When we got home that night, Grampa looked awful: His face was washed out, paler than I’d ever seen it. The trial had probably been harder on him than on me, I thought at the time, because he was worried about me testifying in the most spectacular case in the history of Mississippi. Maybe he’d had some threatening letters because of me, letters he’d kept to himself. There’s no telling what some nuts would say to an old man whose grandson might testify on the wrong side of a local murder trial.

When we sat down for supper, Grampa sighed. “I am glad that trial’s over, gladder than I’ve been for anything in a long, long time. Maybe we can finally forget about Emmett Till and that mess up in Money.”

“You think it’s over, Grampa?” I asked. “The trial’s the end of it?”

“It’s over for those two boys, that’s for sure. Once you’re acquitted of a crime, you can’t be tried for it again.”

“But what about the people who helped them?” R. C. Rydell. Would he get away with murder?

“Get that out of your head, Hiram.” Grampa’s voice sounded strong even though he looked like a good sneeze would knock him right out of his chair. “Just you forget about it. The authorities did a thorough investigation, and there wasn’t enough evidence to convict Bryant and Milam. If they’d had a good reason to suspect anyone else—including R. C. Rydell—they would have been after them in a hot minute.”

“But the paper said Bryant and Milam weren’t alone that night.”

Grampa slapped the table with his hand. “Dammitall, Hiram, you ought to be smart enough to know newspapers make mistakes. Rumors are always flying around in cases like these, and the lawyers made it clear that those Negro witnesses lacked reliability.”

“But what if Bryant and Milam are covering for somebody else?”

“It’s done, Hiram, and believe you me, nobody around here is going to bring up this ugly mess again. It’s over. Period.”

“What about an appeal? Won’t Mr. Chatham take it to another court? Can’t he keep fighting it, maybe try to go after the other people involved?” I felt bad complaining to Grampa about the trial after all the worrying he’d done about me, but I couldn’t keep quiet about it. “It’s just not
right, Bryant and Milam getting turned loose. Everybody in that courtroom knew they were guilty; I still can't believe that jury said they weren't.”

Grampa's pale face turned pink, and he put both hands flat on the table to keep them steady. "Maybe you didn't know this, son, but in the United States of America, citizens are entitled to a trial by a jury of their peers, and the verdict of the jury stands. It doesn't matter what you or anyone else in that courtroom thought about Bryant and Milam. The jury heard both arguments, considered the evidence, and concluded that those men were innocent. The case is closed, and I don't want to hear another word about it. If you want to keep beating on about that trial, go right ahead, but don't do it around me. It's what your daddy used to do, wear me out about what he thought was right or wrong. Well, Hiram, sometimes boys don't know what's right; sometimes they've got to trust their elders. Twelve adult citizens of the state of Mississippi sat in that courtroom for a full week, and they've given their informed decision."

“But what about—?”

“No buts about it, son. You and I aren't going to talk about this again, and I'd advise you not to talk to anybody around here about it. Our community's suffered enough; it's time for things to get back to normal.”

We were mad at each other, so we didn't talk much for the rest of the meal, and by the time Ruthanne cleared the dishes, I was itching to get out of there.

Grampa didn't say anything when I told him I was going for a walk.

The humid night air pressed on me worse than ever; sweat trickled down my back before I'd gotten a block away from home.

It was after nine on a Friday night. A few cars passed as I walked to the bridge, some were packed with kids looking for fun on the first night of a weekend, and seeing them made me wonder what my friends in Tempe were doing, what they'd been doing in the weeks I'd been gone. I was ready to go home, ready to leave Greenwood and Grampa's house, ready to try to patch things up with Dad. About the only thing I'd miss from Greenwood, actually, the only person I'd miss from Greenwood was Naomi.

And I hoped she'd miss me.

