breakfast aromas coming up from the kitchen. For a moment I felt like I was a little kid again and Gramma was down in the kitchen cooking breakfast. The moment soon passed, but I lay in bed for a long time savoring the warm feelings and memories that washed over me in my favorite place in the world. Ruthanne finally had to call me down for breakfast.

It was good to be back in Greenwood. I had come back home, and I was free.

CHAPTER 6

Grampa didn’t get up for breakfast. “Your granddaddy doesn’t sleep well these days, and some nights he’s up late at those Council meetings,” Ruthanne explained, “so you just as well go ahead and eat, Mr. Hiram. He said that if you want, after breakfast you can borrow his truck—if it’s not already borrowed; you ask me, he’s too free and easy lending that truck around—and take a look around town. He’ll be ready for you by lunchtime, so plan on being back by then.”

After breakfast I went out into the backyard to look around; things hadn’t changed much. Around the side of the house and through the bushes between our yards, I could see Ralph’s and Ronnie’s paths still clearly worn in the Remingtons’ yard. Ralph Remington had just come out the back door and started on his path when he saw me. At first he looked spooked.
“Harlan? Harlan Hillburn, is that you?” He squinted to get a better look at me.

“Nosir, it’s me, Hiram; I’m Harlan’s son.” It made me a little mad to be confused for my father, but I knew Ralph was an egg or two short of a dozen.

Still squinting, he took a few steps and stopped when he was as close to me as his path allowed. “Harlan’s married? And you’re his boy?” He looked me up and down. “Spitting image of your father, son, pure-D spitting image. I’d a sworn you were Harlan himself, yes, sir. A plain mirror image of your father. Not your father now, no, not that, but your father when he was your age. How old are you anyway, son?”

“Sixteen.”

“Sixteen. Ah, a fine age to be, sixteen. I remember when I myself was sixteen, some, let’s see, well, too many years ago. Sixteen is half of thirty-two, you know, and I can still recall being thirty-two. Not a bad year, what I can remember of it, not bad at all. No, at thirty-two a man is at the brink of middle age, still young enough to enjoy life, but old enough to know what’s worth enjoying. Yes, yes, young Hiram, thirty-two is a fine age.” He paused and looked carefully at me again. “But you don’t look thirty-two at all, I don’t care what you say.”

“I didn’t say I was—”

“And I can’t for the life of me imagine why a lad your age would want to go around making folks think he’s older than he really is. You’ve got to take pride in who and what you are, Hiram. Pride. The nation’s founded on it, and if you can’t take pride in yourself, if you insist on hiding behind falsehoods, well, you’re headed for trouble with a capital T. Besides, boy, anyone with a noodle of sense would know with a single look that you’re not even close to thirty-two years old. Hogwash! It’s complete foolishness for you to even dream you could pass for a man of that mature age. I tell you, no, let me guess.” He pointed at my chest. “I daresay you’re not much older than sixteen. There, yes. Sixteen.”

He waited for me to say something, but I had no idea what to say.

“Well, tell me, boy, am I right? Are you sixteen or not?”

“Yessir.”

He jerked his arm back and snapped his fingers. “I knew it! Just plain knew it. Thirty-two, what on earth could you have been thinking? Trying to pull the wool over my eyes, weren’t you? I hardly ever get an age wrong, no, not when you know as many people as I know for as long as I’ve known them. So, Harlan, what are you up to today?”

“Hiram, sir. Harlan’s my father.”

“Yes, yes, I knew that. So, Hiram, what are you up to today?”

“I’m thinking about going fishing if I can find some gear in Grampa’s garage.”

