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.

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.
For half an hour I hung around on the north end watching little kids kick rocks into the yellow-green water of the Yazoo when their mothers weren’t looking.

Naomi never showed up, so I walked back over the bridge and headed down River Road to her house. When I crossed the highway at the edge of town, the pavement turned to gravel, and I crunched along about a mile past the cotton gin until I came to the Rydells’ beat-up shack. It looked deserted: trees and bushes grew thick in the property behind her house, and long grass and weeds filled the front yard. Most of the paint on the clapboard siding had peeled off long before, and the sagging roof over the porch looked ready to cave in with the next strong wind. The porch steps creaked when I climbed up to the front door. I knocked and waited. Nothing. I knocked again, harder. “Naomi? Hey, Naomi, it’s Hiram.” Still nothing. I pounded again. “Naomi! Are you in there?” Something, a squirrel probably, rustled behind the house, but nothing else moved. I walked through the weeds all the way around the house, hoping to see some sign of her or maybe to find a note she’d left for me.

Nobody was home, and nobody’d been expecting me to stop by.

Feeling hurt and empty, I headed back into town, hoping R.C. was right, that Naomi could and would take care of herself.

For the rest of that day my grandfather and I avoided each other. I didn’t come home until supper time, and by then he was back in his bedroom.

“Your granddaddy don’t feel well, Mr. Hiram,” Ruthanne said when I walked into the kitchen for supper, “and wants you to go on ahead and eat without him.” She set the food on the table. “That trial laid him low, lower than I’d a thought it would. Could be old Mr. Hillburn’s finally having a change of heart. If that be the case—and if it's catching—maybe something good might come out of Emmett’s death after all. All that grief and suffering that boy’s poor mama’s been through, Lord, I hope it ain’t all in vain.”

She looked sad for a moment, then she remembered what she was doing and motioned for me to sit at the table. “Don’t know how long it’ll be before you come back this way, Mr. Hiram, so I’ve made all your favorite Southern foods, and I expect you to eat up. Every bite. I don’t want your mama complaining that you come home looking skinny.”

For some reason I was starving, and I piled my plate with fried chicken, biscuits, mashed potatoes and gravy, string beans, okra. When I got through that, Ruthanne brought out a slab of ham lacquered with honey glaze. Sweet potatoes. Warm spiced applesauce and coleslaw. I ate while Ruthanne made small talk about her children and their comings and goings. She sure loved her kids. I hoped they knew how lucky they were to have a mother like her.

When my fork clattered on the empty plate, she told me to go take a walk—“Maybe you’ll run into that little Rydell girl”—and to come back ready for pie: gooseberry, rhubarb, and sweet potato. “If you find your friend while you’re out
making room for dessert, tell her she’s surely welcome to set here and share our pie; we’ve got plenty.”

I wandered the streets of Greenwood for about an hour, came back, alone, and had some pie. Before I went upstairs to bed, I thanked Ruthanne for everything she’d done for me.

Monday, my last day in Mississippi.

At breakfast, Ruthanne said, “Your granddaddy ate while you were upstairs packing. After that, somebody picked him up and took him down to the courthouse and from there to go look for a car. He’s gonna be busy, but he promised he’ll be back before your train leaves. Feels bad he can’t make it to the station, but he wants to say good-bye to you ’fore you go.” She looked at me carefully. “Mr. Hiram, are things all right with you and Mr. Hillburn? You both seem awful skittish of each other.”

What could I say? What could I tell her?

“I guess that trial just took a lot out of him,” I said without looking up from my plate. “He hasn’t been the same since.”

Ruthanne waited for me to say more, but I concentrated on the food in front of me. She watched me eat for a moment, and then she turned, shaking her head.

After breakfast I walked to the courthouse to see Sheriff Smith, when I got to his office, his secretary sent me right in.

The sheriff looked up from his desk. “Hiram Hillburn, I figured you’d be back in Arizona by now. You ain’t planning on staying permanent in Greenwood, are you?”

“Nosir. I’m leaving this afternoon. If it’s okay, though, I wanted to ask you a few things before I leave.”

He leaned back in his chair and stretched. “Fire away.”

“Well, about Naomi Rydell. I ran into R.C. the other night—”

“You know,” he interrupted, “I finally did talk to R.C. about his involvement with the trouble up in Money. The boy had an airtight alibi.”

“I know.”

