CHAPTER 5

I was surprised by how little I remembered of Mississippi. I'd forgotten the heat, the heavy humidity that made me sweat all the time. The deep green bushes and trees everywhere seemed foreign, and it was strange to look out the train window and not see mountains anywhere. When our train finally pulled into Greenwood, I started worrying. What had I done, I wondered, leaving Arizona for a place I hardly remembered?

I collected my bags and stood on the platform of the Greenwood station. A few cars lined the redbrick street in front of the station, and across the street I recognized one building at least, the Crystal Grill, one of Grampa's favorite restaurants. I sat down on a bench to wait for Ruthanne and to try to make some sense of this town my dad and I had grown up in. Most women on the sidewalks wore dresses and large hats. Many of the men wore baggy short-sleeved white shirts, a few had on ties. It was early afternoon, and people seemed in a hurry to get somewhere—probably to find a place to escape the heat. I could hear snatches of conversation in the same heavy Mississippi accent that Mom and Dad sometimes lapsed into when they talked to each other at home, and it seemed like the most natural kind of speech in the world. I couldn't figure out why Dad hated it here; it seemed like the homiest place on earth to me, and the longer I stood there, the happier I was to be away from Dad and back where I belonged.

Another big difference between Greenwood and Tempe was the Negroes. There had been a few Negro porters on the train, but I was surprised by how many I saw around the Greenwood station. The freight workers on the platform were all Negroes, of course, but so were almost half the people around the station. The Negro women wore simple cotton farm dresses without hats; most of the Negro men and boys wore blue bib overalls, the same kind Grampa always wore.

"Hiram. Hiram Hillburn, is that you?" It was Ruthanne, and I turned to greet her. She smiled, reached out, and held me by my shoulders. "Child, have you grown! Arizona surely has been good to you." I was nearly six feet tall; when I was a boy, Ruthanne used to tower over me, but now I was able to look her in the eye. "You're just like Mr. Harlan; if you weren't so fresh-looking, I'd swear you were Mr. Hillburn's own boy, not his grandchild."
That was the last thing I wanted to hear. "I'm nothing like my dad, Ruthanne. Nothing at all."

"Shucks, you're your daddy's son whether you like it or not, Mr. Hiram, but I guess at your age, you'd just as soon not admit it." She pointed to my bags. "Let's get those down into the truck and get you home. Your grampa can't wait to see you."

When I tried to pick them up, she stopped me. "You been riding that train for three days. Let Bobo over here carry them; he's got nothing to do right now." She nodded to a Negro boy who looked about my age standing near the edge of the platform. "Bobo," she called, "come on over here and carry Mr. Hiram's bags down to the truck."

He gave her a bored look and didn't move.

"Get yourself over here this minute," she snapped, "and don't you be giving me any of that sass."

Bobo sauntered over. His clothes set him apart from the other Negroes I had seen around the station. Wearing black leather dress shoes, pants, and white shirt, he looked nothing like a country boy from the Delta. He smirked at me as he stood next to Ruthanne.

"Mr. Hiram," Ruthanne said, "this here is Bobo Till, my cousin's nephew; he just come down from Chicago and's been waiting on his train up to Money."

"Hi, Bobo," I said.

He only nodded in return, and Ruthanne didn't like it. "Don't you get on so rude," she said as she nudged him in the side with her arm, "you talk when you been talked to."

Bobo rolled his eyes and then stuttered, "H-hi, H-Hiram."

"That's better," said Ruthanne. "Now, you pick up Mr. Hiram's things and help me get them down to the truck. And hurry up, or you're liable to miss your train."

"I b-b-been on the train all the way from Chicago, Ruthanne. I'm too tired to be carrying somebody else's old b-b-bags."

"That's okay, Ruthanne," I said, "I can handle my own things. Just got this duffel and the one suitcase. They're not heavy at all."

"See," Bobo said with a smirk. "No need for me to be carrying his b-bags. B-besides, it's too hot down here for me to be hauling stuff all over."

Ruthanne turned on him with her hands on her hips. "Emmett Till, you do what you're told to do, when you're told to do it. You've been raised better than that, and I know it." She glared at him until he went over and picked up my duffel bag. Satisfied that he had done at least part of what she had asked, Ruthanne turned and headed down the stairs off the platform and into the street.

"Ain't b-b-been raised to be nobody's old p-p-porter," he muttered so Ruthanne couldn't hear. Then he looked at me and said, "Don't see nobody carrying my b-b-bags around for me," and followed Ruthanne.

I picked up my suitcase and walked alongside Bobo. "So you're from Chicago, huh? You a Cubs fan?"

"Naw," Bobo shrugged. "It's dang hard to be a Cubs fan
these days. What are they, twenty-something games behind B-Brooklyn? Unless they have a decent chance at the p-pennant, I've decided b-being a Cubs fan is a waste of time. B-b-besides, I got b-better things to do back home than worry about b-baseball. Hey, do me a favor," he said as he paused at the top of the stairs, "and hold this for a second." He handed me my duffel bag. I took it and he went down the stairs without me. I stood there feeling dumb as a brick.

Bobo stayed a few steps ahead of me as we walked down the street to Grampa's blue Ford pickup. Ruthanne had just dropped the tailgate when we arrived, and right before she turned around to see us, Bobo took my duffel bag from me and winked. "Thanks," he said before he handed it to Ruthanne to put into the bed of the truck. He turned and headed back to the train platform without saying good-by.