“Fishing? Fishing, now there’s a messy game. And a capital waste of time, if you ask me. Of course, it can be made better if accompanied by the right spirits, as in libations. A few good drinks can make any fishing trip worthwhile, but by and large it’s a national waste of time, if you ask me, a
waster of men's hours and nature's fruits. Sit around all day with a line in the water hoping to catch one of God's silver creatures of the water world. And when you do catch one, well, you treat it in the most inhumane manner, slicing it from tail to throat, sliding your thumb along its spine to dump its guts. Ugh." He shivered. "The entire process is far too messy, if you ask me. A wise man finds a cool place to sit, a place where he can knock back a few cold drinks and worry about the other more foolish of his kind who are out in the hot sun hoping to lure a catfish to their bait. Fishing. Oh, yes, you're thinking of fishing. Well, Harlan, does your father know you're planning on going out to the river alone? Can be dangerous, oh, mighty dangerous."

I felt like I was trapped in quicksand; would he ever get anything right? Would he ever stop talking? I took a deep breath and said, "Nosir, my father's back in——"

"Going behind your father's back, are you? Well, your little deception here with me would suggest you might tend to that sort of game. But I tell you, Harlan——"

"Hiram. I'm Hiram."

"What's that?"

"I'm Hiram. My father's Harlan."

"I knew that. Of course I knew that. But as I was saying, Harlan, you best let your father know you're going fishing. No telling what kind of trouble you might get into out there on the water. Why, just last year we had a boy drown over in Tallahatchie County. Fishing alone. No one knows for sure how he ended up in the water, but he was good and dead anyway. You stay out of that water if you know what's good for you, son." Ralph's eyes started wandering, like he was losing focus. Or maybe he was hearing voices. He looked down the path toward the street, then behind him to his back door. A moment later his gaze came back on me.

"Harlan? Harlan Hillburn, is that you?" He squinted at me again.

"Yessir, Mr. Ralph. And it's good to see you." I waved and headed for the safety of the garage. "You have yourself a good day, and please say hello to Mr. Ronnie for me."

When I was out of sight, I watched him. Still on the path, he looked confused, and then worried. Finally, he looked around, shook his head, and said, "Funny, I could have sworn I saw Harlan Hillburn today." Then he started up the path to the sidewalk and headed downtown.

That was my first conversation with Ralph Remington since I was a kid, and if I could help it, it would be my last. I'd never known anyone who could talk in such circles. When I was little, Gramma and Grampa had always told me to stay away from the Remington brothers, and now I knew why. Ralph's circular talking would make a kid want to swear off talking to adults for the rest of his life.

I couldn't remember exactly where Grampa kept his fishing stuff, so I rummaged around the garage until I found a fishing pole and some tackle. I put the gear in the back of Grampa's truck and headed north out of town. Though it was still morning, the Delta air was already hot and thick, and the breeze that blew through my open window did more to make me sweaty than it did to cool me off.

I took Old Money Road through the tiny cotton gin com-
munity somebody with a weird sense of humor had named Money and headed for a spot on the Tallahatchie River where Grampa and I used to fish. It felt good to be in the Delta again, out among the green cotton fields. The air smelled rich with dampness and earth, and whenever the engine slowed, I could hear the steady drone of locusts everywhere.

After I'd driven a few miles north of Money, I realized that one cotton field looks pretty much like another, that farm roads all look alike, and that back when I was fishing with Grampa, I hadn't been paying attention to where we were going.

But it didn't really matter, because I just wanted to get out on the river, not to fish but because I had always loved the solitude of sitting on the banks, enjoying the lazy movement of water and the beauty of the Delta. Not far past a few tar-paper shanties where Negro field hands lived, I caught a glimpse of the river, so I turned down the next road and followed it through the brush to a small clearing on the banks of the Tallahatchie.

In five minutes I was settled against the base of a tree on the riverbank watching my line tugging against the current. The thick green water seemed hypnotic or soothing or something, and the anger I'd had for Dad, the worries about Grampa, and any other cares I'd brought with me to Mississippi were swept away, and for the first time in a long time, maybe the first time since I'd left Greenwood, I felt content. The sights, the sounds, the smells, everything around me was familiar, and I was home. All that peaceful stuff, though, made me sleepy. I closed my eyes and dozed for several minutes until a sound I thought I had dreamed woke me up.

Splashing. Thrashing in water. And someone calling for help.

