CHAPTER 9

During supper that night I felt so lousy about what R.C. had done that I could hardly face Ruthanne. Grampa could tell I was upset, and before I could slip upstairs to sulk in my room, he said, "Hiram, let's go set in the living room and you can tell me what's eating you. Ever since you got home from fishing, you've looked more miserable than a crawdad in a stew pot."

Frankly, I was glad for the chance to unload my feelings on Grampa, and he let me ramble about what had happened. I didn't get into all the gory stuff, but I did tell him that R.C. Rydell had done some awful things to a Negro boy while we were fishing. I could barely keep my voice from shaking.

"And the worst thing, Grampa, was that I just stood there. I could've pulled him off. I should've done something, but I didn't know what to do." I felt my face turn red. "Truth is, I was scared."

"R.C. didn't do any permanent damage to the boy, just a little roughhousing that went too far. Besides, Hiram, boys like R.C. are as unpredictable as a mad dog; if you'd've gotten in his way, he might have ripped into you."

"But I should have done something. You should've seen how that boy looked at me when he left. He thought I was his friend."

"That's where he made his first mistake. Coloreds around here know better than to push themselves on white folks. There is no friendship between whites and coloreds, never should be, never will be. Even a fool oughtta known that."

"R.C. wasn't just acting unfriendly, Grampa; he was torturing him. It was crazy. Why would anybody act like that?"

"No explaining some people," Grampa said. "There are some ignorant white trash peckerwoods here in the Delta who are just plain mean. Maybe they've got things bad. Maybe they're mad about something. Maybe they can't hold their liquor. You can't understand them, son, and it's no use even trying."

"Should I tell the sheriff?"

Grampa shook his head. "I'm sure Sheriff Smith knows all about R.C. Rydell. That boy's been in and out of trouble his whole life. From what I hear, most of it's just dumb old peckerwood things like bullying people, swearing in public, boozing. But one thing's sure: He doesn't have the brains or the gumption to do anything much worse than what he
did today. I don't approve of what he did, but you also got to remember, Hiram, this is the Mississippi Delta. Sounds to me like that colored boy just didn't have any sense. R.C.'s no good, and I'm damn sorry for what happened, but that boy brought trouble on himself."

I didn't know what to think, and I didn't want to talk to Grampa any longer, so I said good night and went upstairs to my room. Some of what Grampa said about R.C. made sense, but I couldn't think of anything anybody could do to deserve getting treated the way Emmett had been. Why had R.C. been so hateful to a kid he didn't even know? And what if lots of people like R.C. existed? What if they all got together?

They'd be dangerous to almost everyone, not just to Negroes.

Back in Arizona, I'd heard about how the Mormons had been chased out of most places they had lived until they'd finally settled in Utah, a desert nobody wanted. It was hard to believe that Americans could be that cruel to other people just because of religion, or race, or anything. The Nazi slaughter of the Jews, that seemed different—and worse. For one, it was an ocean away, foreigners hurting and killing other foreigners, and the Nazis weren't Americans; they didn't have the principles of freedom and democracy that we had. Maybe in a way, they just didn't know any better, or maybe old Hitler was just able to pull off mass hypnosis or something.

And maybe that's why Dad acted so crazy about the

South and segregation. Maybe he realized that bullies would always find somebody to pick on, if not the Negroes, then somebody else.

And I didn't want it to be me or anybody I loved.

In fact, I didn't want it to be anybody at all.

My head was so jammed with troubles that night that I could hardly keep it still on my pillow; plenty of my restlessness was because of what R.C. had done, but a whole lot of my tossing and turning came from my wondering if maybe Dad wasn't so crazy after all.

Grampa claimed he was feeling better, but his skin stayed gray and loose, and he hardly ever showed the passion for things that he used to when I was little. I tried to talk him into going fishing once in a while, but he said he didn't think he'd have the energy to reel in anything bigger than a minnow. Normally, I would have been bored, but I knew I wasn't going to be in Greenwood much longer, so I didn't mind spending time with Grampa. He still seemed lonely, and sometimes I worried about what he'd do when I was gone. Except for sitting around the house, checking on his land, and doing business at the courthouse, the only thing Grampa did that wasn't just regular living was his work on the White Citizens' Council. He never talked to me about what exactly he did, but I figured he was some kind of big shot on the Council; some nights two or three men would come over to talk to Grampa about what was going on. Twice since I came to Greenwood, he'd left at night for
Council meetings and came back late, long after I was asleep. I figured it was boring political stuff he was working at, probably had something to do with battling desegregation and all that. Seeing him so involved reminded me of Dad: all worked up and smack in the middle of some issue.