I walked down Front Street and cut through the back parking lot of the county courthouse. A few cars were there, probably night-duty police or county jail guards, and except for those, the lot was empty, quiet, and dark. Halfway across, I saw someone, a man it looked like, step out from the shadows behind a Ford sedan parked close to the courthouse's rear entrance.

He flicked a cigarette to the ground when I got closer, and before I could see who he was, he said, "Hey, sisbaby. Where you headed so late at night?" R. C. Rydell stepped out of the shadows, and in the light from the corner streetlight I could see his face was bruised and swollen; blood was splattered down the front of his T-shirt.

I stopped but didn't say anything. He didn't have a knife that I could see.
“Hope you ain’t looking for my little sister,” he said, “cause I don’t think she’s gonna make your little run-dee-foo anytime soon.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“C’mon, Hiram, you think I’m stupid? What kind of big brother would I be if I didn’t know my kid sister had herself a boyfriend?”

“Where is she, R.C.? What happened?”

“Problems at home. Our old man.” R.C. lit another cigarette, snapped the match at me, and took a long drag. “Pa really was on one tonight. He’s been mean before, but tonight he was crazy, out of control. ‘House’s a damn pigsty! Kids don’t do a damn thing round here! I work all day to keep a roof over our heads and what do I get for it?’ That kind of crap. Naomi knows enough to steer clear of him when he’s been drinkin’ and rantin’, and so do I, usually, but tonight he started in on me for being gone, for quittin’ my job at the dock and goin’ to Jackson.”

“You’ve been in Jackson?”

“No future round here. And believe me, I didn’t mind gettin’ away from Pa. I got me a job in Jackson loadin’ trucks and might start drivin’ one in a year or two. I been down there almost a month already. Anyway, Pa don’t like it, and he kept yellin’, ‘Ya run out on me, boy!’ What he means is that he couldn’t take my wages no more to buy booze. He really tore into me tonight: hollerin’, swearin’, callin’ me all kinds of names. I coulda took it because I knew he was drunk and that after this weekend, I’d be cleared out of here for good, but he pulls out his big old leather belt, starts swingin’ it around, swearin’, comin’ at me.” R.C. was breathing hard now, and even in the shadows, I could see the pain on his face.

“He caught me good a couple times and I just took it. That made him mad, so he throws the belt down and starts with his fists.” R.C.’s voice got faster. “Hittin’ me in the face, kickin’ me, scrammin’ like a crazy man. He popped me in the nose—blood gushed all over, it’s probably broke—and that did it. That pulled my trigger, and there was no stoppin’ me.

“I whaled on Pa like I was some kind of machine. Hittin’ him in the face, left, right, left, poundin’ him as hard as I could. He was bleedin’ bad, but I kept at him. That’s when Naomi started screamin’. She tried to make me stop, I don’t know, I can’t remember very well, but I think she pulled on my arm or somethin’, and I shoved her outta the way and kept swingin’ at Pa. Pretty soon he went down like a sack of seed, and I started kickin’ him, yellin’ as loud as I could. I swear, Hiram, I felt like all the hate I’d ever had was pourin’ out of me right on to him.

“When he stopped movin’, stopped swearin’, stopped cryin’, I quit, and that’s when I could hear Naomi cryin’ and beggin’ me to leave him alone. She wasn’t mad or nothin’, but awful scared, maybe scared I’d gone crazy too. I tried talkin’ to her, but she was just cryin’ and cryin’, so I grabbed my duffel bag and got out of there, out for good. I ain’t never goin’ back. Never.”

“You just left Naomi there? What’s she going to do?”
"Last I saw her she was bent over Pa, tryin' to clean him up. I told her to leave him be, he had it comin', and she knew it. And you know what? It felt good to rip into my old man. The whole time I was poundin' him, I wanted to kill him. I was honestly trying to beat him to death." He took a deep, shaky pull on his cigarette. "I don't know if I managed it or not, but in case I did, I come down here to let the sheriff know."

"You told the sheriff you beat up your own dad?"

