CHAPTER 10

When I finally fell asleep Friday night, I dreamed that Dad and I were fishing somewhere on a gorgeous morning. The sun filtered through the trees and light reflected off the river like shiny scales, while we sat on the banks enjoying the peace and beauty of the place. Dad looked content and happy, not just with life but with me. We weren't talking, but I could feel his love and acceptance. More than anything, more than even my next breath, I wanted to stay there at his side, to bask in the warmth of the morning sun and the security of his affection. He put an arm around my shoulders. It felt warm and strong. And real. I felt the weight of his arm and the movement of his ribs as he breathed. I'd never been closer to him.

Then, for some reason, I stood up and left. I walked up a path away from the river to get something, something that seemed important to me at the time, something I thought would please him.

When I got back, Dad was gone. At first I didn't panic. I sat down exactly where we had been before and waited. I knew he'd return, and when he did, so would all the comfortable, good feelings.

Minutes passed.

Dad didn't come back.

As I sat alone on the bank of that river, the secure, loved feeling I had savored with Dad bled out of me, and a horrible emptiness replaced it. My heart ached for that feeling to return, but it didn't. I knew that moment with Dad was lost forever, and I sat on the riverbank crying for my father.

And for me.

When I woke up, the ache in my chest lingered, and I felt lonelier and sadder than I had ever felt in my life.

All day Saturday, I kept worrying about Emmett. If I thought I could have found his uncle's home, I would've driven out to warn him. I knew they wouldn't have a telephone in a sharecropper's shack, so trying to call him wouldn't have done any good. I felt lousy and helpless, and I said something to Ruthanne about it while she was cleaning up after breakfast.

She shook her head and frowned. "I already heard plenty about his stupid stunt at that white man's store up in Money, and soon as I see him, I'm going to give that boy a talking to he won't forget. It's thoughtful for you to be worrying about
him, Hiram, but I'm sure Uncle Mose knows all about what happened and I'll keep an eye on Bobo till they get him safe on that train back to Chicago."

Later Grampa could tell I was worried about something, and he did his best to cheer me up, even took me fishing on the Tallahatchie, but that only made me feel worse. It reminded me of all the crap R.C. had done. I went only because I hoped I'd see Emmett so I could warn him and tell him I was sorry I'd let R.C. hurt him, but our fishing trip didn't last long because Grampa tired out so fast, and we left the river without any fish—and without seeing Emmett.

On the way home Grampa said, "You're still looking glummer than a lost puppy, son. Tell you what. We'll have dinner tonight at the Crystal Grill to cheer us up. No better place in the Delta for a good meal and good company."

That night when we got to his favorite restaurant, Grampa really perked up. Everybody in the place knew him. Some people patted him on the back as they passed our table; others stopped to chat, usually about his work on the Council and how they appreciated all he was doing to "save the South." I hadn't seen him enjoy himself that much the whole time I'd been back in Greenwood.

When we got home, Grampa settled into his living room chair to read the Commonwealth while I fiddled with the radio looking for a baseball game. I found a Dodgers game and lay on the floor listening to it until I dozed off. Some time later a knock on the door woke me up. Most of the lights in the house were off—it had to be pretty late—and Grampa had already answered the door.

"Evenin', Mr. Hillburn," said one man. "Sorry to be callin' on you so late."

"Yessir, it is late," said another man, "but we gotta talk."

Grampa looked back into the living room and saw I was awake. "Council business, Hiram. Why don't you go on up to bed?" Then, instead of inviting the men into the living room like he did with his regular Council buddies, he stepped outside and talked to them on the porch—with the front light off—before coming back in to tell me he was off to another meeting. "Don't wait up, son," he said. "This looks like it might take all night." I watched him get into the backseat of their car and drive off and then I went upstairs to bed. He must have got back pretty late, because it took me a long time to fall asleep, and I never did hear him come in.

The next day, Sunday, Grampa and I both woke up feeling tired and lazy. The August heat and his diabetes had been wearing on him, and I was haunted by my worries about what R.C. might have done to Emmett the previous night.

I made us a late breakfast, and we spent the rest of the day napping, playing cards, or listening to the radio in the living room. Seemed like neither one of us ever really got awake that day. I thought about asking Grampa if I could use the phone to call long distance to talk to Mom and Dad, but I didn't know what I'd say to them if I did. I had a feeling that maybe Dad would call me, so I didn't mind hanging around the house all day waiting for the phone to ring.

It never did.
Grampa felt better Monday morning, so after breakfast we drove out to the fields. "Little fresh air is what we both need, son," he said. "Sitting around the house all day yesterday didn't do either one of us a bit of good."

As we drove to the fields north of town, I wondered if I should tell Grampa about my fears that R.C. might have done something bad to Emmett, but he seemed so happy to be outside and to see that his crops were about ready to harvest, that I didn't want to ruin his mood.

"Tell you what, Hiram," Grampa said as we pulled away from the fields, "let's drive over to Indianola for lunch. There's a great little cafe downtown where we can get some catfish that's almost as good as Gramma used to cook." He leaned back into the truck seat and swung his arm out the window and pointed forward. "Drive on, boy. We're having us a day trip."

"Grampa," I said as we headed up the highway, "did you and Dad ever fish together much, you know, when he was little?"

"Your daddy used to love fishing," Grampa said. "He'd badger me all week to take him fishing on Saturday morning. He didn't mind getting up early. Didn't mind sitting still on the riverbank. Didn't mind spending the whole damn day in the same spot holding a fishing rod."