Thursday I stayed close to home, spending as much time with Grampa as I could, and it was like old times: After Ruthanne’s breakfast Grampa and I got into the pickup and drove over to the courthouse and then out to the fields. We didn’t stay in either place very long, and ended up at the River Café by noon. After lunch we went home so he could take a nap. When he woke up, he sat in his favorite chair and read Civil War history books until Ruthanne had supper ready. After supper he went back to the living room to read The Greenwood Commonwealth, and we talked about the news, his childhood, and whatever else he felt like talking about. A knock at the door interrupted us, and Grampa answered it: Some guy came by wanting to borrow the truck. “Key’s are in it,” Grampa told him. “Just make sure it’s got some gas left when you’re done.” He walked back to his chair smiling; I could tell it made him feel good to help out his neighbors.

Later that evening some men picked Grampa up for another Council meeting. For a while after he left, I sat in the living room reading the newspaper and listening to the radio. The man who had borrowed the truck had already returned it, so I thought about taking it and cruising Greenwood, but there wasn’t a whole lot to see in Greenwood at night. Besides, there really was only one person I wanted to see, even though I wasn’t sure how I could see her or if she’d want to see me.

By 10:00 I was bored and restless, so I went for a walk. Greenwood’s dead quiet at night, and as I walked along River Road, the only thing I heard except for the buzz of the summer locusts and the sound of an occasional car or truck, was the soft flow of the Yazoo River down below the sidewalk. After a few blocks I turned left on Fulton Street and walked onto the bridge that crossed the river.

Halfway across stood a girl looking over the railing. The dim streetlight at one end didn’t do much to break up the shadows that blanketed most of the bridge, but as I got closer, I could see that she had blonde hair and was staring at the dark water flowing beneath us.

My chest got tight when I recognized her. She didn’t move as I approached, and I had to work to take a breath before I spoke. “Naomi? What are you doing out here?”

She answered without looking up, without a trace of surprise. “I’m lookin’ at the river; Hiram Hillburn, and thinkin’ about an old friend.”

I stood next to her. “Been here long?”

“Just every night since I heard you were back in Greenwood.” She bumped her shoulder into mine and turned her head so I could see her. Wow, she was even prettier than she was when we were kids. “Where have you been? Did living in Arizona make you forget your Mississippi friends?”

“Naomi, I—”
“Don’t go fretting about it, Hiram.” She smiled and nudged me with her hip. “I’m just teasin’.”

“Really, I’ve wanted to see you and all, but I’ve been pretty busy since I got here, and I wasn’t sure, you know, how you’d feel if I just showed up one afternoon.”

“I would’ve felt right fine about it. It’s not like I get many visitors out to the house. R.C. and Pa make dang sure of that, believe me. You of all people oughtta know that I’d be hoping you’d show up, but I knew your grampa’d been sick and all, and that you were tending him. Still, you can’t blame me for wishing you’d come and see me. It’s been an awful long time, Hiram.” She spoke without sadness, and seeing her smile and hearing her beautiful Southern voice made me glad I’d come to the bridge that night.

“I have seen R.C. a few times, and I asked about you.”

“R.C.” Naomi rolled her eyes. “I’d like to wring his neck. Do you know that he waited two whole days before he even told me you were in town? Not that I see him much anyways, with him working days and tomcatting’ around at night, but he should’ve been a little more thoughtful, and I let him know it too.” Naomi was the only person alive who could scold R. C. Rydell and get away with it.

“He hasn’t changed much, has he? I mean, he’s bigger and all, but he’s still R.C.” I almost told her what he had done to Emmett at the river, but I decided bad news about her brother wouldn’t do her any good. She already knew—better than anybody—the kind of guy he was.

“I wish he’d turn over a new leaf,” she said. “He used to be just ornery, but lately he’s been worse than that, almost like he’s trying to get into trouble or trying to prove something. Sometimes I worry about him, Hiram, that he’s looking for something he’s never going to find.”