I set my pole down and stood up. "Help!" cried a panicked voice from downstream. "Somebody help me!" I jogged along the banks toward the sound. "Help, hey, somebody!" The voice was garbled, choking. At the next clearing I saw someone almost in the middle of the river, flailing in the water. He was too far out for me to reach with a branch or stick.

"Hey, hey you!" I yelled. "Hang on. I'm coming in." I kicked off my shoes and dove into the Tallahatchie. It took five or six strokes to reach him, and as soon as I got close, he crashed both arms into my head and thrashed around so wildly that I couldn't grab him; finally he did exactly what our lifesaving merit badge instructor had said drowning victims always do: He threw his arms around my neck and clamped on like a two-ton crawdad. We sank in a hurry, and his grip tightened, choking me, as soon as the water closed over our heads.

That's when I panicked. I knew we'd both be dead if I didn't do something, so with my free arm I reached back as far as I could and punched him in the face. That only loosened his grip, so I jammed my knee up into his crotch. A burst of air bubbles blew out of his mouth and his grip
slackened enough for me to shove him away, scissors-kick back to the surface, and take deep gulps of air. He floated up a moment later, taking what looked like his last breath. I swam around behind him, popped him in the head again to make sure he was going to cooperate, looped my arm under his chin, and side-kicked us to shore. He floated along without a struggle.

It was a Negro boy, and his short dark hair glistened and dripped water as I dragged him up on the riverbank. He moaned and twisted over on his stomach once I had him on land, so I stood away and let him figure out where he was before I said anything. Other than the rise and fall of his back, he didn't move for several seconds, then he got up on his hands and knees and puked river water.

"You'll feel better soon," I said. "It's good when your body gets all that stuff out."

The boy shook his head, coughed, then vomited again. He stayed on all fours for a minute, then turned over and sat on the grass, resting his arms on his knees and letting his head hang like he was exhausted. He looked familiar; his clothes were different, but I recognized him. "Bobo? We met at the train station; you were with Ruthanne."

"Call me Emmett. Family calls me B-Bobo, but I'm trying to get rid of that nickname." He peeled off his T-shirt and wrung out the water.

"Good thing I caught you when I did," I said, "or you'd've been fish bait."

"You hit me." He pressed the back of his wrist against his bleeding lip and then held his arm out and showed me the blood on his wrist.

"You would've drowned both of us, so I figured I had only one chance to make sure you'd let go. You going to be okay?"

"Long as you d-d-don't tell anybody."

"You get in trouble if your parents find out?"

He shook his head and held out his hands for me to pull him up. "Got my reputation to maintain," he said as he stood up. "I d-d-don't want my old country cousins having a good laugh on me. When my uncle heard I couldn't swim, he told me to stay away from the river, but I figured a little old river's not going to hurt me. Anyway, I'd appreciate it if you don't say nothing to nobody."

"Sure, but I gotta know, how come you were in the river if you don't know how to swim?"

"I spent all night in my uncle's shack out this way and was b-bored stiff. For a good time around here, my cousins think hanging out at B-Bryant's store is as good as it gets. Hey, I'm from Chicago, and we got lots more action up there. I figured if I was going to be here for a couple weeks, I'd b-better take a look around and see if there was anything I could do that would be a little more interesting than chopping cotton or playing checkers at B-Bryant's Meat and Grocery. This morning I followed an old p-path from my uncle's shack and it came to this river, and 'cause I had nothing b-better to do, I stood around chucking rocks in the water."
“Chucking rocks usually don’t get you into the river,” I said.
Emmett stood up. “Yeah, well, when I was p-picking up rocks along the shore to chuck, one b-bit me.” He held up his middle finger that had a chunk of missing skin. “Some kind of spiny-backed turtle.”

“Snapper. They call them snapping turtles down here.”

“Okay, so that old snapper snapped me good, and I thought maybe I’d go after him and b-bring him b-back to my uncle’s place. He’d be a good trick to play on somebody’s b-bed.” Emmett smiled. “I saw him move away from the shore, so I took off my shoes and waded in after him. He kept moving, I kept moving, then I slipped and the old river started p-pushing me downstream. It was a heck of a lot d-deeper than I thought.”