"Sheriff Smith knows all about Pa. He's known what's been goin' on since I was a little kid. Soon as I told him, he said he was surprised it hadn't happened sooner and told me to get on the late bus to Jackson and never come back. Told me he'd take care of Pa and make sure Naomi's okay. You know, for a lawman, Sheriff Smith's all right."

R.C. looked like he'd been through the fight of his life, lost, and was relieved it was finally over. He smiled weakly. "I'm gonna make it in Jackson, Hiram. Things are gonna be different for me."

"Are you sure the sheriff's not doing anything? How do you know he won't come after you?"

"If he does, he does." R.C. shrugged. "I been in trouble with the law before, and I can take it, but like I said, he knows Pa and what's been goin' on at home. He said even if I did kill Pa, he'd consider it self-defense or justifiable homicide or something like that."

"What about all this other stuff?" I asked. "They just had that big trial in Sumner; Bryant and Milam got turned loose."

"He told me about all that and asked me about that nigger trouble that happened last month. Said somebody'd told him I'd been braggin' 'bout how I was goin' to help humble an uppity Northern nigger." He looked at me with a thin smile. "I wonder who woulda done that."

I gulped and took a step back, half expecting R.C. to flatten me. But he just kept talking.

"Anyway, I told him that Bryant and Milam did ask me to help 'em that night, but when I went home after talking to you, Pa was drunk again. Yellin', hittin', same old stuff. That's when I decided I had to get out of here, so I grabbed some things, left home, caught the bus to Jackson, and haven't been back since."

"But I thought—"

"Yeah, you thought I helped kill that Chicago boy. Well, Mr. Sisbaby, I guess I missed my chance." He shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno, I could've done it, but I didn't. Like I said, things are gonna be different for me now. I'm lookin' for a change in Jackson."

"What about Naomi? Where is she? What's she going to do?"

"Naomi's no baby. Livin' with somebody like Pa makes you pretty tough, Hiram Hillburn, so I ain't worried 'bout my kid sister. If Pa's dead, maybe she'll stay in the house a while. Or maybe she'll move in with some do-good neighbor. She can come down to Jackson with me if she wants, but I ain't tellin' her what to do or not to do. She's old enough to figure things out, and I got my own worries."
“Do you know where she is right now? I want to see her, help her if I can.”

R.C. took a last long drag on his cigarette, flicked it out into the parking lot, and picked up the duffel bag near his feet. “You didn’t hear me, sisbaby. Only thing Pa ever done for her was make her tough, so she don’t need your help or nobody else’s. She wants to see you, she’ll find you. You could go lookin’ for her, and maybe you’d find her; she’s probably at home or at the hospital if Pa made it, but I doubt she’s goin’ to be wantin’ to see anybody right now. Even you.” He touched his nose gingerly, then looked up at the sky for a moment before walking past me. “I gotta get to the bus depot. See you round, sisbaby.”

When R.C. left, I walked to the bridge and stood where Naomi and I usually met. I hoped maybe she’d show up later, after she got her dad taken care of. Leaning against the bridge rail, I thought about R. C. Rydell. Was he lying about being in Jackson? Lying about Naomi? R.C. was mean, but I’d never known him to hurt his sister.

But if he was telling the truth, who had been with Bryant and Milam that night they kidnapped Emmett Till? Probably somebody as hateful to Negroes as R.C., but I didn’t want to think about it. Like Grampa said, the trial was over, and nobody down here was going to be looking to start another one.

Besides, I wanted to think about Naomi. I’d always known she’d had it bad living with her dad, but until tonight, I really had no idea how rotten things were for her. I didn’t know what I could do, but I wanted to be there at the bridge if she decided she needed my help or if she just wanted somebody to talk to. Maybe the best thing for her would be to get out of Greenwood and come back to Arizona with me. She could stay with my family a while, at least until we could find somebody in Tempe for her to live with. My sisters would love her; so would Mom. She could go to Tempe High with me. It’d be hard for her at first, kids would tease her about her Southern accent and stuff, but like R.C. said, Naomi was tough; she could handle whatever Tempe High threw at her.

