

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,

and he got a kick out of it, until one day a supervisor with an even deeper voice crept up on him and taught him a lesson.

Elwood told him his name again, to signal a new start to their acquaintance.

"You told me last night," Desmond said. He laced his brown shoes, which were impeccably polished. "If you've been here a while, you're supposed to help out the Grubs, so you can get points. I'm halfway to Pioneer."

He walked with Elwood the quarter mile to the dining hall, but they got separated in the chow line, and when Elwood looked for a place to sit he didn't see him. The mess hall was loud and rowdy, full of all the Cleveland boys serving up their morning round of nonsense. Elwood was invisible again. He found an empty seat at one of the long tables. When he neared, a boy slapped his hand on the bench and said it was saved. The next table over was filled with younger kids but when Elwood put his tray down they looked at him like he was crazy. "Big kids aren't allowed to sit at a little-kids table," one of them said.

Elwood sat down quickly at the next free spot he saw and to head off rebuke didn't make eye contact, just ate. The oatmeal had a bunch of cinnamon dumped into it to hide a lousy taste. Elwood gobbled it down. He finished peeling his orange before he finally looked up at the boy across the table who had been staring at him.

The first thing Elwood noticed was the notch in the boy's left ear, like on an alley cat that had been in scrapes. The boy said, "You eat that oatmeal like your mama made it."

Who was this, talking about his mother. "What?"

He said, "I didn't mean it like that, I meant I ain't never seen someone eat this food like that—like they liked it."

The second thing Elwood noticed was the boy's eerie sense of self. The mess hall was loud with the rumble and roil of juvenile activity, but this boy bobbed in his own pocket of calm. Over time, Elwood saw that he was always simultaneously at home in whatever scene he found himself and also seemed like he shouldn't have been there; inside and above at the same time; a part and apart. Like a tree trunk that falls across a creek—it doesn't belong and then it's never not been there, generating its own ripples in the larger current.

He said his name was Turner.

"I'm Elwood. From Tallahassee. Frenchtown."

"*Frenchtown*." A boy down the line mimicked Elwood's voice, giving it a sissy turn, and his buddies laughed.

There were three of them. The biggest one he'd seen last night, the boy who looked too old to attend Nickel. The giant was named Griff; in addition to his mature appearance, he was broad-chested and hunched like a big brown bear. Griff's daddy, it was said, was on a chain gang in Alabama for murdering his mother, making his meanness a handed-down thing. Griff's two pals were Elwood's size, lean on the bone but wild and cruel in the eyes. Lonnie's wide bulldog face tapered into a bullet at his shaved scalp. He'd scrounged up a patchy mustache and had a habit of smoothing it with his thumb and index finger when calculating brutality. The last member of the trio was called Black Mike. He was a wiry youth from Opelousas who was in constant battle with restless blood; this morning he wobbled in his seat and sat on his hands to keep them from flying off. The three of them owned the other end of the table—the seats between were empty because everyone else knew better.

"I don't know why you so loud, Griff," Turner said. "You knew they got their eye on you this week."

Elwood assumed he meant the housemen; there were eight of them spread out at different tables in the mess, eating with their charges. It was impossible he'd overheard, but the houseman closest to them looked up and sent everybody act-casual. Griff, the bruiser, made a barking noise at Turner and the other two boys laughed, the dog noises part of a running gag. The one with the shaved head, Lonnie, winked at Elwood and then they returned to their morning meeting.

"I'm from Houston myself," Turner said. He sounded bored. "That's a real city. None of this country shit y'all got up here."

"Thanks for that," Elwood said. He tipped his head toward the bullies.

The boy picked up his tray. "I didn't do shit."

Then everyone was on their feet: Time for class. Desmond tapped Elwood on the shoulder and escorted him. The colored schoolhouse was down the hill, next to the garage and the warehouse. "I used to hate school," Desmond said. "But here you can grab some shut-eye."

"I thought this place was strict," Elwood said.

"Back home, my daddy'd beat my ass if I missed a day of school. Nickel, though." Academic performance had no bearing on one's progress to graduation, Desmond explained. Teachers didn't take attendance or hand out grades. The clever kids worked on their merits. Enough merits and you could get an early release for good behavior. Work, comportment, demonstrations of compliance or docility, however—these things counted toward your ranking and were never

far from Desmond's attention. He had to get home. He was from Gainesville, where his father had a shoeshine stand. Desmond took off so many times, raising hell, that his father begged Nickel to take him. "I was sleeping under the stars so much, he thought I'd learn to appreciate having a roof over my head."

Elwood asked him if it was working.

Desmond turned away and said, "Man, I got to make it to Pioneer." His grown-up man's voice, coming out of his scrawny body, made it a poignant wish.