He took a shaky breath. “For a while I figured I was never going to see Chicago again. Dang glad you heard me.”

“No problem. I was just fishing downstream a ways. Actually, I was napping with my fishing pole and you woke me up.”

“Not the first time I’ve been somebody’s b-bad dream. Anyway, now I know what a fish feels like. I think I like Chicago better.”

“Maybe you ought to stay away from the Tallahatchie while you’re down here. Next time I might not be around to pull you out.”

“Don’t worry ’b-bout that. I’ll be finding me b-better things to do than hang around some old river filled with snapping turtles and sleepy white fishermen.” He grinned.

“I gotta find my shoes and head b-back to my uncle’s place. It’s about lunchtime, and my aunt’ll have conniptions if I’m not there to eat.”

We walked upstream together until he found his shoes. He sat down and pulled them on, then stood and put on his T-shirt. “I’ll see you around,” he said as he headed up the path. “Hope the lifeguarding business keeps up for you.”

When I got back to my fishing spot, I picked up my pole and reeled in my line. The hook was empty, of course.

I laid the pole on the grass and sat back down under the shade of a cypress tree hoping to go back to sleep, but I still had too much adrenaline pumping through me to relax. When I’d earned that lifesaving merit badge a couple years earlier, I never figured on using it; there’s not a whole lot of water in Tempe, and what little there is, is usually in a cement rectangle supervised by a lifeguard. The rescue I’d just done scared me. I could’ve drowned; Emmett and I both could have ended up dead in the Tallahatchie River. I wondered if anyone would have ever found us. I wondered if Dad would have even cared.

The peace I’d enjoyed earlier was gone, so I picked up my pole, walked back to the truck, and headed home. Grampa would likely be up and ready for lunch by now. I remembered how he felt about Negroes, and didn’t plan on saying anything to him about Emmett and the river.

My clothes were still damp when I got home, and when Grampa asked how I got all wet, I lied and told him I’d had
a snag on my line pretty far out in the river, and when I went out to try to work it free, I fell in.

"I taught you better than that, Hiram. Any good fisherman can loose a snag if he uses his head. If nothing else, you can just cut the dang line."

I shrugged. "I didn't want to lose my hook and sinker."

"How many times you been fishing since you left Greenwood?" Grampa asked, though he already knew the answer. Dad hated fishing. "If your father ever bothered to take you fishing, you wouldn't have forgotten everything I taught you." He scowled and paused a moment. "No matter. Run upstairs and get changed. You're driving us to the River Café for lunch. Hurry on up, son, 'cause I'm plenty hungry."

After I changed my clothes, I helped him outside and into the truck and climbed behind the wheel. I started the truck and backed down the driveway. "So what have you been doing since they let you out of the hospital?"

"Reading, mostly. Some exercises, learning how to get around, getting the old legs to do what I tell them. And eating Ruthanne's good cooking—more of it than I should. And some folks come around, and we talk about the Councils and what we can do to keep our schools around here right."

I turned onto River Road and headed downtown. "What's wrong with the schools?"

"What's wrong? Hasn't your daddy told you about the desegregation ruling by that rabble-rousing Supreme Court? Bet he's been happier than a pig in mud about all that craziness. I tell you, son, mixing Negroes with our white students is going to ruin our schools and all America, but down here, we're not going to allow it. Some good folks formed White Citizens' Councils to keep things sensible in the Delta. Those damn Yankees think they can tell us how to run our lives, well, they better think again." He looked real serious. "I tell you, son, around here, we're not going to take this integration craziness lying down. Not us, not here, not ever."

The more he talked about the Supreme Court's ruling, the more agitated Grampa became, and I was glad when we pulled up in front of the River Café. Maybe we'd run into enough of his old buddies that he'd have something else to talk about besides schools and Negroes.

I'd had enough tension for one day.