I sat at the base of that bridge rail for a couple more hours thinking about how great life would be with Naomi in Tempe, figuring out exactly how to convince her to come back with me, aching to see her again, to hold her and let her know that I’d do whatever I could to make things right.

I sat there a long time waiting and dreaming, but she never came. Finally I walked home and went to bed, but I didn’t sleep much.

The next morning even the smell of Ruthanne’s bacon and biscuits wasn’t enough to get me out of bed. I felt flat, wiped out from the trial and everything, sad that my summer was over; and, because I wasn’t sure how he’d react, a little worried to go back home and face Dad. I’d be leaving Mississippi in a couple days, and when I got back to Tempe, I’d have to jump right into school and everything else that had started without me. Anyway, I wanted at least one lazy morning in bed before I went back to the grind at home.

I should’ve been able to sleep in—I felt plenty lazy
enough—but too many things were buzzing in my brain. Not the trial or Emmett Till or R. C. Rydell. That stuff was all done as far as I was concerned. I was worrying about Naomi. Was she all right? Would I see her before I left? If I did, would I be able to talk her into coming to Arizona?

With all that running through my head, I tried to sleep and did doze a little, but I was too restless to sleep soundly, like there was something I should've been doing but wasn't. I was thinking of Naomi too, of course; it would've been impossible not to.

Around 11:00 I heard Grampa talking to somebody down in the driveway below my window. Being lazy had made me bored and hungry, so I decided to get out of bed, get dressed and see what Ruthanne had left me to eat. Before going downstairs I looked out the window and saw Grampa talking to three men I didn't recognize.

Whatever they'd been doing, it looked like they had just about finished up. One man patted Grampa on the shoulder and said, "You just let us worry about this, Mr. Hillburn. We know how to take care of these kinds of things; you can count on us doing it right."

"I hope to get a fair price for it," said Grampa. "It's been good to me all these years."

The man held up a set of keys. "You can't be too choosy about price in this situation, but we'll do what we can. I guarantee you this truck will be out of Mississippi before dark. Soon as we get it sold, you'll get your money."

"I could sell it myself and save a heck of a lot of money and trouble." Grampa's voice was edgy, like it got when he was mad or tired.

"Sure you could," the man said, "but having it sit around here for too long might end up making more trouble than you want. We'll keep it quiet, and you'll get your money." The man got into the cab and started the truck while his two friends jumped in the back.

Grampa watched them drive away.

When I came downstairs, he was at the kitchen table with a pile of papers spread out in front of him.

"So, the dead rise again," he said with a smile. "Thought you'd never miss one of Ruthanne's breakfasts."

"I decided to sleep in at least once before I have to go back to school." I went to the stove and found a plate of biscuits and jelly Ruthanne had left. I took the plate to the table and sat down across from my grandfather. "Hey, Grampa, what happened to the pickup?"

"I sold the damn thing. It was getting too rattley for me. I'm going to get a car with automatic transmission."

"A car? What are you going to do with a car? Can't haul stuff in it, can't take it out to the plantation. Or fishing. There's not a thing wrong with that old pickup."

"Don't be bothering me about this, Hiram. It's gone, and it's not coming back."

Grampa looked a little mad, and I didn't want to be arguing with him during my last days in Greenwood, but selling that truck made no sense. "I always liked that pickup; there's no good reason for getting rid of it."
“I’ve got reasons, and I don’t have to be explaining them to my grandson.” His face got red again, and he started shoving his papers into a big brown envelope. “Adults have reasons for doing what they do, even if they make no sense to children. Children, including you, Hiram, have got to learn to trust their elders. That truck’s gone, and I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

“Seems like you don’t want to hear any more about anything these days,” I snapped back. “First about the trial, then about R.C. or whoever helped Bryant and Milam, and now about the truck.”

