

3

ROOM B of the Sixth Street church held a heavy wooden table, some chairs, and not much else. The walls were decorated with crayoned Jesuses—scraggly beards and long washboard faces. Some of the Sunday school kids had used a single crayon to color both Jesus's beard and his complexion. The result looked something like the Hunchback of Notre Dame.

Two black women and two white guys were in the room when I got there, a bit late. One of the white guys introduced himself as Paul Warren, our organizer from the Congress of Racial Equality. He was probably about twenty-three or -four. He blinked so much, I wondered whether he had recently gotten contact lenses, but I decided it was nerves. T.J. must've been his barber just as she'd been mine all my life, because cowlicks of different lengths jutted out of his scalp. While we waited for the last two volunteers, he paced the tight space at the end of the room, his thumbs hooked through the belt loops of his jeans.

When the last two Freedom Riders showed up, Paul launched into his speech. I only half-listened. It had all been said at the church, I was sure. For a while, I studied the faces of the other Freedom Riders. Except for one, they looked older than me, but none of them looked more than thirty.

I checked my cuticles, wondered what Rosemary would be doing later, and mentally added up my small savings and the last paycheck I'd be getting on Friday. I thought I should give the money to T.J., just keep a few dollars for myself. I wasn't going to need much until I came home. Maybe I could talk her into using it for the appointment with the doctor she was supposed to make.

Paul was winding down. "We'll spend this week practicing techniques for dealing with violence. But tonight I'd like you to introduce yourselves and say a few words about why you're here." He jingled the change in his pocket. "Dorothy, why don't you start?"

Her hair had been crimped into a small bun tacked to the nape of her neck. Dorothy's best feature was her eyes, almost yellow, unsettling in her cocoa brown face. "I'm an opera singer," she said with a flash of those catlike eyes, as if she feared one of us might deny it.

Paul stood at the window, his back to us. "How did you come to volunteer?" he said to the garbage cans outside.

She said, "I know somebody who was on the burning bus."

Snapshots of the bus flipped through my mind. I tried to imagine myself inside it. Was I screaming? I shuddered. *Maybe I was being a fool, just like Rosemary and T.J. said. Maybe I couldn't do this.*

Dorothy touched her hair. I couldn't read her expression. "My husband's down there already," she said. I thought she sounded unhappy, but not scared.

I told myself again that the difference between a coward and a brave man was the brave man only dies once. *Yeah*, Rosemary retorted, *but that's just because the brave man doesn't have any imagination.*

I heard Paul say, "Do they call you Tommie?" He was speaking to an elfin girl in half-glasses.

"Not if I can help it, they don't. My name is Thomasine." She was the only Freedom Rider close to my age, or at least she looked it. The frizzy halo of her hair—the first Afro I ever saw—sparked like black lightning where the sun touched it.

Paul said, "Please tell me you're older than thirteen." I wondered if he was trying to flirt with her.

Thomasine said curtly, "I'm nineteen."

Paul let out a nervous giggle and turned back to the view. I suspected he imagined staring into the distance made him seem imperial. Of course, since he stood two feet from a row of trash cans, there wasn't a great deal of distance for him to stare into.

"Well, you know." Thomasine shrugged. "I graduated high school and a lot of my friends been talking about the Freedom Rides."

"But what made you sign up?"

She looked hopefully toward the door. I thought she might be considering how much she'd like to walk through it. But something changed in her face. "Any of you ever hear of Emmett Till?"

A cute blond guy with startling blue eyes said, "Of course." The other white guy, skinny and hunched, said, "You talking about that kid that was lynched a few years ago?" The skinny guy had been biting his nails ever since I came in. He probably wasn't too relaxed with the burning bus either.

Thomasine twisted a large ring. "Emmett was fourteen. They said he whistled at a white lady." She spoke in almost a

sing-song voice. It sounded like reciting. I guess she was trying to keep herself from hearing what she was saying. "They put out his eye. They put out all his teeth except for two. They did things to him for hours and hours and, when they finished, they threw him in the river with something around his neck." She took in a long draught of air and focused on the ring. It didn't help me that she'd rushed through these facts. Emmett Till's mangled face was as vivid in my mind as it had been on the first day the paper published his photograph. "Emmett was sort of a half-cousin of mine. My mama went out there to be with his family at the funeral. His mama made them keep the coffin open. She didn't want anybody covering up what they did to that little boy." She pressed her lips together then and fell silent.

Paul waited, as if he hoped she might change the subject and say something to lift the gloom that had settled over us. But Thomasine was through talking. "Thank you," he said finally, and turned to me. "Your name's Geraldine?"

I dragged my eyes away from her sad face, reflecting that only moments before she'd seemed cheerful. "I go by Jeri."

"So what brings you into the Movement?"

I'd been dreading having to answer this question from the moment he put it to Dorothy. Even though Dasante Mitchell's speech inspired me to stand up when I did, I couldn't admit that. Paul might believe I was as rash as T.J. said I was. Of course, I could have talked about Emmett Till. When he was murdered, I was only two years younger than he was and I felt that if the grownups in Mississippi could kill a small boy, they could kill me. But, if I went back to his story, I'd only look like I was copying Thomasine and Paul would start thinking I didn't have any good reason to be in that room. T.J.'s story had been on my mind since the rally at the church, but I couldn't talk about it. I wasn't ever going to tell anybody that story.

