

The Way Home

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Published by Phoenix

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PHOENIX

A PHOENIX PAPERBACK

First published in Great Britain in 2008
by Orion Books

This paperback edition published in 2009
by Phoenix,
an imprint of Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7538-2711-6

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that
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and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to
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ONE

NO ONE could say why it was called Pine Ridge. Wasn't any pines around that Chris could see. Just a group of one-story, L-shaped, red brick buildings set on a flat dirt-and-mud clearing, surrounded by a fence topped with razor wire. Beyond the fence, woods. Oak, maple, wild dogwood, and weed trees, but no pines. Somewhere back in those woods, the jail they had for girls.

The facility was situated on eight hundred acres out in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, twenty-five miles from Northwest D.C., where Chris had grown up. At night, lying in his cell, he could hear planes coming in low. So he knew that they were near the Baltimore airport, and close to a highway, too. Some days, if the wind was right, playing basketball on the outdoor court or walking to the school building from his unit, he'd make out the hiss and rumble of vehicles speeding by, straights going off to work or heading back home, moms in their minivans, kids driving to parties or hookups. Teenagers like him, only free.

Of course, he had been told exactly where he was. The director of the district's Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, the superintendent, the guards, his fellow inmates, his parents, and the lawyer his father had hired to represent him had explained it to him in detail. He'd even been shown a map. But it was more interesting for him to imagine that he was in some kind of mysterious location. *They are sending me to a top secret place in the woods. A facility for boys they cannot*

control. A place that can't hold me. I will now plan my daring escape, ha-ha.

"Chris?" said his mother.

"Huh?"

"Is something funny?"

"No."

"You're grinning."

"Was I?"

"Chris, you seem to be treating all of this very lightly."

"I don't mean to, Ma. I was thinkin on something, was all it was."

"You were thinking *about* something," said his father.

Chris smiled, causing the muscles along his father's jawline to tighten.

Chris Flynn was seated at a scarred wooden table in the Pine Ridge visiting room. Across the table were his parents, Thomas and Amanda Flynn. Nearby, several other boys, all wearing polo shirts and khakis, were being visited by their moms or grandmothers. A guard stood by the door. Outside the room, through a square of Plexiglas, Chris could see two other guards, talking to each other, laughing.

"How's it going, honey?" said Amanda.

"It's all right."

"How's school?"

Chris glanced around the room. "I go."

"Look at your mother when she's talking to you," said Thomas Flynn.

Instead, Chris stared into his father's watery eyes. He saw a husk of anger and hurt, and felt nothing.

"I'm asking you," said Amanda, "are they treating you all right? Are people bullying you?"

"You don't need to worry about that. I know how to jail."

"*You*," said Flynn, his voice not much louder than a contemptuous whisper.

"Do you have one of those level meetings coming up?" said Amanda.

"Not that I know."

"They're supposed to have them monthly. I'll follow up with our attorney. He's in contact with the superintendent."

"Fine."

"Let's pray," said Amanda.

She laced her fingers together, rested her hands on the table, and bowed her head. Chris and Thomas Flynn dutifully did the same. But they did not speak to God, and their thoughts were not spiritual or pure.

When Amanda was done, the three of them got up out of their seats. Amanda looked at the guard, a big man with kind eyes who surely would understand, and she embraced her son. As she held him, she slipped three folded twenty-dollar bills into the pocket of his trousers.

Amanda broke away from him, tears heavy in her eyes. "We're doing everything we can."

"I know it."

"You're in my prayers. I love you, Chris."

"Love you, too, Mom." He said this quietly, so the other boys would not hear him.

Neither Chris nor his father made a step toward each other. After a long, empty lock of their eyes, Chris gave Thomas Flynn a tough nod with his chin, turned, and left the room.

"Should we try and talk to the superintendent before we leave?" said Amanda.

"What for?" Flynn shook his head. "Let's just go."

ALONG WITH an escort guard, Thomas and Amanda Flynn walked out of the building toward the gatehouse, Thomas in front of Amanda, his heavy steps indenting the mud beneath his feet. Inmates, between classes and lunch,

were moving from unit to unit, their arms behind their backs, one hand holding the wrist of the other, accompanied by a guard carrying a two-way radio. All of the boys were black. Flynn had seen one Hispanic kid, waxy eyed and wired on meds, on his last visit, so maybe there were a few Spanish here, too, but that was immaterial to him. What weighed on him was that Chris was the sole white inmate of the facility.

My son, here with all these...

Flynn stopped himself before ugly words spelled themselves out in his head.

He rang the bell on the door at the rear of the gatehouse, looking through bars and Plexiglas to get the attention of one of two uniformed women behind the counter. Like most of the female guard staff Flynn had seen here, these women were wide and generously weighted in the legs and hips. He and his wife were buzzed in, and they passed through the same security aisle, similar to those used in airports, they'd entered. Neither of the guards looked at the couple or spoke to them as Flynn and Amanda collected their keys and cells.

They exited the gatehouse and walked along the chain link and razor wire fence to Amanda's SUV, parked in the staff and visitors' lot. They did not talk. Amanda was thinking of going to early mass on Sunday and lighting a candle for Chris. Flynn, as he often did, was thinking of what had gone wrong.

By Flynn's reckoning, he had begun to lose his son somewhere in Chris's freshman year of high school. At the time, Chris was playing football and CYO basketball, getting decent grades, attending Sunday school and mass. He was also smoking marijuana, shoplifting, fighting other boys, and breaking into cars and lockers. This was all happening at the same time, when Chris was about fifteen. To Amanda, Flynn

began to refer to his son as if he were two people: Good Chris and Bad Chris. By the time Chris was sixteen, only Bad Chris remained.

