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Chris Crowe
For my parents,

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CHAPTER 1

My dad hates hate.

All my life, if the word ever slipped out of my mouth, he'd snap into me faster than a rattlesnake.

"Hiram," he'd say, straightening up tall like a preacher, "the world's got plenty enough hate without you adding to it. I will not tolerate such language—or even such thinking—in my home or in my family!" He'd go on with his sermon for too long, five minutes or more, preaching about the evils of hate and reminding me how hate had hurt folks back in our old home, the Mississippi Delta. Then he'd march me up to the bathroom and give my tongue a slathering of Lifebuoy soap.

I can't tell you which was worse, the sermons or the soap, but I will tell you this: I hated Dad when he acted like that, like some kind of born-again crusader out to protect everybody's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.
By the time I turned sixteen last July, I'd had it with Dad's sermons and weirdness about hate, racism, equal rights, and all that. Funny thing was, the more he preached about hate, the madder it made me. Never told him to his face, of course. It wouldn't have been worth it, but I let him know in a thousand ways that I'd just as soon live in the Arizona desert with Gila monsters and tarantulas than spend any time with him.

But a few months ago, the summer of 1955, lots of stuff happened, stuff I never would have imagined. It was strange, but you know how sometimes when you get what you think you always wanted, it turns out to be nothing like you expected?

That happened to me when I was back in Greenwood, Mississippi, last summer. Some awful things happened to a Negro kid named Emmett Till, and I was right in the middle of it, smack in the heart of crazy, senseless hatred. And you know what? When it was all over, I started seeing Dad—and lots of people—a whole lot different than ever before.

I first started butting heads with Dad in 1948—I was only nine—because he dragged us away from Mississippi. Dad and his dad, Grampa Hillburn, got along about as well as Hitler and Roosevelt. Spend any time with the two of them in the same room, and you'd figure that World War II hadn't ended yet. The problem was that while Dad was away fighting Japanese in the Pacific and Mom was working for the war effort, Gramma and Grampa Hillburn raised me. They spoiled me pretty good, I guess, but as a little kid, I liked the spoiling, and I loved my grandparents. And their big old house. And Greenwood, Mississippi.

Dad came home from the war, took one look at how tight I was with Grampa, another look at the South he hated, and used the GI Bill to go up to Ole Miss to get a master's degree in English so he could land a college teaching job out west, far away from Grampa, from Mississippi, from racism and prejudice, from hate. Mom and Dad lived in a shoe box—size apartment up there, so while Dad studied and Mom worked at Oxford Elementary School, they let me stay with Gramma and Grampa for the two years it took Dad to finish school.

Looking back on it now, I can see how lots of things that happened when I used to live in Greenwood stacked up to set the stage for all the horrible stuff that took place last summer.

I still remember being a little kid in Greenwood. I spent nearly all my time with Grampa, and we had a regular routine: After breakfast we'd walk down to the Leflore County Courthouse so Grampa could "do a little business." That usually meant he'd stroll into someone's office, pull up a chair, and visit. Usually, before he'd even sit down, he'd fish in his pocket for a nickel, hand it to me, and say, "Hiram, Mr. Hardin and I have some serious business to tend to for the next little while. Why don't you run down to the lobby and see what Mr. Paul's got for sale today."

Funny how you remember some days more than others, but I still remember one summer morning there. With the nickel in my fist, I left Mr. Hardin's office and headed
straight for the glass cases and counters in the center hallway of the courthouse.

"Hey, Mr. Paul, it's me, Hiram Hillburn."

"Little Hiram, how's the world treating you this morning?" Mr. Paul turned to face me, smiling with his hands flat on the glass countertops. He looked about my dad's age, and I knew he'd been in the war too. His Army truck hit a land mine in France and he ended up blind. Dark glasses hid his eyes.

"Grampa gave me a nickel."

"That right? Nobody can say old Earl Hillburn doesn't know how to occupy his grandchild. What'll it be today, Hiram?"

I walked up to the glass display cases and looked over the rows of gum and candy bars laid out on the shelves. Behind the counter, Mr. Paul kept an ice chest full of soda, and on the right side of the display case he kept a cooler filled with ice cream bars. It was a hard decision.

"I've got some cold Co'-Cola back here," he said, "but I know you like those Eskimo Pies too."

This particular morning was cooler than most summer mornings had been, so I had my eye on something else.

"Could I please have a Hershey's bar, Mr. Paul?"

Keeping his head upright, he reached carefully into the display case and felt around until his hand found the dark brown Hershey's bars. He set one on the counter. "That'll be five cents."

I snapped my nickel flat on the glass top. Mr. Paul felt for it, picked it up, and dropped it into the cigar box he kept on a shelf behind him. "Pleasure doing business with you, Hiram. What big things do you and your grampa have planned for today?"

"Dunno, sir." I peeled the wrapper off my chocolate bar and broke off a section. "He'll probably be talking in there with Mr. Hardin for a while longer. Then we'll go out to the fields and work some before lunch."

Mr. Paul grinned. "Work? You mean your grampa will drive out there and watch those boys sweating in his fields while he sits in his truck drinking lemonade and reading the paper. I'd surely like to get some of that kind of work for myself." A man approached the counter, and, hearing him, Mr. Paul said, "Well, I've got to get back to business. You have yourself a good day, Hiram, and stay out of the way of that busy grampa of yours."