So I started feeling my way into an answer: “My grandmother was a Red back in the fifties—”

Paul turned and looked at me sharply. “Your grandmother’s a Communist?”

“Not anymore. The Party threw her out. T.J.’s never been much of a follower.”

He crossed his arms and leaned back against the wall under a particularly grotesque Jesus. “You understand CORE doesn’t take Reds, right? You don’t have any affiliations with leftist groups yourself, do you?”

“I’ve never been much of a follower either.”

“Oh?” His brows went up and I saw my mistake.

“Don’t worry, I can follow if I have to.”

“If you go on the Rides, you’ll have to.” He dismissed me, gesturing to the skinny guy. “Ned?”

“I wasn’t saying I volunteered because my grandmother used to be a Communist. That would be silly.”

He turned back toward me. “I’m sorry. You weren’t finished?”

“I only meant she talked to me about prejudice and Negroes. Because that’s one of the things the Communists I used to know worry about.”

His gaze held mine for a moment. It wasn’t friendly. “So is that it?”

“Not really. I wanted to say something about a fairy tale. Yeah, I know, it’s really immature to talk about a kid’s book. But this one meant a lot to me. It’s about a little girl, Molly Whuppie.” Ned snickered. “Okay, it’s a funny name, but she’s the only little girl hero I ever came across. See, she single-handedly rescues her sisters from an evil giant. The thing is, she can get away from him over the bridge of the single hair because she’s light but he—”

“Is Molly Whuppie your role model?” asked Ned, trying

without success to keep the sneer out of his voice. "Because it's going to be tough to lose enough weight to get over that bridge yourself."

"Yeah, that's right, Ned. Thanks. What was I thinking?" I stood up. "Excuse me." Paul frowned. "The bathroom?"

"Down the hall."

I splashed my face with cold water and peered into the murky mirror. "Hello, dimwit," I said to my reflection. "Maybe tomorrow you should bring a stuffed teddy bear, huh? I bet that cute guy was impressed."

When I got back, the cute guy with the incredible blue eyes was speaking. "So I have the bad luck to be good at something that doesn't interest me very much and to be very interested in things—such as this—that don't pay the rent. That's about it." He shrugged.

"Thanks, Chris." Paul cast a scathing look in my direction and then turned a radiant smile on the final speaker. "Sheila. Please go ahead."

The woman sitting next to Chris, the woman he came in with and who was probably his girlfriend, introduced herself. Sheila wasn't beautiful but she was one of those women who got away with not being beautiful. She was beautifully put together in all the ways I was not.

"So why am I here?" Sheila smiled but her eyes didn't smile with her. "My real father took off before I was born. My mother married Harold when I was still a baby. Harold was a Negro. *And* he was my *real* real father." She fidgeted with her watch. "When I was ten, my mother planned a trip to see her sister in Alabama." She tucked her hair behind her ears. "My dad said he couldn't go but I told my mother I wasn't going if he didn't." She hesitated. This was hard, I could see. "When he explained why he couldn't, I called him a liar. I screamed at him." She looked down and tears spilled onto the table. She

raised her face to us and I realized I'd been wrong. She *was* beautiful. "My dad died last year. He would've been proud, I think. I know I owe it to him to—to join this movement."

Paul, who'd been standing in the glare at the window, moved to the head of the table. "Thanks to each of you for your stories. I think that's enough for one session. Tomorrow night we'll talk about the philosophy of non-violence and we'll run through some techniques for protecting yourselves. See you all back here tomorrow evening."

We got up and filed out of the room. On the church steps I felt a hand on my arm. I turned around and my heart rate sped up.

"I liked your story." Chris looked sincere. I was still stinging from Ned's remark. "Molly Whuppie. It was cool. I never heard of it before."

I tried to think of something witty to say, something that might stay with Chris all the way home. Instead I blurted like a little kid, "I think Paul hates me."

A crooked smile dimpled his cheek. "Don't sweat it. Paul's one of those guys who takes himself way too seriously."

I nodded. It was an opinion I shared. I glanced around. "So where's Sheila?"

"I think she caught the bus. Why?"

"Oh. Nothing. I was just wondering." He looked like he was starting to lose interest in talking to me. "That was quite a story she told. It got to me."

"Yeah, me too."

"I'm sorry I missed your speech. What was all that stuff about being good at something you don't like?"

"I'm a civil engineer." He patted his shirt pocket. It was empty. "I wanted to be a poet laureate or a great concert pianist, but it turns out you need talent."

"I know what you mean. I was thinking of going into

archaeology myself, but they told me I had to have some sort of training. Looking for a cigarette?"

"Yeah, why? You have one?"

"Sorry. Don't smoke." We started down the steps. "So tell me—if I don't sound too much like Paul—why did *you* volunteer?"

"I'm not sure. Ah. Here they are." He took a pack of Camels from his jacket pocket. "Probably my high-minded upbringing. My dad's a Unitarian minister."

"Well, that trumps my Communist grandmother." He gave me a funny look. "I mean, they're ethical people, those Unitarians, but they don't have any dogma, do they?"

"I guess you don't know any Unitarians. Well, I'll see you tomorrow." He started away and then turned around. "Hey, don't worry about Paul. After this week, we'll probably never see him again."