As we pulled away from the station, we drove past a blonde-haired girl about my age. She walked with her head down like she was trying to be invisible. "Who's that girl?" I asked Ruthanne.

"Naomi Rydell." Ruthanne shook her head and sighed. "Too bad about that little girl; the things she's been through make a body wonder if God's in heaven."

"R.C.'s sister? I would've never recognized her." Seeing Naomi, even for a moment, stirred a warm spot in my chest and made me remember that there was more than just Grampa that I cared about in Greenwood. "But what things are you talking about?"

"Same old, same old. Her no-account brother is in one scrape after another, and if that wasn't enough, her lowdown father treats her worse than a family mule. Sleeps all day, drinks all night, and never does a lick of work. Poor girl's running that house, trying to keep that pitiful family together the best she can. Lord knows it can't be nothing but misery in that shack out there on River Road."

Would Naomi remember me?
I sure hoped she would.

When I stepped through the front door of Grampa's house, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath through my nose, and memories came flooding back. Gramma working in the kitchen. Grampa sitting in his chair smoking a cigar and reading the paper. Waking up mornings in my dad's old room to the smell of coffee and sausage. This was it. I was back.

Ruthanne had gone ahead of me into the living room. "He's here, Mr. Hillburn," she said. "The boy's come home."

The rustle of newspapers and then Grampa's voice. "Hiram? Hiram, son, come in here and let me look at you!"

When I entered the living room, Grampa was in his favorite chair. On one side of it stood a wheelchair with a pair of wooden crutches lying across the arm rests. Grampa beamed when he saw me.

"Hey, Grampa."

"Don't Hey, Grampa' me. Come here and give me a hug."

I went to his chair and bent over to hug him. His cheeks were rough with stubble and paler than I remembered, but
his arms felt as solid and strong as ever. "Welcome back, welcome back, son," he said softly as he held me. "It's so
good to have you home again."

When he let go, he wiped his eyes with his finger and
smiled. "You've turned into a young man, Hiram. Not much
like that little boy who used to run around here and steal
Gramma's gingersnaps."

I didn't know what to say. It was hard not to stare at the
wheelchair; Grampa didn't seem right, didn't seem like I
remembered—or at least like I wanted him to be.

"Don't worry about these old doodads," he said, pointing
to the wheelchair and crutches. "They were just temporary
help till I got my blood circulating right and my legs work-
ing again. I'd be lying if I said that stroke hadn't hit me
hard at first, but now I'm getting around pretty good for an
old man; a little slow and stiff sometimes, but I get around
when I have to.

"Sit down." He waved his hand at me. "You've had a long
train ride and must be worn out." He raised up in his chair
and called to the kitchen, "Ruthanne, this boy needs some
cold lemonade, and see if you can round up a plate of some
of those cookies I've been smelling these past two days."

In a moment Ruthanne returned and set a glass of
lemonade and a plate of gingersnaps on the table beside
me and handed Grampa a tall glass of iced tea. He took a
drink and squinted as if he were in pain. "Dammitall, Ruthanne, this tastes like brown water. Can't I get some-
thing to sweeten it up?"

"Now, Mr. Hillburn"—Ruthanne shook her head—"you
know what Doc Peterson says about you and sugar. I'm just
doing what he asked me to do."

"Damn diabetes," Grampa muttered as he handed the
glass back to her. "I'm not thirsty anyway. Guess I'll just
enjoy getting reacquainted with my oldest grandson for a
while."

As soon as Ruthanne left the room, Grampa said, "Hiram,
hand me a couple of those gingersnaps, will you? What
Ruthanne and Doc Peterson don't know won't hurt them
any."

Grampa nibbled on the cookies while I told him about
Joseph, Emma, Eliza, and Brigham. He was full of questions
about them, and often pulled out an envelope that held
snapshots Mom had sent him over the years to look at while
I talked about my brothers and sisters. "We've got to get
them to come out here for a visit sometime," he said. "I need
to see the rest of my grandchildren, and they need to see
me and Gramma's house."

We talked for a couple more hours, but Grampa never
once asked about Dad.

And I didn't offer to talk about him. Being around
Grampa again made me feel good, and reminded me why I
hated Dad for making us move to Arizona. I didn't care
what Ruthanne or anybody said: I wasn't like my father. I
was my grampa's boy, always had been, always would be.

The next morning, I felt kind of strange when I woke up
in my old bed in Dad's room and smelled the familiar
breakfast aromas coming up from the kitchen. For a moment I felt like I was a little kid again and Gramma was down in the kitchen cooking breakfast. The moment soon passed, but I lay in bed for a long time savoring the warm feelings and memories that washed over me in my favorite place in the world. Ruthanne finally had to call me down for breakfast.

It was good to be back in Greenwood. I had come back home, and I was free.

CHAPTER 6

Grampa didn't get up for breakfast. "Your granddaddy doesn't sleep well these days, and some nights he's up late at those Council meetings," Ruthanne explained, "so you just as well go ahead and eat, Mr. Hiram. He said that if you want, after breakfast you can borrow his truck—if it's not already borrowed; you ask me, he's too free and easy lending that truck around—and take a look around town. He'll be ready for you by lunchtime, so plan on being back by then."

After breakfast I went out into the backyard to look around; things hadn't changed much. Around the side of the house and through the bushes between our yards, I could see Ralph's and Ronnie's paths still clearly worn in the Remingtons' yard. Ralph Remington had just come out the back door and started on his path when he saw me. At first he looked spooked.