CHAPTER 3

Silence. One early fall morning a few weeks later, I woke up and the house was deathly quiet. The sun gleamed through my bedroom window; it was still morning, but something wasn't right. I sat up in bed and listened. I could hear the morning birds outside and the sounds of cars crossing the bridge over on Fulton Street, but no sounds from the kitchen. No smell of coffee, bacon, sausage, and biscuits from downstairs. Maybe it's earlier than it seems, I thought. I slid out of bed and padded down the back stairs to the kitchen. No coffee brewed on the stove; everything was exactly as neat and clean as Gramma had left it when I went to bed the night before.

"Gramma?" My voice echoed softly in the kitchen. "Gramma? You here?" I walked through the dining room to the double doors that led to Gramma and Grampa's bedroom. The door was ajar, and I nudged it open further with my head as I peered into their room. No one was there. It hadn't ever looked quite the way I saw it then: The sheets were wrinkled and shoved to the foot of the bed. A closet door stood open, and several drawers of Grampa's dresser stuck out. A chair in the corner had been tipped over. The room felt completely empty.

"Grampa? Gramma?" It felt strange to be in the house alone. I wasn't afraid; it just didn't seem regular. I walked back to the kitchen to get something to eat, when I heard the front door open.

"Hiram? Hiram, boy, you back there?" Grampa came into the kitchen wearing his bib overalls over his pajamas. His hair was rumpled, and he looked exhausted, more tired, more beaten than I'd ever seen him.

He walked in just as I was about to take a bite of the gingersnap I had pulled out of the cookie jar; and I was afraid I was going to catch it from him for eating a cookie first thing in the morning. "Sorry, Grampa, but I couldn't find Gramma and didn't know what to eat . . ."

"Come here, son, come here." He reached his arms out to me, and his eyes welled up with tears. At first I didn't recognize the look on his face. He wasn't mad, that I knew. A tear trickled down his cheek. "Come here, son, please come let me hug you." His voice quivered. He wasn't mad at me; he was sad.

I ran to him and buried my face in the bib of his overalls. He held me tight and said, "Oh, Hiram, son, she's gone. What am I going to do?"

"She'll be back, Grampa," I said as gently as I could. "I bet
she just went up to Oxford to see Dad and Mom. We can eat breakfast at the River Café, and then you can take me to school. We'll be okay."

Grampa sat down at the kitchen table and pulled me into his lap. "No, son, Gramma's not coming back, not till the good Lord brings her home to us." His eyes were watery and red. "She's gone to glory, Hiram, gone to glory and left me here alone. Oh, what am I going to do?"

Then it hit me: Gramma was dead.

I wrapped my arms around Grampa's neck and hugged him while we cried together, mourning the loss of a wife and grandmother and friend, wondering how we could possibly survive without her.

Dad and Mom came down to Greenwood as soon as they heard about Gramma. They stayed for the funeral, and those days were the only times I had seen Dad and Grampa together without fighting. Maybe it was out of respect for Gramma, or maybe they just didn't have time. I'd never been around anyone's dying before, and I was surprised at how busy the house got. Neighbors brought in food and flowers. Often they stayed late into the night, eating and talking with Grampa and Dad about Gramma. Mom and some neighbor women stayed busy in the kitchen keeping food coming out into the dining room, washing dishes, and finding space for the plates of sliced ham and roast beef, the bowls of potato salad, the peach pies and chocolate cakes, and the loaves of bread that people brought over.

Ralph and Ronnie Remington even came over to pay their respects. Ronnie wore a black suit coat stretched to button across his wide belly; a limp bow tie hung cockeyed from the collar of his white shirt. Ralph wore a blue tuxedo jacket with navy blue pants, shiny at the knees. He carried a champagne bottle with a wide purple bow tied around its neck. Both men looked about as comfortable as cows in a slaughterhouse. The two of them were speaking quickly to each other, their gaze darting around the room at the neighbors, who avoided or ignored them. Ronnie kept wiping his forehead with a gray handkerchief, while Ralph steered him through the crowded living room toward Grampa and Dad. A group of friends and neighbors stood around my dad and grampa, and when they saw the Remingtons approaching, they closed ranks, blocking them from the circle of mourners. Ronnie looked panicked, mopping his forehead faster and faster while whispering to Ralph. Ralph nodded and listened with a hand on his brother's arm to keep him from bolting. I watched him scan the room, looking for an out, hoping to make contact with at least one person.

