any of his peckerwood friends will let you get away with speaking against white men for doing something to a Negro? And even if you get back to Arizona, do you know what they'll do to your grampa? You can't talk in court, Hiram, you just can't. If anything happened to you, if R.C. did something to you”—her voice shook—“I just couldn't stand it!” She grabbed my hand and squeezed it, hard. “You stay away from that trial, Hiram Hillburn. I don't care if you have to sneak out of town and I never see you again, but you stay away from that trial. You just stay away, hear me?” Then she leaned into me and started to cry.

I held her while she buried her face against my chest, and I wanted to stay with her like that for as long as I could. Holding her made me forget about everything else that had gone wrong that Mississippi summer. Right then the only thing I wanted to remember about my weeks in Greenwood was standing alone with Naomi Rydell on the Yazoo bridge thinking not about Emmett, or R.C., or Grampa, or Dad, but about Naomi and how I wanted to protect her.

Naomi wouldn't let me walk her home that night. “Who knows what kind of mood Pa'll be in? And besides, R.C. might be around.”

I sure didn't want to run into R.C., but I didn't want Naomi walking home alone either.

“I can get home fine by myself, Hiram,” she insisted. “Been doing it for years and haven't had a problem yet.”

Before we said good-bye, she took my hand in both of hers and stared at me, her eyes glistening in the dark. “You remember what I told you about that trial. It won't do nobody no good if you get up and talk, so decide right now you'll have nothing to do with it.” She squeezed my hand. “Promise, Hiram. Promise you won't go to the trial, won't say anything about R.C. or anything else.”

“Maybe they won't even ask me to testify. Maybe I'll go
and just sit around at the trial and the lawyers will decide they don't want to hear from me. There hasn't been anything in the Commonwealth about the third man for a while, so maybe they've given up looking for R.C. Or maybe the district attorney decided just to go after Bryant and Milam because they've already confessed to kidnapping.

"And maybe you're wrong. Don't do it, Hiram. Don't be stupid."

Time passed as slow as mud. Mom called every three or four days to see how I was doing. We never talked long, and we never talked about Dad. Except once. "Your father and I want you to know that we're very concerned about your safety, Hiram. Are you sure things are going to stay under control?"

"Mom, it's going to be all right. I don't even know for sure if I'll end up talking in the trial anyway."

"Still, we'd feel better if..." She paused. "Hiram, your father wants to speak to you."

Dad wanted to talk to me? I couldn't believe it.

"Hiram?"

"Hey, Dad."

He cleared his throat. "Son, I want you to know that your mother or I will be out there immediately if you need us. We've even checked into one of us flying there if we have to. We're worried about this trial mess you've gotten into."

"It's going to be okay. Grampa told me—"

"Your grandfather!" he said quickly and too loud. I heard him take a breath. "Your grandfather is not in any situation to make promises like that. Besides, I am your father; Hiram, and I'm the one who must ultimately be responsible for your safety."

It felt good to hear Dad say that. Very good. "Thanks, Dad, but I've even talked to the sheriff—"

"George Smith?"

"Yessir."

"George is all right. What did he tell you?"

"That there's no way out of the subpoena. I can't leave Greenwood, but he's got someone watching the house, and he promised he'd keep an eye out for anyone who might be looking for trouble. I believe him, Dad. And I'm not scared, honest." That was a lie.

"Well, you listen to me. Sheriff Smith is a good man, but you're still in the heart of the Delta, son, and some people down there get crazy about anything they think's going to threaten their Jim Crow ways. Things can get dangerous, fast. You're a smart boy; I expect you to use your head."

"I will. I promise."

"Good. And remember, you need me or your mother; you call us immediately. It'll take some arranging—Mom's got all the kids and I've got school just starting up—but if you need us, one of us will be out there just as fast as we can."

"Grandpa's taking good care of things. I'll be fine, Dad."

"Well, if you're sure, Hiram, but you remember what I said."

I thanked Dad and said good-bye. Nothing he said
changed a thing about what was going on in Greenwood, but almost everything he said made me feel better about him, about us.

While I waited for the trial, school had started in Greenwood, and during the day when all the kids in town—including Naomi—were in class, I did what I could to keep from going stir-crazy. Some mornings I'd stay home and read library books or take Grampa's truck and go for a drive in the country. Other times, Grampa and I went out to check his fields. A couple mornings a week we went fishing, but always on the Yazoo instead of the Tallahatchie. It was strange because Grampa never used to fish the Yazoo, but when I asked him about it, he just shrugged it off.