“Really? Well, I just wanted to make sure you knew that we took your call seriously. Now, what about his sister?”

“R.C. told me about his dad and everything, and I was wondering, well, what’s happened to Mr. Rydell?”

“Not dead, unfortunately. He got busted up bad, but not bad enough. He’ll be in the hospital a good while.”

“What about Naomi?”

“She told me you might be asking.” The sheriff smiled. “Nice girl, Naomi Rydell, and it’s a miracle she survived that home she’s been raised in. I suppose I should have done something sooner, but the law’s pretty soft on fathers, especially when there’s no mother. Heck, Naomi was mother and father both for that house since she was eight years old. But you’re wondering where she is. Let’s just say she’s in a safe place. We found her a good home, somewhere her father won’t be able to hurt her again, where she can enjoy the last couple years of her childhood.”

“If she knew I’d be looking, did she say anything, leave me a note or something?"
He shook his head. “Things happened fast after R.C. licked their daddy. Naomi was pretty upset and didn’t have time to do much letter-writing.” He stood and reached his hand across the desk. “But I will tell her you came by.”

Mr. Paul had a couple of customers when I got to his stand in the courthouse lobby, so I hung back, waiting until they were gone. “Hey, Mr. Paul,” I said when they’d left.

“Hiram Hillburn, I figured you’d be long gone by now. Don’t you have to be getting back to school?”

“I’m leaving this afternoon, but I wanted to come over and say good-bye.”

“That’s thoughtful of you. So, are you glad you came to Greenwood?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I am, and sometimes I’m not.”

“My guess is that sitting through the trial won’t be one of your summer highlights.”

“I didn’t like the trial or any of the stuff that happened before it, but you know what was the worst of all? It was knowing that everybody in that courtroom knew Emmett Till had been murdered; some probably even had something to do with it. And that jury sat there for a week, listening to evidence and testimony so clear that even my little brothers could’ve figured it out, and they go and give a not guilty verdict.”

“Least they had a trial,” Mr. Paul said.

“But the trial didn’t make any difference. These guys got away with murder anyway.”

“Sure the boys got off, but you can’t tell me the next peckerwood who’s got lynching on his mind isn’t going to worry just a little that he might end up in a courtroom.”

“What about the people who don’t get caught? The people who never go to trial? They get away with murder too.”

“In a way they do, but they’ve also got to live with it the rest of their lives. Can you imagine always worrying about getting caught? About someone finding out?”

“Yeah, but it’s hard knowing that people can hide so much badness inside themselves, people you think you know and love. It makes you wonder about everybody.”

“Folks sometimes do ugly things, Hiram, but that don’t necessarily make them evil. A lot of good folks just make stupid decisions or get themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“But even if he’s in the wrong place at the wrong time, a good person shouldn’t go along. He should leave or stop whatever bad that’s happening.”

“Sure he should. Sure should all of us.” Mr. Paul paused. “Have you always managed that?”

_That_ gave me something to think about while I walked home.

When I got back to my grandfather’s house, a new Chevy sedan sat in the driveway.

“Got that automatic transmission,” my grandfather said when I came into the living room. “And got a good deal on it.” He motioned for me to sit down. “Where’ve you been, son?”
I kept standing. I still didn’t feel like talking to him long. “Around town. Saying good-bye to some people.”

“What time’s your train leave?”

“Two o’clock. I guess Ruthanne’s going to take me?”

“In that new Chevy. But she’s expecting to feed you lunch before you go. It’s her last chance to fatten you up before you leave Mississippi.” He grinned. Like old times.

I stood there a moment without saying anything. Then I said, “I guess I better get my bags in the car. Smells like lunch is about ready.”

When I came back into the house, my grandfather was already at the table.

“Mr. Hiram,” Ruthanne said, “I do hope you’ve saved yourself a little appetite. You’re going to hurt my feelings if you don’t clean up all this food before you go.”

“Ruthanne,” my grandfather said, “I’m sure that between the two of us, we can make a good dent in this splendid meal, but whatever we don’t eat, you can send with him on the train.”

“Could, but I’ve already packed him a little something for the trip.” She pointed to a large grocery bag on the counter. “Don’t want to weigh him down with too many things. Ya’ll get busy eating,” she said as she set a bowl of potato salad on the table. “I’ll be upstairs, Mr. Hiram, so you just give me a holler when you’re ready to go to the station.”