Enough about R.C. I’d had all I wanted of him lately. “So, how’s your dad doing?”

Naomi blinked when I said “dad,” but her expression didn’t change. “Fine. Same as ever. Everything’s just fine at home.” Her voice was hard, firm. I knew she didn’t want to talk about her father, so I just stood there looking at her, looking at the Yazoo, and neither one of us talked.

Finally, she spoke again. “Hiram, you ever want to get away? You know, just take a break from everything?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been trying to get back to Greenwood for seven years. Sometimes my dad really bugs me, and for the last few years, it seems like all we do is fight, so I couldn’t wait to get away from home.”

“And are you glad you did? I mean, has it helped any?”

“I don’t know. At first it was fun, riding the train alone and all, visiting with Grampa, seeing places and people I knew when I was a kid. But it hasn’t been all fun; some things have changed around here, at least they seem like they’ve changed to me. I’m not sure how I feel about that. Kind of disappointed, I guess.”

“Have I changed?” She smiled, her voice teasing me. “Are you disappointed?”

“You’ve changed, all right, but believe me, I’m not disappointed.”
“Good.” She looped her arm through mine. “I’ll let you keep talking then.”

I remembered why I had always loved being around her. Naomi was so easy to be with, so comfortable. Most good-looking girls made me nervous, but being with Naomi seemed like the most natural thing in the world. “Anyway, I’ve been thinking about things, about my dad and my grampa. Those two never did get along, just like me and Dad don’t get along. But, I don’t know. Some stuff that’s happened down here has made me wonder about Dad, kind of helped me think about him in a different way.”

Naomi leaned her head against my shoulder and sighed. “You know, I’m dying to leave, even if it’s only for a little while, but I’m not like you. There’s no place for me to go. R.C. can be a real headache when he’s around, but at least he looks out for me, always has. Lately, though, I can feel him pulling away, and I don’t know what I’m going to do when he finally leaves. He’s working, and feeling more like a man every day, ready to be on his own. Pa can’t see it, and he still treats R.C. like a kid, and sometimes, boy, do they battle.” Her voice grew soft and sad again. “It’s hard to take, awful hard to take.”

I slid my arm around her shoulders and hugged her. “I’m sorry, Naomi, truly sorry.”

She hugged me back, hard, but her body felt soft against mine and her hair smelled fresh, like river water.

After supper Friday night Grampa was reading the newspaper, and I was out on the back porch hoping for a cool breeze. I’d been thinking a lot about Dad and Grampa, about how the three of us were connected even though on the surface we seemed to be pretty disconnected. My life felt like it had been tied into a giant knot, one that would take a long time to untangle. I was looking forward to going back to Tempe, because maybe I could finally talk to Dad, and we could start undoing some of the snags we’d gotten all caught up in.

While I was sitting on the porch steps, R.C. crashed through the back bushes. My stomach tightened as he flicked his cigarette into the grass and sat down next to me. “Ain’t seen you round town for a while, Hiram.” “Been spending most of my time with Grampa. That’s what I came here for.” “We sure had us a good time fishin’ Wednesday. You remember that?” “Only thing I remember is you torturing that kid.” Even though R.C. scared the heck out of me, I had to say something. Maybe he’d break my neck right there, maybe he wouldn’t, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep that night if I didn’t finally stand up to R. C. Rydell. “And I want to tell you something, R.C.: I’m never letting you—or anyone—do stuff like that around me again.”

R.C. looked surprised. “What are you talkin’ about, Hiram? All’s I remember is that you and me went fishing on the Tallahatchie, caught us some fish, ate us some lunch, took a nap, and headed home. Nothing else. Pa even remembers that string of fish I brung home.”
"Yeah, well, I remember something sick. Something wrong."

"Is that right? Well, Hiram boy, don't go forgettin' that you was there the whole time, and you're just as much to blame for anything sick or wrong that might've happened."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sheriff Smith come round askin' questions yesterday, stuff about some black boy from Chicago. Old Mose Wright, the kid's uncle, complained that a couple local guys had been pickin' on the boy, and he remembered that one of 'em's name was R.C. Course, the sheriff don't put much stock in some strange nigger's complainin', but he said it was his sworn duty to check out the boy's story. I told him I didn't know no strange niggers, and he knew I steered clear of colored folks anyhow.