As a teenager and into his twenties, Flynn had blown his share of marijuana, so he detected Chris's use right away. Flynn could see the high in Chris's eyes, the way he would laugh inappropriately at violent images on the television screen, or his sudden interest in their Lab mix, Darby, playing tug-of-war or wrestling him to the ground, things he would never do while straight. Of course, there was the smell that always hung in Chris's clothing and, when he had copped, that unmistakable skunky odor of fresh bud in his bedroom.

It didn't bother Flynn horribly that his son smoked marijuana. In fact, he told Chris that he had no moral objection to it but felt that it was, basically, a waste of time. That for an already marginal student like Chris, it could impede his progress. What bothered Flynn, what became alarming, was that Chris began to smoke marijuana to the exclusion of everything else. He stopped playing sports. He stopped going to mass and hanging out with his church friends. He quit his job at the coffee shop in Friendship Heights. His grades edged toward failure. He seemed not to care about the loss or what his degeneration was doing to his parents.

Amanda still thought of Chris as her little boy and couldn't bring herself to discipline him like a young man. Plus, she was certain that the Lord would step in and, when He deemed it appropriate, blow the black clouds away and give Chris the wisdom to get back on the righteous path. Flynn's response was elemental and not carefully considered. He believed in Darwin over fairy tales and aimed to reinforce his position as the alpha dog of the house. He put Chris up against the wall more than once, raised his closed fist, and walked away before punching him. So Chris knew

that his father was willing to cross the line and kick his ass, but the knowledge did nothing to alter his behavior. He didn't care.

Chris was charged with possession of marijuana. The arresting officer did not show up for court, and the charge was dropped. Chris got in a fight at school and was suspended. He strong-armed a fellow student for his Walkman on school property and was arrested and expelled for the remainder of the year. He received community service time. Chris and his friend Jason were caught on camera looting the lockers of their high school basketball team while the players were at practice, and were arrested and charged. An adjudicatory hearing was scheduled. Chris was videotaped vandalizing and stealing from cars in the back lot of a Mexican restaurant. His father paid off the owners of the restaurant and the owners of the vehicles, thereby avoiding the involvement of police. And then there were the final charges and the conviction that led to his incarceration: assault, possession with intent to distribute, leaving the scene of an accident, reckless driving, driving on the sidewalk, fleeing and eluding police. With each succeeding "incident", with each visit to the Second District station on Idaho Avenue to pick up his son, Flynn grew more angry and distant.

Kate would be eighteen now. We'd be looking at colleges. We'd be taking photos of her, dressed up for the senior prom. Instead of visiting that little shit with his prison uniform and his pride in knowing "how to jail".

Christopher Flynn was the only surviving offspring of Thomas and Amanda Flynn. Their first child, Kate, died two days after she was born. The death certificate listed the cause as "respiratory distress syndrome", which meant that she had suffocated. She was a preemie, and her lungs had not fully developed.

At the time of Kate's birth, Thomas Flynn was a young

uniformed police officer in D.C.'s Fourth District. He had signed up impulsively, successfully passed through the academy, and upon his graduation he almost immediately realized he had made a mistake. He was dispassionate about the job and did not want to lock up kids, making him unsuited to be a soldier in the drug war. Flynn resigned and took a position as an account representative for a carpet-and-flooring wholesaler whose sales manager, not coincidentally, was his former high school basketball coach. Flynn's intention was to learn the business, establish contacts, and eventually go out on his own.

Soon after Kate died, Amanda became pregnant but lost the baby in the first trimester. Despite assurances from her obstetrician that she was healthy, Amanda, who along with Flynn had dabbled in cocaine in her youth, blamed her past drug use for Kate's premature birth and death. She believed that she had permanently damaged her "insides" and could no longer carry a child to term. "My eggs are dirty," she told Flynn, who only nodded, preferring not to argue with her, in the way that one does not try to reason with a loved one who has begun to mentally slip away. Amanda had by then welcomed Jesus into their lives, and Flynn found it increasingly difficult for the three of them to coexist.

Kate's death did not ruin their marriage, but it killed a piece of it. Flynn barely recognized in the humorless, saved Amanda the funny, spirited woman he had married. Despite the emotional gulf between them, they continued to have sex frequently. Amanda still secretly hoped to have a healthy child, and, born again or not, she had a body on her, and Thomas Flynn liked to have it. Chris was born in 1982.

As the problems with Chris progressed, Flynn found himself thinking more and more of Kate. She was with them for only two days and had no discernible personality, but he was haunted by her and obsessed with what she might have

become had she lived. Chris was real, a stained reminder of Flynn's failings as a father. The Kate he imagined was a charmer, lovely, well mannered, and successful. Kate would surely have looked upon Flynn with loving eyes. He fantasized about the daughter he would never have, and it made him feel optimistic and right. Knowing all the while, from the evidence of his business and his everyday life, that reality was usually far less intriguing than the dream.

"Tommy?" said Amanda, now seated beside him in the SUV, Thomas Flynn in the driver's bucket and fitting his key to the ignition.

"What."

"We should schedule a meeting with our attorney. I want him to keep in contact with the warden."

"You want to help him, huh?" Flynn glared at his wife. "I saw you slip Chris that money."

"He might need it."

"I told you not to do that, didn't I?"

"Yes, but—"

"*Didn't* I."

"Yes."

"He's going to buy marijuana with it. They get it from the guards."

"I can't just leave him in there with no resources. He's our son."

Flynn held his tongue.