When Ruthanne left, my grandfather said, “Son, I’m sure going to miss having you around the house.” His voice sounded soft and tired. “For a while it seemed like the old days when you were little, and Gramma was still here. You know, I still miss her, miss her terribly, and it’s going to be pretty hard getting used to an empty house again.” His eyes got watery. “It was so wonderful having you here. I only wish . . . I wish there hadn’t been so many distractions. It wasn’t fair for you to get caught up in that trial business.”

“Maybe, but it taught me some things.” I stared at him, wondering what he’d say.

He held my stare a moment, and then looked down. “About that, Hiram, you know I tried everything I could to keep you away from that trial. There was no need for you to get involved.”

“It was the right thing to do,” I said. “When I left home, I promised Mom I’d do what was right, and at the time, I figured I knew something that might have made a difference in the trial. That’s why I told the sheriff, even though I didn’t want to. That’s why I went to the trial, even though I didn’t want to. Turns out that what I knew didn’t have a thing to do with the kidnapping and murder of Emmett Till.” I waited for my grandfather to say something. To apologize. Wouldn’t he want to clear his conscience, at least with me, before I left?

“Well,” he said, “the trial took a different direction, didn’t it? Apparently the prosecution had decided either that Mose Wright’s testimony was faulty or there wasn’t sufficient evidence that others had helped Bryant and Milam do anything. And, of course, the jury wasn’t convinced that Bryant and Milam did anything at all to that Till boy. I’m
sure there will be rumors floating around for a while—there always are after a sensational trial—but soon enough those will die down and things will get back to normal. What you need to remember, son”—Grampa narrowed his eyes—“is that you can’t believe everything you hear. Nothing’s as simple as you might think.”

That was the last either of us talked about the trial. For the rest of lunch we talked about my brothers and sisters, about life in Tempe, about the weather, his crops, and anything except his guilt. When the time came for me to leave, we said good-bye and hugged. Grampa got teary-eyed as I carried the rest of my things out the front door to the car.

All the way to the station I tried to convince Ruthanne that she didn’t have to wait with me. We were standing behind my grandfather’s new Chevy, and I had my bags in hand when she finally agreed.

“Sure, now? I don’t want you getting on the wrong train and ending up in New York or someplace worse.”

“Ruthanne, I’m sixteen. Only one train’s passing through here in the next two hours. I’m sure I can figure it out.”

She looked a little sad. “Well, I’m going to miss you around the house. Never did see anything brighten up your granddaddy like having you here did.” She tucked the grocery bag she had packed for me under my arm. “Now, you be careful on that train, and don’t you dare share this with any strangers. You take care, Mr. Hiram, and be sure to say my hello to your mama and daddy.”

Except for the stationmaster who checked my ticket and a couple of railroad workers, the station was empty, and I wished I had a book or magazine to read while I waited for my train. I set my bags on a wooden slat bench on the platform and was ready to walk to a drugstore on Carrollton Avenue to pick something up when I saw her.

It didn’t look like Naomi at first. She was wearing a bright new cotton dress, and her blonde hair was brushed out, down to her shoulders. But maybe the biggest difference was that she didn’t look so defeated.

She walked right to me, took my hand, and sat down on the bench. “I’m glad I got here before you left, Hiram. I’ve been wanting to talk to you . . . but, well, things got complicated pretty fast.” Her hand felt warm, relaxed. She told me Sheriff Smith had found her a family to live with, a good family who’d take care of her; she’d finish high school, and then maybe go to secretarial school or even college. Naomi sounded full of hope.

We sat on that bench and talked until my train came. When we hugged good-bye, I felt her tears on my cheek. “I hope you come back someday, Hiram,” she whispered. “Things, everything, will be better then.”

I couldn’t answer because if I did, I knew I’d cry. I just hugged her tighter and prayed nothing but good would come her way for the rest of her life. She’d already had a lifetime share of the bad.

The train whistled twice, and a conductor called, “All aboard!” I stood up and grabbed my bags. “Thanks, Naomi,” I said. “Thanks for everything.”
I got on the train just before it started moving, and from my window seat, I watched Naomi standing alone on the platform until the train was out of sight. Naomi was all right, was going to be all right. It was nice leaving Greenwood knowing that.

When I got back to Arizona, Dad, not Mom, met me at the station in Phoenix. That surprised me. Dad was always busy with something, stuff at work or church or with the little kids, so Mom usually had to deal with me.