I could hardly believe what I'd just heard: Dad fishing? He'd never said a word about it. We didn't even own any poles. "So when did he change? I mean, he's never taken me fishing."

"When your daddy got to be older, everything went crazy. He didn't want to go fishing, didn't want to have anything to do with me, and I don't mind telling you that his attitude rubbed me the wrong way. This was my only child; all my life I'd planned that we'd spend time together, fishing, working out in the fields, and when he didn't want to do that anymore, I started pushing him. Making him go. Making him do what I wanted him to do." He shook his head. "And that didn't do a damn bit of good except to push him away from me and my life. Don't get me wrong, son, your daddy never gave us a lick of trouble. He got good grades, behaved himself in school, did everything right, but he wasn't doing it my way, and I let him know it. By the time he was in high school, we hardly talked anymore." He sighed. "And you yourself know that things haven't changed much since then. Maybe they've even gotten worse."

"That's kind of what worries me," I said. "The same stuff is happening with me and Dad. Before I came down here, I didn't care about how we got along—and I didn't care because I thought he didn't care, but I don't like how things are with me and Dad, and now I'm starting to think that maybe he doesn't either. The problem is, I don't know what to do about it."

"It can't be one way, I know that," said Grampa. "To get connected, you've both got to reach out, you've both got to be willing to give a little. My problem always was I wouldn't give an inch."

"Maybe Dad and I are too much like that; neither one of us is willing to make an effort to understand the other."
“I'll tell you, son, that's one family trait I wish hadn't been passed on. There's lots in you that you, your daddy, or I can't do a thing about, but this is something you can change. And believe me, a good relationship between a father and his son is worth it. It's worth more than you can know.”

“Grampa, sometimes I wish that Dad and me could be like you and me.”

Grampa looked sad when he heard that, and he said quietly, “So do I, son. So do I.”

When we got back home, there was a note on the door from Ruthanne. It was written in her perfect looping cursive handwriting and in the careful English she always used when she wrote something.

“Dear Mr. Earl,” it read, “I am truly sorry I cannot be at work today. My extended family has experienced a tragedy, and I must attend to their immediate needs. I shall do my utmost to be at work on time tomorrow morning. Please excuse my unavoidable absence.

“Very sincerely yours, Ruthanne Parker.”

“Good thing we had that big catfish lunch in Indianola today,” Grampa said as he handed me the note and opened the front door. “Grab the newspaper there, Hiram, and let's get inside and figure out what we can do to keep from starving until we see Ruthanne again.”

I picked up the Commonwealth off the porch and followed Grampa into the house. When he got settled into his favorite chair, I handed him the paper and headed for the kitchen to put something together for dinner. “Scrambled eggs and toast okay?” I asked.

“Throw in a little onion if you can find it,” he called over his shoulder as he snapped open the evening paper. “Looks like we're going to survive after all.”

I had just set the frying pan on the stove when Grampa called for me. I switched off the burner and trotted back into the living room. “Grampa, are you all right?”

“Take a look at this,” he said, handing me the paper. His face had turned serious and pale.

Splashed across the front page was the headline: “Chicago Negro Youth Abducted by Three White Men at Money.”

I felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach. I skimmed the article: Emmett had been missing since early Sunday morning. Three white men and a woman had gone to his uncle's home and asked if the boy from Chicago was there. They took Emmett out to their car where a white woman identified him as the one who had made “ugly remarks” to her, and then put him in the car and drove off. No one had seen Emmett since. The sheriff had already arrested Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam for the kidnapping—even though they claimed they had released Emmett—and was searching for a third man.

“I can't believe this! I called the sheriff's office. I told them about R.C. I warned them that something like...” My voice choked up and I had to sit down. “It's R.C. They've got to know that. I told them Friday night.”

“What are you talking about?” Grampa looked worried.

“The third man! R. C. Rydell told me he was going to make trouble.”

“Now don't go jumping to conclusions, son,” said Grampa.
“Just because R.C. was talking big Friday doesn’t mean he had something to do with this.”

“But he told me he was going up to Money with some other men. He said they were just going to do some talking, but I knew it wouldn’t stop at that. I knew something bad was going to happen. I should’ve done more. I could’ve stopped R.C. I could’ve found Emmett and warned him.” My whole body felt cold and hard, like a rock sinking to the bottom of a lake.

Grampa was about to say something when the phone rang. I went into the kitchen and answered it.

“This is Sheriff George Smith, and I’m wondering if I could speak to Hiram Hillburn.”

“Yessir,” I said. “That’s me.” I gulped. What had R.C. told the sheriff? Had he blamed me for what had happened?

“My deputy said you called here Friday night with some information about R.C. Rydell and his plans to call on a Negro boy Saturday night.”

“Yessir.”

“You seen R.C. lately?”

“Not since that night.”

“He say anything to you about what he planned on doing?”

I took a deep breath. “He said he was going up to Money with a couple other men to talk to a Negro boy about the trouble at the Bryant store. I tried to stop him. I didn’t want anything to happen. I called your office and told—”

“Hold on, boy. You did just fine. Now, you got any idea where R.C. might be? He didn’t say anything about where he might be heading, did he?”

“Last I knew he was headed home.”

Sheriff Smith cleared his throat. “I thank you, Hiram, for your help in this case. One more question: How long are you planning on staying in Greenwood?”

“I got a ticket for Wednesday’s train. My dad wants me back in time for school.”

“Well, you’d better call your daddy and tell him you’re not going to be able to make that train. I’m afraid we might be needing you around here for the next little while.”