Grampa ignored me and concentrated on getting his papers into the envelope. There was no sense fighting with him about this; I was going home soon and wouldn’t have been driving the truck much anyway, so I cooled off and changed the subject.

“I saw R. C. Rydell last night, Grampa.”

He looked up right away. “R. C. Rydell? Did he try to break your neck?”

“We just talked. He was heading out of town after one too many fights with his dad.”

“Too bad he’s not taking his father with him,” Grampa said. “That man’s been tormenting his children for longer than should be allowed. It ruined R.C., and I’m sure it was no good for Naomi, even though she seems to have turned out all right. At any rate, she’ll be better off with her good-for-nothing brother gone. Where’s he headed?”

“Jackson. He’s been working down there for almost a month. And you know something kind of funny? He was down in Jackson the night Bryant and Milam kidnapped Emmett Till. When he first told me that, I thought for sure he was lying, but now I believe him. All this time I thought he was the third man they were looking for, and he wasn’t even in the county.”

“I wouldn’t trust that boy any farther than I could throw him,” Grampa said. His voice sounded hurried, nervous. “You can’t take anything he says for truth, though I never was convinced he had anything to do with all that trouble with Roy and J.W.”

“Well, he’s off the hook in case anybody ever starts trying to track down whoever else was in on that killing.”

“I told you before, Hiram, no one in the Delta is going to bother with that case again. The jury gave a decision, and the judge accepted it.” He got the last of his papers into the envelope and sealed it with the brass clasp. “And now there’s no evidence left to link any other person to the kidnapping. As they say, ‘This case is closed.’” Grampa smiled, looking more relaxed than he had since before the trial started. “And now it looks like we’re going to have to start working on getting you on a train to Arizona.”

“Yeah. Do you think you can call Mom and Dad today and let them know the trial’s over, and that I’m clear to leave now?”

“News about the trial was in papers all over the country, so I’m sure they know the trial’s over, but I’ll call and let them know you’re coming home as soon as possible. I’d also
better have Ruthanne run over to the train depot and make sure we can get you a ticket for tomorrow or Monday."

It surprised me that Grampa was so cheerful about my leaving. Sure, I was anxious to get out of there as fast as I could, but I'd expected him to start with the usual sales pitch to stay in Greenwood. For most of my life he'd been begging me to come back, and now it seemed like he couldn't wait for me to leave.

But I didn't have time to figure him out right then. If I was going to be gone soon, I had to talk to Naomi. I told him I had to go find a friend.

Grampa smiled. "Of course, you have to say good-bye to the girlfriend. Don't be gone too long; you'll need to be getting your things packed up pretty soon." Grampa pushed away from the table and went into the living room, and I headed out the kitchen door for Naomi's house.

When I was walking down the driveway, I spooked Ronnie Remington, who had just come out of his house and was walking his path to the sidewalk with his head down. He almost ran into me when we reached the sidewalk at the same time.

"'Scuse me," he said nervously as he stopped dead in front of me, waiting for me to move out of his way so he could follow his route on the sidewalk. He looked up, and his eyes got wide when he recognized me. "I-I'm just going downtown to get some things. I should've been looking where I was going. Ralph's always telling me to look where I'm going, because if I don't, I'm going to run into things or get run over." He gulped and blinked rapidly. "Not that I'm worried about getting run over, or that I'm saying you ever tried to run me over. I'm not saying that at all. No, not at all. You can trust me on that. I did not say that you were driving that old blue Ford pickup with that evil Rydell boy and tried to run me down. I did not say that, and you can rest assured that I will never say that to anyone. Not a single solitary soul." His eyes glazed as he talked faster and faster. "One thing the Hillburns know is that the Remingtons are good neighbors. We never tell anyone anything. Ralph and I, we mind our own business and we trust other people will mind theirs. Your grampa, he knows that. We haven't told a soul about his pickup, not a soul."