I gulped when his eyes met mine, and he immediately smiled and walked toward me, pulling Ronnie along. Ronnie kept his head down, glancing nervously from side to side.

"Young Mr. Hillburn, I presume?" said Ralph. "My brother and I, good friends and neighbors of your dear, dear grandmother, are heartbroken at this recent tragedy. Florence, your grandmother, was a champion, you know, well, of
course you know, a friend to all who knew her, a kind, gentle lady. Please know that you have our most mournful condolences.” He handed the champagne bottle to me and nudged Ronnie in the ribs.

Ronnie glanced at me before lowering his head again. He was crying. “I promised Ralph I wouldn’t cry. I did say it. Yes, I did. ‘Ralph,’ I said, ‘I will not cry. No, I won’t. Even though,’” his voice quivered, “‘even though Florence Hillburn was our best friend in Greenwood.’ Of course Ralph won’t cry. He’s a rock, a real Gibraltar, though if you ask me, a little emotion is a healthy thing once in a while. Some people are just so hard-hearted, you wonder if they have a heart at all. Not that I mean that Ralph is hard-hearted, no, I would never say that. But of course not your sweet grandmother, no, not her. Florence Hillburn was . . . she was a queen of kindness. Yes, I like how that sounds. It suits her: a queen of kindness.” He smiled and wiped a tear from his cheek with the back of his hand.

“Did you know that she often brought us dinner? Leftovers is what she called it, but it was a feast. That woman could cook, but she was full of charity, looked out for Ralph and me, not that we can’t look out for each other, for ourselves, of course. We’re two grown men perfectly capable of taking care of ourselves, and never once did we look for a handout, no, sir, we never looked for someone’s charity. Ralph, you know, isn’t much interested in cooking—or eating, for that matter—but I can get into the kitchen and put together a meal when I have to. Why, just last night I was

frying some eggs to go with toast. A good meal, you know, fried eggs and toast, and we were about to sit down to eat . . .” His voice grew soft and quivery again. “Well, anyway, Florence Hillburn was, oh, yes, she was . . . a queen of kindness.” Tears dripped onto his shoes. I felt sorry for Ronnie—and for me. Seeing him so sad made me miss Gramma more than ever.

Ronnie looked wrung out from talking about Gramma, but Ralph was ready to move. “Ahem, well, yes, young Mr. Hillburn, ah, by the way, what is your name, lad?”

“Hiram.”

“Of course, Hiram Hillburn. How could I forget that? Many times I’ve seen you with your grandparents. Noble family you have here, young Harlan.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Remington, but I’m Hiram. Harlan’s my dad.”

“Yes, of course he is. I’ve known young Harlan for many years, don’t you know.” He looked around him. “It’s clear that your father and grandfather are going to be occupied for some time with all these dear, dear friends. I’m afraid that I really must get Ronnie back home; this has been so shattering for him, so very difficult. Please extend our most severe and kindest sympathy to your family. I apologize for Ronnie’s unseemly outpouring of emotion, but your grandmother’s demise has come as a real shock to him, and, of course, to me as well.” Ralph cleared his throat. “Now we must return to our own abode and deal with our private grief in whatever ways seem to bring us peace.” Ralph nod-
ded at me and steered the crying Ronnie back through the living room and out the front door.

When they left, I realized I'd been crying too.

The graveyard ceremony was just as depressing as everything else had been. Watching Gramma's coffin get lowered into that grave just about broke me in half. I can't recall anything the minister said; I felt like my ears were plugged and I was watching everything through watery eyes. After Gramma had been laid to rest, all the friends and neighbors stuck around to talk with Grampa and Dad, and I just wanted to get out of there, so I told Mom I was going back to the car to wait for everyone. She understood, I think, why I needed to go.

