tag or something in his shirt; it kept sticking him in the neck.

Blakeley stopped. He said, "You know when to say, *Yes, sir*—which is always—you'll be okay, son." He was familiar with Elwood's "situation"—his intonation swaddled the word in euphemism. "A lot of the boys here, they got in over their heads. This is an opportunity to take stock and get your head right."

Cleveland was identical to the other dormitories on the campus: Nickel brick under a green copper roof, surrounded by box hedges that clawed out of the red soil. Blakeley took Elwood through the front door and it was swiftly clear that outside was one thing and inside another. The warped floors creaked incessantly and the yellow walls were scuffed and scratched. Stuffing dribbled from the couches and armchairs in the recreation room. Initials and epithets marked the tables, gouged by a hundred mischievous hands. Elwood fixated on the housekeeping chores Harriet would have ticked off for his attention: the fuzzy haloes of finger grime around every cabinet latch and doorknob, the balls of dirt and hair in the corners.

Blakeley explained the layout. The first floor of each dorm was taken up by a small kitchen, the administration offices, and two large assembly rooms. On the second were the dorm rooms, two of them for the high-school-age students and one reserved for the younger kids. "We call the



younger students 'chucks,' but don't ask me why—nobody knows." On the top was where Blakeley lived and some utility rooms. The boys were heading to bed, Blakeley told him. The dining hall was a walk and they were wrapping up supper, but did he want something from the kitchen before they closed for the night? Elwood couldn't think of food, he was too knotted up.

There was an empty bed in room 2. Three rows of bunks stretched over the blue linoleum, each row with ten beds, each bed with a trunk at the foot for the boy's things. No one had paid Elwood any attention on the walk over, but in here each boy took his measure, some of them conferring quietly with their buddies as Blakeley took him down the rows and others filing away their appraisals for later. One boy looked like a thirty-year-old man, but Elwood knew that was impossible since they let you out when you turned eighteen. Some of the boys carried themselves rough, like the white boys in the car from Tampa, but he was relieved that a lot of them looked like regular guys from his neighborhood, just sadder. If they were regular, he'd make it through.

Despite what he'd heard, Nickel was indeed a school and not a grim jail for juveniles. Elwood had gotten off lucky, his lawyer said. Stealing a car was a big-ticket offense for Nickel. He'd learn that most of the kids had been sent here for much lesser—and nebulous and inexplicable—offenses. Some students were wards of the state, without family, and there was nowhere else to put them.

Blakeley opened the trunk to show Elwood his soap and towel, and introduced him to the boys who slept on either side of him, Desmond and Pat. The house father instructed

them to show Elwood the ropes: "Don't think I won't be watching you." The two boys mumbled hello and returned to their baseball cards once Blakeley disappeared.

Elwood had never been much of a crier, but he'd taken it up since the arrest. The tears came at night, when he imagined what Nickel held in store for him. When he heard his grandmother sobbing in her room next door, fussing around, opening and closing things because she didn't know what to do with her hands. When he tried without success to figure out why his life had bent to this wretched avenue. He knew he couldn't let the boys see him weep, so he turned over in the bunk and put his pillow over his head and listened to the voices: the jokes and taunts, the stories of home and distant cronies, the juvenile conjectures about how the world worked and their naïve plans to outwit it.

He'd started the day in his old life and ended it here. The pillowcase smelled like vinegar, and in the night the katydids and crickets screeched in waves, soft then loud, back and forth.

Elwood was asleep when a different roar commenced. It came from outside, a rush and a whoosh without variation. Forbidding and mechanical and granting no clue to its origin. He didn't know which book he'd picked it up from, but the word came to him: *torrential.*

A voice across the room said, "Somebody's going out for ice cream," and a few boys snickered.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Elwood met Turner his second day at Nickel, which was also the day he discovered the grim purpose of the noise. "Most niggers last whole weeks before they go down," the boy named Turner told him later. "You got to quit that eager-beaver shit, El."

A bugler and his brisk reveille woke them most mornings. Blakeley rapped on the door of room 2 and yelled, "Time to get up!" The students saluted another morning at Nickel with groans and cussing. They lined up two by two for attendance, and then came the two-minute shower where the boys furiously lathered with the chalky soap before their time ran out. Elwood put on a good show of acting unsurprised by the communal showers but had less success hiding his horror at the frigid water, which was searching and merciless. What came from the pipes smelled of rotten eggs, as did anyone who bathed in it until their skin dried.

"Now it's breakfast," Desmond said. His bunk was next to Elwood's and the boy made an effort to fulfill the house father's orders from the night before. Desmond had a round head, chubby baby cheeks, and a voice that startled everyone the first time they heard it, it was so gruff and full of bass. His voice made the chucks jump when he crept up on them,