I meandered down the marble hallway and out the main courthouse doors. A huge magnolia tree shaded the front of the building, and I walked under the tree and pulled myself up into its lowest branches, resting comfortably in a shady nook to enjoy my candy bar and wait for Grampa.

When Grampa came out of the courthouse, we walked back home, got into his pickup, and drove north of Greenwood for a few miles on Old Money Road, past flat wide fields furrowed with dark green cotton plants. Once we got to his fields, Grampa parked the truck and turned me loose while he talked with the workers and looked over the crops. I wandered up and down the cotton rows looking for ar-
rowheads or lost tools or anything I could find in the furrows. Grampa always rewarded me with a nickel when I found something. I liked exploring the rows of plants—they offered some shade from the Mississippi sun, and if the wind blew even a little, the plants swayed and stirred up air that seemed almost cool.

When Grampa was done in one part of the field, he'd whistle for me, and we'd drive to the next section. The only person he ever talked to was the field boss, Mr. Irwin, a red-faced man who wore dark green coveralls. Grampa talked to him and then Mr. Irwin told the field hands whatever it was Grampa wanted them to do. They were all colored men; I never saw a white man working Grampa's fields. I hadn't found anything worth a nickel to Grampa's fields. I followed some of the Negro workers into the rows while they chopped cotton. One man noticed me following behind, and turned to talk to me.

"You Mr. Hillburn's gran'child, ain't you?"

I didn't answer. I was seven years old, and he looked as old as Grampa, and taller. I'd hardly ever talked to a Negro man before, and I was scared.

He smiled and patted me on the head. "S'okay, Little Mr. Hillburn; I was wonderin' why you're followin' me." His deep, gentle voice relaxed me.

"Just watching," I said cautiously. "You choppin' those weeds pretty fast."

"Got to, little man. This whole field needs chopping today, and if we don't finish it, it's gonna be added to tomorrow's work, and if that happens, we ain't never gonna go home tomorrow, and, son, I can't stand the thought of working in this field both day and night."

"I can help. Sometimes I help Gramma in the garden. She says I'm a good worker."

"Bet you are, I bet you are." The man smiled and turned back to his hoeing.

I stepped closer and could see the sweat damp on the back of his shirt. His black forearms, knotted with muscle, gripped the hoe, bringing it up and down rhythmically, knocking out weeds without hurting the cotton plants. I had to almost jog to keep up with him as he swept down the furrows. When we got to the end of the row, Grampa saw us. The Negro worker paused a moment to stand up and stretch his back, and as he did so, I grabbed his hoe and headed back into the cotton.

"Hiram! Hiram Hillburn, you put that down right now!" Grampa shouted. I dropped the hoe and Grampa turned on the worker. "You, boy!" he snapped. "Don't you know any better than to let my grandchild play with that tool? I ain't paying you to be a slacker, so you got no reason to be resting when you should be chopping."

The worker lowered his head.

"Mr. Irwin know you take rests at the end of the row?"

"No, sir," the man replied without looking up.

"I catch you wasting my money again, you'll be working without a lunch break or not working at all. You understand me, boy?"

"Yessir," the man said as he picked up the hoe and turned back to his work.
Grampa often got mad like that: lightning quick, fast and without warning. His voice changed completely, mean: mad and mean at the same time. It scared me. “Hiram, boy, you come here right now.”

I trotted to his side but stayed clear of his arm that tried to rest on my shoulders.

“Son, let me tell you something.” He patted me on the head. “God made Negroes to work the land. They don’t feel the heat like we do; they can work all day long in the most hellish weather. They’re strong people, good with their hands.”

“I’m good with my hands too, Grampa. Gramma lets me help in the garden.”

“Well, sure, you’re good with your hands, Hiram, but there’s lots more that you can do. These folks, they’re doing what the good Lord intended them to do; that don’t mean you can’t do it too, but you got more in you, boy. You’re meant to be the boss, not the worker.”

I looked out over the field at the black men, the backs of their shirts stained with sweat, bent over their hoes chopping weeds among the cotton plants. They worked methodically, quickly, almost like machines. I could do that, I thought, but I wouldn’t want to do it all day.

I followed Grampa to the truck and climbed into the cab. He handed me a thermos cup of Gramma’s cold lemonade. Hot from the time I’d spent in the sun, I gulped it down, no longer thinking about the black men and their backbreaking work out in Grampa’s fields.

Coffee. When I was at Gramma and Grampa’s house, I woke up every morning to the smell of coffee. The nutty aroma floated up the back stairs and into my room through the transom window above my door. Once I was awake, I tried to separate the other aromas of my grandparents’ house: Some mornings the meaty, spicy scent of sausage came up the stairs; other days the sweet fragrance of fresh muffins. Behind those morning smells lingered the mellow scent of mildew, wood, and Ivory soap. To this day, if you dropped me blindfolded at my grandparents’ home, I’d know I was there as soon as you opened the door.

Gramma and Grampa lived in a big white two-story house on Market Street, just a block from the Yazoo River and four blocks from the courthouse. Their house looks like a smaller version of the White House in Washington,