When I turned to leave, I saw Naomi Rydell. Her blonde hair was pulled into tight pigtails, and her face looked shiny and freshly scrubbed.

"Hey, Hiram," she said.

"Hey, Naomi. I didn't know you were here."

"I come a little late, and all those people were so crowded around, I just stayed back a ways." She looked sad. "Don't like funerals."

"Me neither." But I was glad to see her. She didn't make me feel any less sorry for my gramma's death; being around her just made me feel better.

"Last funeral I went to was Ma's. Pa wasn't even there, just me and R.C. It was the hardest thing I ever done, and I didn't want to go, but I went anyway because I loved her and wanted her to know that, without a doubt."

"Funerals don't help a whole lot," I said.

Naomi nodded and bit her lower lip. "I still miss her something awful." She tugged my sleeve. "C'mon, Hiram, I'll show you her grave."

We walked to a quiet corner of the cemetery where there were no headstones. Naomi stopped in front of a grave marked only with a thin metal nameplate. Small piles of old flowers were scattered around it.

"Here she is," Naomi said. "Her body, anyway. I know she's not here, of course. She's up in heaven with the angels, so I don't come here much anymore, but I don't think she minds. When I get real lonely and want to talk to her, you know what I do?" She looked hopeful, like she was going to let me in on a secret.

"No, what?"

"At night, when Pa's sleeping, I walk downtown to the Fulton Street Bridge. It's quiet, you know, and real peaceful. I stand right in the middle and look over the railing and watch the water move by. And I think about my mother. And about—he lowered her head and her voice shook—and about how much she loved me." Then Naomi looked up, her eyes red and full of tears, and took my hand. "It's a good place for that, Hiram, and I'll share it with you anytime. You get to missing your gramma—or anybody you love—and you just go there and look into the river and you'll feel better. It can be our place."

I was crying again, and the last person in the world I wanted to see me crying was Naomi. I wiped my tears with
the back of my hand. “Thanks,” I said. “And sorry. This is hard, you know. I'm really going to miss Gramma.”

“I know,” she said as gently as someone who really does. “I know.”

After Gramma's funeral, Dad had to get back to Ole Miss, but Mom planned to stay in Greenwood a few more days to take care of me and Grampa. Before he left, Dad sat down with me at Gramma's kitchen table.

“You doing okay, son? I've been so busy that I really haven't had a chance to talk with you.” Dad seemed uncomfortable, like he knew he had to talk to me but didn't know what to say. “This took us all by surprise, Hiram. I hope you understand that only Gramma's body is dead. Her spirit still lives, and we'll be with her again one day.” He cleared his throat and said, “Now, your mother wants you to come back to Oxford with her when she leaves next weekend.”

“But who'll take care of Grampa? He'll be in this big old house all by himself. He'll be so lonely.” My eyes got teary when I thought about Gramma dead in her grave and Grampa sad and all alone. I swallowed hard to keep from sobbing.

“Grampa can take care of himself, Hiram. He's only fifty-five, and he's got lots of friends here in Greenwood.”

“Daddy, why don't you and Mom come down here and live again? We can all stay together and help Grampa get along with things. I bet Gramma would like that.”

“It's not that easy, son.” Dad rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “I can't see how we could come down here, not now, anyway. I'm in the middle of a semester, and Mom's got that job at Oxford Elementary.”

“When school's over, then can we? I like living here with Grampa.”

Dad frowned. “Hiram, when we let you come down here to live with Gramma and Grampa, it was never intended to be permanent. We're our own family, and as soon as I’m finished with school, we'll live together again. In a house of our own.”

“But this house is big enough for all of us. Why can't we live here?” As far as I was concerned, this was my house too. It scared me to think of living anywhere else.

“Because of your grampa. He's been quiet during these funeral days, but pretty soon he'd start in on me again. And frankly, I don't want to live in Greenwood or in Mississippi. I've already started looking for college teaching jobs in the West: Utah, Idaho, Arizona, California. I love the Delta, but there are some things you can't understand that keep it from being a good place for us right now.”

“It's good enough for me, Daddy. I like Greenwood. I like this old house.”