I had no idea what he was talking about, so I tried to slow him down. "There's nothing to tell about the pickup, Mr. Remington. Grampa sold it. No secrets there."

"Nobody calls me Mr. Remington," he smiled. "It sounds good, sounds like it should sound. I wonder if I should tell people to start addressing me as Mr. Remington. 'Ronnie' always sounds so childish, and a man at my age, well, Ralph's actually older than I am, so I suppose he'd like to be called Mr. Remington too. As a matter of fact, I'm sure he'd like that. We have similar tastes, you know. Well, not about everything, but about some things. A few things, at least. We used to, anyway."

He twitched when I touched his arm to stop him. "Mr. Remington, about the truck. It's... no... secret," I said slowly. "Grampa sold it is all."
"Of course he sold it. He told us he was going to, after the trial and all and the horrible, horrible trouble that started up in Money. Not that I've even been to Money. Too small. Just a cotton gin and a few stores, I hear. He made Ralph and me promise, as good neighbors, of course, that we wouldn't say anything to anyone about what Ralph saw. Well, when he saw it, he didn't think anything of it at the time. Folks often borrow your grampa's truck, and Ralph of course can't sleep and often watches out the window. Not peeping, of course, of course not that, but in a neighborly way, watching out for our neighbors and their things."

"Ralph saw something?" Something tickled the pit of my stomach.

"Oh no, I promised I would never say that. When your grandfather came over to talk to us about that terrible, terrible tragedy, that Chicago boy they found dead, when he came to talk to us about that, he wanted us to make sure we hadn't seen anything. Well, of course I hadn't because I always retire by ten o'clock. If I don't get a good ten hours of sleep, I'm a wreck the next day. So of course I was asleep. But not Ralph. No, Ralph's a night owl. So he saw Roy and J.W. that Saturday night, recognized them right off because he'd gone to high school with J.W., of course, he's a few years older than J.W., but they were in school at the same time. So how could he not recognize them? Ralph remarked to me that he didn't know that your grandfather knew J.W., though. It was that next day he told me that. That about your grandfather and J.W. Milam."

Ronnie's words swirled around my head so fast, I felt dizzy. I wasn't even sure what I was hearing. "Milam? Grampa was with Milam?"

"I never said that. Did I? Promised, Ralph and I, that we wouldn't tell anyone anything about it, and we haven't. We told your grandfather that except for when he told me, Ralph would not ever tell anyone that he'd seen Roy and J.W. drop him off late, oh very late, that night. It was strange, though, for your grandfather to be out so late, and that's probably why Ralph even remembered it. You know he's so forgetful. He drinks, you know. Too much, if you ask me. But will he listen to me? No. Never has, never will. I'm the younger brother, so he thinks he doesn't have to listen to me, even though I'm the only one in the family with any common sense."

The dizziness was getting worse, so I put my hands on Ronnie's shoulders to steady myself and to slow him down. "Please, Mr. Remington, please talk in a straight line, will you?"

That startled him. He paused, looking at my hands on his shoulders, and when I let go, he started talking again, this time more slowly.

"Yes, yes, I do prattle on sometimes. I like it when you call me Mr. Remington. I'm going to have to remember to tell Ralph that. We must have people address us that way."

"About Milam and Bryant. Please?"

"Of course you know about the trial. Ralph and I didn't go, of course, but we read all about it in the Commonwealth."
They covered it well, don't you think? Something in there, even nice photos, about the trial every day. Comprehensive coverage, I'd say. Well, we were horrified to read all the details. Such a tragic, tragic thing. And Ralph read about your grandfather's pickup. That one witness, oh what was his name? He saw it Sunday morning, out at that other plantation. Well, I'll never remember his name. That worried Ralph right away, he has such a legal mind, you know. He knew people would know whose truck that was. Circumstantial evidence, of course, of course. It proves very little or nothing, he said. But if it were added to what he saw, you know, Roy and J.W. dropping him off so terribly late one night, and Roy borrowing that truck. Well, pardon the expression, but that would be damning, Ralph said. Quite, quite damning. So of course, we admire your grandfather and his fine work with the Citizens' Councils and all that, and we've always tried to be very good neighbors, so of course when your grandfather came over to chat with us, well, we knew the score. We assured him, as I'm assuring you, that we would never tell anyone anything. Of course, most people don't listen to us anyway. Though I have no idea why."