Then I remembered that he'd probably followed every minute of the trial, not because I might have been in it, but because it was about somebody like Emmett Till getting killed in Mississippi. Of course he'd follow a civil rights case, especially when it was in Mississippi, and he probably couldn't wait to get my eyewitness account of the whole trial. Fine. If he wanted to know about the trial, I'd tell him—tell him almost everything.

When I stepped off the train, he was alone, looking over the crowd trying to spot me. He didn't see me at first and I didn't wave or call to him, I just watched. He looked a little like my grandfather, not as heavy, but his face, the way his hair was graying, even the way he moved. At least in appearance, he definitely was his father's son. After a minute or so, the crowd thinned enough for him to see me. He smiled, waved, and walked over to me.

"Welcome home, son," he said. We shook hands, and then he reached out and put a hand on my shoulder. "We've missed you."

Dad and I stood facing each other awkwardly for a moment. I was almost as tall as he was. He looked a little older, tireder. For a second, our eyes met, and something passed between us, an understanding of some sort, from one Mississippi boy to another.

Then Dad patted my shoulder and picked up my bags; I followed him out to the parking lot.

It's a good ten miles from the Phoenix train depot to our house in Tempe. Even in late September the weather was still hot, and Dad had all the car windows down as we headed home. The dry air swirled through the station wagon moving things around but not really cooling us off. For the first few minutes neither one of us said anything, but I wanted to at least try to talk to Dad to see if we could talk without ending up in a fight.

"How's everybody?" I asked.

"Better, now that school's started. The kids were getting pretty antsy the last couple weeks of summer. Too much time on their hands was not a good thing." Dad cleared his throat, and while keeping his eyes on the road, said, "That trial, it really must have been something. I kept thinking of that poor boy's mother, of his entire family, how awful it must have been for them to see and hear all that evidence and then to have that jury turn Bryant and Milam loose." He sighed. "It's been like that for too long down there, but maybe all the attention that trial got will put people on warning. Desegregation was already on its way, and then the trial. I can imagine how my dad's taking it. Of course, nothing in the Delta's going to change any time soon, but
it's a start, a step in the right direction." He glanced at me as if he'd just remembered something and said, "Sorry, Hiram. Probably the last thing in the world you want to think about right now is that trial. Tell me about Greenwood. Are you glad you went?"

"Sort of. Greenwood was exactly how I remembered it. The town and the house haven't changed a bit. When I first got there, I thought I'd never want to leave; then stuff started happening, ugly kinds of stuff."

"The trial?" asked Dad.

"And other things. Some people there were terrific, but a lot of them, I don't know, they seemed to have a meanness in them. They were friendly and all that, but..."

"They weren't very nice to Negroes."

"Yeah, but it took me a while to notice that. I guess when I was a little kid, that was all going on over my head. At least it never registered with me."

"And what about Grampa?"

"For a while it was like the old days when he and Gramma were taking care of me. We went fishing, went out to the fields, ate at the Riverside Café. It was a lot of fun." Then I wondered something. "Dad, did you ever do stuff like that with him?"

"All the time. Being the only child, I was pretty spoiled."

"When did it change?"

"Dad never did change; he always wanted to do things with me, but gradually I stopped wanting to do things with him. I guess in a way, it was kind of like it was for you. I got older and started noticing some things I hadn't noticed before. When I saw things I didn't like, I wouldn't shut up about them, and Dad didn't like that at all. Any time I'd want to argue, he'd just tell me, 'Children've got to learn to trust their elders,' and figure that would shut me up. It did for a while, but when I got old enough to start thinking for myself, I learned that kids can't always trust everything their elders do. And that was the beginning of the end for me and Dad."

"Did you stop loving him?" I asked.

"For a long time I thought I did, but then I realized that no matter how wrong or bad or stubborn your father is, he's still your father. I sure didn't like the things he did and said, and frankly, lots of times I didn't like him, but he's my father, and he loved me, and for that I love him." He glanced over at me. "What about you?"

I didn't answer right away. Maybe I wouldn't be able to answer for a long time. I knew some things, some horrible things, about my grandfather. Dad probably did too. "I don't know. Grampa's pretty complicated. I guess I'm still working on it."

Dad reached over and patted my leg. He looked a little embarrassed. "I wasn't asking about Grampa."