The colored schoolhouse was older than the dormitories, one of the few structures that dated back to the opening of the school. There were two classrooms upstairs for the chucks and two on the main floor for the older kids. Desmond steered Elwood into their homeroom, which had fifty desks or so crammed inside. Elwood squeezed into the second row and was swiftly appalled. The posters on the walls featured bespectacled owls hooting out the alphabet next to bright drawings of elementary nouns: house, cat, barn. Little-kid stuff. Worse than the secondhand textbooks at Lincoln High, all the Nickel textbooks were from before he was born, earlier editions of textbooks Elwood remembered from first grade.

The teacher Mr. Goodall appeared, but no one paid him any mind. Goodall was a pink-skinned man in his mid-sixties, with thick tortoiseshell eyeglasses, a linen suit, and a mane of white hair that gave him a learned air. His scholarly demeanor swiftly evaporated. Only Elwood was dismayed by the teacher's distracted, lackluster efforts; the other boys spent the morning goofing and joshing. Griff and his cronies played spades at the back of the classroom, and

when Elwood caught Turner's eye, the boy was reading a wrinkled Superman comic. Turner saw him, shrugged, and turned the page. Desmond was out cold, his neck cracked at a painful angle.

Elwood, who did all of Mr. Marconi's accounting in his head, took the rudimentary math lesson as an insult. He was supposed to be taking college classes—that's why he was in that car in the first place. He shared a primer with the boy next to him, a fat kid who burped up breakfast in powerful gusts, and they started a dumb game of tug-of-war. Most of the Nickel boys couldn't read. As each boy picked up that morning's story—nonsense about an industrious hare—Mr. Goodall didn't bother to correct them or share the proper pronunciation. Elwood carved each syllable with such precision that the students around him stirred from their reveries, curious as to what kind of black boy talked like that.

He approached Goodall at the lunch bell and the teacher pretended to know him: "Hello, son, what can I do for you?" Another one of his colored boys, they came and went. Up close, Goodall's pink cheeks and nose were lumpy and ridged. His sweat, accented by last night's bottle, was a sweet vapor.

Elwood kept the indignation out of his voice when he asked if Nickel had advanced classes for students who were looking forward to college. He'd learned this material years ago, he explained humbly.

Goodall was amiable enough. "Certainly! I'll speak to the director about it. What was your name again?"

Elwood caught up with Desmond on the path back to Cleveland. He told Desmond about his conversation with the teacher. Desmond said, "You believe that shit?"

After lunch, when it was time for art class and shop, Blakeley pulled Elwood aside. The house father wanted Elwood to work on the yard crew with some of the Grubs. He'd be joining the other boys in the middle of their shift, but grounds work gave you the lay of the land, so to speak. "See it close up," Blakeley said.

That first afternoon, Elwood and five other boys—most of them chucks—prowled over the colored half of campus with scythes and rakes. Their leader was a quiet-natured boy named Jaimie, who had the spindly, undernourished frame common to Nickel students. He bounced around Nickel a lot—his mother was Mexican, so they didn't know what to do with him. On his arrival, he was put in with the white kids, but his first day working in the lime fields he got so dark that Spencer had him reassigned to the colored half. Jaimie spent a month in Cleveland, but then Director Hardee toured one day, took a look at that light face among the dark faces, and had him sent back to the white camp. Spencer bided his time and tossed him back a few weeks later. "I go back and forth," Jaimie said as he raked up pine needles into a mound. He had the screwed-down smile of the rickety-toothed. "One day they'll make up their minds, I suppose."

Elwood got his tour as they cut their way up the hill, past the two other colored dormitories, the red clay basketball courts, and the big laundry building. Looking down, most of the white campus was visible through the trees: the three dormitories, the hospital, and administration buildings. The head of the school, Director Hardee, worked in the big red one with the American flag. There were the big facilities the black boys and white boys used at different times, like the gymnasium, the chapel, and the woodshop.

From above, the white schoolhouse was identical to the colored one. Elwood wondered if it was in better shape, like the schools in Tallahassee, or if Nickel delivered the same stunted education to all its charges regardless of skin color.

When they got to the top of the hill, the yard crew turned around. On the other side of the rise was the graveyard, Boot Hill. A low wall of rough stones enclosed the white crosses, gray weeds, the bent and lurching trees. The boys gave it a wide berth.

If you took the road past the other side of the slope, Jaimie explained, eventually you reached the printing plant, the first set of farms, and then the swamp that marked the northern end of the property. "You'll be picking potatoes sooner or later, don't worry," he told Elwood. Gangs of students walked the trails and roads to their work assignments while supervisors in their state cars crisscrossed the property, watching. Elwood stood in wonder at the sight of a black boy, thirteen or fourteen years old, driving an old tractor that pulled a wooden trailer full of students. The driver looked sleepy and serene in his big seat, taking his charges to the farm.