Most afternoons, Grampa dropped in on his friends in the courthouse; like Grampa, they'd all taken a sharp interest in the trial and agreed that they needed to make sure that the NAACP and the outside agitators from the North didn't keep the Mississippi court from doing its job. Most of them worried that the school integration law had started things going in a bad way, and that Northern rabblerousers would use the trial to force other changes in the South. "We've kept the races separated for a long time and we don't intend to change now," was what Grampa or one of his friends usually ended up saying.

The Commonwealth said Sheriff Smith had lots of threatening letters and phone calls from people in Chicago and Mississippi. Somebody even said a caravan of one thousand Negroes was on its way down from Chicago to go after Milam and Bryant, and that worried the sheriff enough that he called in the National Guard to protect the county jail. On Tuesday, the same day they had a huge funeral for Emmett up in Chicago, the big news around Greenwood, news that surprised most everybody, including Grampa, was that the grand jury had indicted Milam and Bryant for murder and kidnapping. Even though they'd already admitted to kidnapping Emmett Till, they pleaded innocent to both charges.

Because the trial was going to be held up in Tallahatchie County and probably because Sheriff Smith was worrying about keeping the peace, on Wednesday Bryant and Milam got moved to the Tallahatchie County jail up in Charleston. For a while, no one was sure how long they'd be there because no one knew when they'd have the trial—some said it could be all the way in March 1956—but on Friday the Commonwealth announced the trial would begin on September 19.

Nine days. Only nine days to decide whether or not I'd tell the truth if I had to sit in the witness chair:

Even if I hadn't been sweating what I'd say if I had to testify, I would have been thinking about the trial most of the time anyway. Almost every day the paper had something about the case, and even if you didn't read the paper, anywhere you went in the county, you'd hear people talking about it. This was the biggest thing ever to hit Greenwood, maybe ever to hit Mississippi.

On a Monday afternoon a week before the trial was sup-
posed to start, Grampa and I were at the courthouse and he
was talking with a friend about their White Citizens' Coun-
cil. I could tell he didn't want me hanging around while
they talked, and to be honest, I didn't want to be there ei-
ther, so I walked down to the lobby to get a Coke from
Mr. Paul.

He opened the bottle and set it on the counter: "So, Hi-
ram, you got your wish to stick around in Greenwood a lit-
tle longer. You been enjoying the extra summer vacation?"

"You know, I used to think I'd love a longer summer vaca-
tion, but I'm kind of missing school."

He smiled. "Sometimes when we get what we've always
wanted, we realize it's not what we thought it was. When I
was your age, I wanted more than anything to get away from
Greenwood for a while and find out what the rest of the
world was like. Then World War Two came along and gave
me my wish. I saw plenty of the world, until this, of course."
He pointed to his eyes. "And the whole time I was gone, the
only place I could think of was little old Greenwood, Mis-
issippi. Life sure has a funny way of teaching us lessons,
don't it?"

"Yessir," I said, "but it seems like some people never learn
any of those lessons no matter how many times they're
taught."

"Oh, they learn 'em, Hiram, they just don't know it.
Sometimes it takes a change of scenery or a good whack in
the head to help you recognize the lessons you've learned."

"This change of scenery's sure made me realize that
Greenwood, well, it's different. Lots different from what I
thought it was."

"You're not the only person these days wondering about
Mississippi. From what I hear, people up north—Negro and
white—are pretty hot about that boy's death. For all the
trouble this has caused, some folks down here are wishing
that boy's body would've stayed at the bottom of the Tallah-
hatchie. And that trial next week's going to heat things up
more than anything."

"Do you think the trial will change anything around
here?"

"You know anything about the South," Mr. Paul said, "you
know we change slower than a tombstone. Oh, it might be a
little step forward, but that Negro boy ain't the first to be
murdered down here, and I'm afraid he won't be the last."

"Mr. Paul, if you had a chance to be in the trial, you know,
like a witness or something, what would you do?"

"If I knew something that proved those two didn't kill
that boy, I'd feel obliged to testify, and if I had something
that would convict 'em, well, I'd have to plan on closing my
shop and heading somewhere far away from Mississippi.
But I'd speak up."

"Wouldn't you be scared?"

"You bet I'd be scared. I'd be branded a nigger-lover as
soon as I showed up in court, and I suppose I'd be lucky if all
I got was a few shot-out windows and a burning cross in my
front yard."