"'Just checking,' he told me. 'Just making sure no pecker-woods round here start any illegal violence.' He told me to stay out of trouble and then left, and I been wonderin' if he come talk to you yet."

I shook my head.

"Well, if he does, just you make sure you get your story straight. We don't want to be confusin' poor old Sheriff Smith."

"Look, R.C., if you're asking me to lie, forget it. I haven't seen Sheriff Smith, and I don't plan on seeing him, but if he comes around asking questions, I'm going to tell the truth."

R.C. swore and jumped to his feet. "You little sisbaby! I shoulda knowed you'd get all cry-ey over that colored boy."

He looked mad enough to chew tar, and just when I expected an uppercut to my jaw, he smiled. "But hell, it don't matter none. Smith'll believe me over you. You ain't been around here for years anyway, and you're goin' back home pretty soon." He patted me on the shoulder. "Guess I worried you over nothin', Hiram boy."

He lit a Viceroy, and I got up to go back inside. "What's your hurry? Don't you want to sit around and visit with an old pal?"

"You got that right, R.C."

"Well then, I'm glad I came to say good-bye. One other thing. You hear about that trouble up in Money a couple days ago?"

"Trouble you're in the middle of?"

"Me?" R.C. grinned. "No, not me. Least not yet. Naw, it's nigger trouble. Some strange nigger messed with a white woman up to Bryant's store."

"What do you mean 'messed with'? He raped a white woman?"

"Naw, but the boy don't know his place. Folks are sayin' he talked ugly and whistled at her. A married woman, even. The lady's husband was pretty upset when he heard 'bout it. Asked me to go with him and some friends to visit the boy tomorrow night and teach him about how things work down here in the Delta."

"Don't do it, R.C." I felt dizzy, scared like something terrible was going to happen. "I swear if you do anything, I'll—"

"Look at you!" R.C. laughed. "Don't get yourself all
worked up for nothin', Mr. Sisbaby. I ain't stupid enough to come and tell you of all people right before I go and do somethin' illegal. It's gonna be talk, nothing else. I'm just doing my citizen's duty to guarantee that white women are safe in our community."

"I'll call Sheriff Smith. I mean it."

"Go ahead," R.C. shrugged. "Nothing to tell. We're just gonna talk to the boy." He patted me on the head. "Night night, Hiram boy. Hope you don't have no bad dreams." R.C. walked across the yard and out through the bushes.

When I came back into the living room, Grampa was asleep in his chair, *The Greenwood Commonwealth* folded in his lap. I wanted to ask him if he'd heard about the trouble in Money and to tell him what R.C. had said. I wanted to ask him what I should do. I almost woke him, but then I decided that I was sixteen years old and could make up my own mind. I went into the kitchen and called the sheriff's office. My hand shook a little as I dialed the phone.

Sheriff Smith wasn't there, so I ended up talking to one of his deputies. I told him everything R.C. had said.

"Ain't nothing to worry 'bout, son," he replied. "R. C. Rydell's sure enough a troublemaker, but that's all he is. I don't expect that he'll even make it to Money; he's too busy getting into mischief down here in his hometown to head up there."

"But he said he was going up there with some men because of that trouble at Bryant's on Wednesday."

"Know all about that. Coloreds round here been talking about it since yesterday: The word is that some nigra boy from Chicago made ugly remarks and then whistled at Miz Bryant." The deputy chuckled. "Fool boy forgot where he was and what he was, and it's a fact somebody's sure to give that boy a talking to. It'll do him good to learn how things work here in the Delta."

A Negro from Chicago? Emmett! My heart thumped like it was going to rip right out of my chest. "You don't understand. R.C. doesn't just talk. He's dangerous."

"Oh, he likes to think he's dangerous, but I've known him since he was a kid. Ain't gonna be no harm done, believe me."

"But I know R.C. and what he can do. Can't you at least go talk to him? Or maybe pick him up tonight to keep him out of trouble? What if you send somebody by that boy's house, you know, to warn him or to send him back to Chicago right away?"

The deputy sighed. "Lookit, son, we can't be running all round the county for no good reason. Why don't you just let us worry about the law around here? There ain't gonna be no serious trouble; I can guarantee it. Now I gotta get back to work."

The phone line clicked and the dial tone sounded like an alarm in my ear.