When the other boys stiffened and stopped talking, it meant that Spencer was about.

Midway between the colored and the white campuses stood a single-story rectangular building, short and skinny, that Elwood took for a storage shed. Rust stains fell like vines across the white paint covering its concrete-block walls, but the green trim around the windows and front door was fresh and bright. The longer wall had one big window with three smaller ones next to it like ducklings.

A patch of uncut grass, a foot wide, encircled the build-

ing, untouched and untamed. "Should we cut that, too?" Elwood asked.

The two boys next to Elwood sucked their teeth. "Nigger, you don't go that way unless they take you," one said.

Elwood spent his free time before supper in Cleveland's rec room. He explored the cabinets, where they kept the cards and games and spiders. Students argued over who was next for table tennis, slapped paddles toward the saggy net, and cursed over wild shots, the pop of the white balls like the ragged heartbeat of an adolescent afternoon. Elwood checked out the meager offerings on the bookshelves, the Hardy Boys and comic books. There were moldy volumes about the natural sciences with space vistas and close-ups of the seafloor. He opened one cardboard chess set. There were only three pieces inside—a rook and two pawns.

The other students circulated, to or from work or sports, upstairs to the bunks, into their private recesses of mischief. Mr. Blakeley stopped on his way through and introduced Elwood to Carter, one of the black housemen. He was younger than the house father and carried himself like a stickler. Carter gave him a quick, dubious nod and turned to tell a thumb-sucker in the corner to knock it off.

Half of the housemen in Cleveland were black and half were white. "You got a coin toss over whether they look the other way or hassle you," Desmond said, "no matter what color they are." Desmond lay on one of the couches, his head on the funny pages to prevent it from touching an unwholesome stain on the upholstery. "Most are okay, but some of them got that mad-dog shit in them." Desmond pointed out the student captain, whose job it was to keep track of infractions and attendance. This week Cleve-

land's captain was a light-skinned boy with thick gold curls named Birdy—he was pigeon-toed. Birdy patrolled the first floor with the clipboard and pencil that were the trappings of his office, humming happily. "This one will rat on you in a second," Desmond said, "but get a good captain and you can scrape up some nice merits for Explorer or Pioneer."

An air horn screeched to the south, down the hill. No telling what it was. Elwood turned over a wooden crate and slumped down. Where to fit this place into the path of his life? The paint hung in thin rinds from the ceiling, and the sooty windows turned every hour overcast. He was thinking of Dr. King's speech to high school students in Washington, DC, when he spoke of the degradations of Jim Crow and the need to transform that degradation into action. *It will enrich your spirit as nothing else can. It will give you that rare sense of nobility that can only spring from love and selflessly helping your fellow man. Make a career of humanity. Make it a central part of your life.*

I am stuck here, but I'll make the best of it, Elwood told himself, and I'll make it brief. Everybody back home knew him as even, dependable—Nickel would soon understand that about him, too. At dinner, he'd ask Desmond how many points he needed to move out of Grub, how long it took most people to advance and graduate. Then he'd do it twice as fast. This was his resistance.

With that, he went through three chess sets, made a complete set of pieces, and won two games in a row.

Why he intervened in the fight in the bathroom, he couldn't muster a proper answer later. It was something his grandfather might have done in one of Harriet's stories: stepped up when he saw something wrong.

The younger boy being bullied, Corey, was not some-

one he'd met before. The bullies he'd encountered at his breakfast table: Lonnie with his bulldog face, and his manic partner Black Mike. Elwood went into the first-floor bathroom to urinate, and the taller boys had Corey up against the cracked tile wall. Maybe it was because Elwood didn't have any goddamned sense, as the Frenchtown boys said. Maybe it was because they were bigger and the other guy was smaller. His lawyer had persuaded the judge to let Elwood spend his last free days at home; there was no one to take him to Nickel that day, and the Tallahassee jail was overcrowded. Perhaps if he'd spent more time in the crucible of the county jail, Elwood would have known that it is best not to interfere in other people's violence, no matter the underlying facts of the incident.

Elwood said, "Hey," and took a step forward. Black Mike spun around, slugged him in the jaw and knocked him back against the sink.

Another boy, a chuck, opened the bathroom door and yelled, "Oh, shit." Phil, one of the white housemen, was making the rounds. He had a drowsy way about him and usually pretended not to see what was right in front of his face. At a young age he had decided it was easier that way. A coin toss, as Desmond had described Nickel justice. This day Phil said, "What are you little niggers up to?" His tone was light, more curious than anything else. Interpreting the scene was not part of his job. Who was at fault, who started it, why. His job was to keep these colored boys in check and today his responsibilities were not outside his grasp. He knew the names of the other boys. He asked the new boy his name.

"Mr. Spencer will take this up," Phil said. He told the boys to get ready for dinner.