“Son, you don't know some of the uglier things about the South. I want you to grow up understanding that all men are free and deserve to be treated that way. Ever since I got home from the war, your mother and I have been planning to move west. It'll be good for us, you'll see.”
I didn't see. I couldn't. I loved my life in Greenwood. Grampa had warned me about Dad's crazy ideas and that someday he might want to leave Mississippi, but I never believed him.

"What's wrong with Mississippi?"

"You're too young to understand now, but someday you will. I'm just doing what's best for our family."

I knew there was no talking Dad out of it, but I couldn't give up without trying.

"But can I stay here with Grampa?"

"Of course not." Dad's face flushed. "You're my son, and you'll do what I say."

"No, I mean can I still live with Grampa while you're at Ole Miss? I've got a bed here, and I can help him with things, and Mom can still come down on weekends and for the summer vacation. Grampa will be so lonely, Daddy. He'll need me. It'll only be for a little while."

Dad shook his head tiredly and said, "I'll speak to your mother about it, but don't get your hopes up."

But after Dad left for Oxford, Mom told me they decided I could stay if I wanted to.

So I stayed with Grampa in Greenwood. He moped around for a while, but gradually things got back to normal. Ruthanne, a tall, thin Negro woman Grampa hired to cook and clean, knew how to cook everything Gramma ever had, and some other things as well. She worked five and a half days a week—she had Sundays off and didn't come in until Monday afternoons—kept the house immaculate, and kept me and Grampa stuffed with delicious food. But Grampa would no longer eat in the kitchen. "Just doesn't feel right," he told me one night while we sat on the front porch swing watching for meteors. "That old kitchen feels wrong without Florence in it. You can eat there if you want, Hiram, but I'm going to have to eat in the dining room from now on. There's too much Florence in that kitchen, and I can't stand to eat in there without her around."

Sometimes at night, late, when it seemed like the house was covered with a heavy damp blanket of darkness, I would hear Grampa moving around downstairs. Sounds in the kitchen. Then muffled movement in the living room. Once in a while I'd hear the front door open and close. It made my chest ache to think of my grandpa down there, lost and looking for his wife, searching their familiar places for memories of her.

That turned out to be my last year in Greenwood. When school was out in Oxford, Mom came down to live with me and Grampa, and Dad announced that he was almost done with graduate school. He figured he'd finish everything up by the middle of July, right after my ninth birthday. He'd already started hearing back from some colleges about jobs, and at the end of June he called us from Ole Miss to say that he'd received a letter and contract from Arizona State College, and we'd be moving to Tempe in August, just in time for the new school year. "It's going to be a new life," he said. "A whole new life."
A life without Grampa, a life away from my home. I knew I'd hate it, and I hated my dad for all his plans to rip me out of Greenwood and ruin my life. Right then I swore that I'd never be happy in Arizona.

That night, mad and sad, I went to the Fulton Street Bridge for the first time since Gramma died. I stood in the spot Naomi had described and watched the dark water of the Yazoo swirl under the bridge. I thought about Gramma and Grampa and how much I'd miss them when we left Mississippi. I prayed to be able to stay. I begged God to stop Dad from dragging me to Arizona.

And I prayed that Naomi would show up at the bridge that night so I could explain why we were leaving, so I could say good-bye. More than anyone, she would understand how I felt.

I stayed on the bridge as late as I dared. Naomi never came, and before I left, I looked down into the Yazoo one last time and whispered, "Gramma, Grampa, Naomi, I'll come back. I promise."

The last time Grampa and Dad talked to each other was when Dad announced he was moving us to Arizona.

Grampa blew his stack. "Arizona! Why in hell would you want to live in that desert? That's my only grandchild you got there, Harlan. How can you take him away from his home, from his grampa?" They argued for a while, Grampa swearing and shouting, Dad yelling right back. As usual, the only thing their arguing did was make them both madder.

On the morning that we left, Grampa refused to help us load up the car; he just stood on the front porch and watched. When it was time to leave, Dad slid behind the wheel and said, "Say good-bye to your grampa, Hiram. No telling when you'll see him again." Mom glared at Dad a moment and then sighed and walked over to hug Grampa.