I felt the blood draining from my face. The dizziness was back, and the breakfast I'd just eaten felt like rocks in my stomach.

"My, Hiram, you don't look so well. You know, this Indian summer we're having is quite brutal. The heat, over ninety hasn't it been, with all this humidity, well it is, of course, the South, but it's just brutal. You should get right back inside, out of this sun, and have yourself a nice cold glass of iced tea."

I moved off the sidewalk, and as soon as the way was clear, Ronnie moved past me, still talking as he walked. "Iced tea. That will help. Yes, it would. Of course with sugar and a slice of lemon..."

The sun did feel brutal. The air close, damp, and heavy; so thick, I could hardly breathe. Had I even been breathing? It felt like Ronnie sucked up all the air when he talked, so fast, so much, and what he said. The weight of his words and the weather and everything else from that Mississippi summer squeezed all the air out of me. I half staggered back into the house.

Grampa was reading in the living room when I came in and flopped onto the sofa, but I didn't even look at him. With my head still spinning, I leaned back and stared at the ceiling, waiting for the dizziness to pass. I could feel my grandfather's presence in the room but he said nothing. He was watching me, waiting. Maybe worried. Would he still worry about me?

Or was he worried about himself?

My head cleared enough that I could sit up. Grampa was in his chair, and he smiled at me. "Are you feeling all right, son?" He looked concerned, looked just like my grandfather had always looked. His voice sounded soothing, like I was back home. The sights, sounds, and smells of Gramma's house. Those were all around me. Cozy. It felt good.

Then I remembered Ronnie. Had it been a dream? Had I even seen him? Maybe it was all some sort of hallucination.
I looked at Grampa. I loved him. I knew he loved me. We were both sitting in a room where we'd read together, listened to the radio, where he'd played with me when I was a little boy. This room, this house, this man were all a part of my roots, all parts of a memory I had always loved.

But another, newer memory nagged my conscience. I tried to ignore it. I wanted to forget it, but the Hillburn stubbornness wouldn't let me. I knew I could settle it with one statement, not even a question. I could say it, watch my grandfather and know. I'd know immediately, know if my roots were solid as ever or if they'd withered and rotted.

I looked at Grampa, his face full of concern and love for me. I felt his love. I loved him, I had always loved him.

"Grampa, Ronnie Remington told me something about a promise."

He didn't move. His expression didn't change. His look of concern stayed the same. But his eyes, his eyes looked desperate when he shook his head, chuckled, and said, "Oh, that Ronnie Remington, he talks in such circles that he could drown a man."

"You were there. That night, you were there."

My grandfather's smile faded. He looked away from me and whispered, "The boy was alive when I left; they promised they were done with him when they brought me home."

And then I knew.
Knew what I didn't want to know.

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CHAPTER 17

On my last Sunday in Greenwood, I slept late, waiting for my grandfather to get up and eat breakfast and find something to do before I came downstairs. By 11:00 I was up and dressed, and, without seeing my grandfather, went looking for Naomi. I had to talk to her before I left Mississippi; I needed to talk to someone, someone I cared about and could trust.

I made it to our place on the bridge before noon. By then most people had finished their church meetings, and some, still in their Sunday best, were out for a walk. The heat wave had broken Saturday night, and citizens of Greenwood were in their yards and on the streets savoring the first day of fall-like weather.

Naomi wasn't at our spot at the center of the bridge, so I walked across hoping to see her somewhere along the way.