"But you'd do it?"
“Other than making the decision harder, being scared wouldn’t matter one way or the other.” He patted the counter. “You stewing about something serious, Hiram?”

“I guess so. It’s just that when things are scary or dangerous, it’s hard to see clear what to do.”

“Well, the best way to work your way through it is to size up both sides of something, then use all the brains you’ve got to figure out what’s right and what’s wrong, and make yourself do the right thing. Do that and no matter what happens, no matter what people say, you’ll have no regrets.”

That night after dinner I walked over to the bridge, hoping to see Naomi. Nobody was around when I got there, so I stood at our favorite spot and leaned over the railing to watch the Yazoo flow underneath me. Where the bridge lights reflected off the water, I could see the swirls and sticks, clear signs that the current was moving downstream, but where the shadow of the bridge fell, I saw only black, like the river was pouring into a bottomless pit that swallowed up all the water that came its way. I kicked some pebbles between the railing down into the shadows but didn’t hear or see any sign that they’d broken the water’s surface. The old river kept on moving into the blackness under the bridge, taking with it whatever happened to be along for the ride.

Being with Naomi would’ve helped, because I had decided that if she asked me again to promise I wouldn’t say anything in court, I’d promise. I’d promise her I’d run away from that subpoena and never go near the Sumner court-

house, promise her I’d go home to Arizona on the next train, promise her that I’d be back to see her the following summer and every summer after that.

An hour passed. I walked from one end of the bridge to the other. I tossed a few rocks over the side. I counted bars in the railing. I looked for shooting stars. I listed all the reasons why I shouldn’t have anything to do with that trial.

Naomi never showed up that night, and I was left alone with nothing but my own conscience to help me decide what to do. Right then I wished I was back in Tempe. I wished I had never come to Greenwood, never gotten mixed up with R.C. or Emmett or any of this mess.

One of the last things Mom had said to me on the phone was: “Remember who you are, Hiram, and remember to do what’s right.”

Who was I?

Hiram Hillburn, a kid from Arizona. Son to an English professor who hated everything about the South, grandson to a gentleman farmer who loved everything about it. Both men had heads harder than cement, and both charged ahead full speed with whatever they thought was right. What they had in common is what kept them apart.

Mr. Paul had told me to use my head, so I started stacking up the positives against the negatives. I knew I could get out of the trial if I really wanted to. Sheriff Smith already had his hands full, and I could slip out of town and he probably wouldn’t bother to do a thing about it. The paper had made it pretty clear that both the defense and the prosecution had already lined up witnesses, and neither one had talked
to me yet, so I probably wasn't in either side's game plan. And the sooner I left Greenwood, the sooner I'd be back in school, the less homework I'd have to make up. And I could start smoothing things out with Dad.

If I stuck around for the trial, I'd be wasting my time. I'd be in the way. Nothing would get accomplished. Nothing would get changed.

The positives outweighed the negatives by a ton. Now all I had to do was go home and call Mom and Dad to tell them I was coming home as soon as I could. Everybody would be glad: me, Grampa, Naomi, R.C. and his buddies, Mom, and probably even Dad. So it was settled: I'd run away from the trial.

But it wasn't settled. That knot in my stomach didn't go away; it got worse, almost making me want to puke over the bridge rail. All the positives in the world couldn't fool me. I knew what was right, and I knew if I was going to do what was right, I had to show up at the trial and if asked, tell everything I knew. A boy—a boy I knew—had been kidnapped and murdered. And I knew who did it, at least I knew one of the people who had a part in it. Nothing would bring Emmett back to life, but the trial of his killers might be the start of things, might be a small step to making life for Negroes in the South—heck, in the whole United States—a little better. If nothing else, it might make me feel a little better.

I was Hiram Hillburn, and I knew what I was going to do: I was going to do what was right.

CHAPTER 14

The Tallahatchie County Courthouse sits smack in the middle of the town square of Sumner, a little town north of Greenwood, and you can tell that when it was built, people figured it had to last till doomsday. The building is three stories of solid brick with long windows on the first and second floors that have solid steel shutters that could be closed in case of atomic bomb blasts, riots, or invasion. Shops and a handful of cafés surround the courthouse. The rest of Sumner isn't much more than a few streets lined with the small houses of townspeople and retired farmers.

Early Monday morning, Grampa and I drove up to Sumner. We were both bleary-eyed and quiet because we'd been up late Sunday night arguing about whether or not I should tell everything if I got called on to testify. Around midnight when Grampa finally realized I wasn't going to