Grampa didn't seem too worried about the sheriff's phone call. "George Smith is all right," he said. "He's just doing his job. My guess is that when he finally catches up with R. C. Rydell, he's going to want you around to back up your story. You'll be fine, Hiram, I promise. And look on the bright side: We'll get to have a little more time together."

We talked for a few minutes, then Grampa went to the kitchen to use the phone. He dialed the operator and asked her to connect him with my parents' phone number. While I stood behind him waiting for the call to be put through, I wondered how Mom and Dad would take it. Would Dad even believe Grampa, or would he think it was some kind of trick to keep me in Greenwood longer? I still felt cold and nervous. The thought of being the guy who got R. C. Rydell in big trouble with the police made me want to get out of Greenwood while I was still breathing.

"Hello, Dee?" Grampa said into the phone. "This is Earl. . . . Yes, calling long distance. . . . No, Hiram is fine, but there is some complication just now. Is Harlan home? . . . I see. Well, there's been some mischief down here, none of it Hiram's doing, of course, but the sheriff is in the middle of tracking down some of the troublemakers, and he might need Hiram here to confirm a detail or two. . . . No, no, it's nothing serious at all, just a hotheaded kid acting stupid. Of course, Hiram is welcome to stay here, you know that. I'll take good care of him until this whole thing is over, then I'll make sure he gets on the next train for Arizona. . . . Yes. . . . Yes, dear, I will."

Grampa handed me the phone. "She wants to talk to you."

"Hiram?" Mom sounded worried. "You're not in trouble, are you?"

"It's like Grampa said. The sheriff just wants me to stick around in case I have to answer questions or something. I'll be all right."

"Your father's not going to be pleased when he hears about this. You know how he feels about Greenwood."

"Well, tell him that being here has helped me appreciate what he's been saying all along. I still love it here and love being with Grampa, but I think maybe I understand Dad a little better now. At least I hope I do."

"Do you need me or Dad to come out there? One of us could be in Greenwood in a few days."

"I'll be fine with Grampa, and I'll come home as soon as I can. Everything'll be okay." I tried to say that like I believed it.
“Just you remember who you are, Hiram Hillburn, and be sure you do what is right no matter what. And help your grampa as much as you can. You’re not there on vacation anymore.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“I love you, son.”

“Love you too,” I said before I hung up.

Later that night Grampa talked to Sheriff Smith on the phone just to make sure he understood everything that was going on. He told me about the call before we went to bed.

“George thinks this might go to trial, and if it does, and if it turns out R.C. was involved with those peckerwoods, he’ll need you to testify. He’s got other evidence, of course, but your story will help place R.C. in the picture. I told him I didn’t think involving you in this whole mess was necessary, but he insisted on keeping you around. I tell you one thing, Hiram, if R.C. Rydell is involved in this, he’s in deep trouble. This isn’t bullying. They’re after him for kidnapping. George thinks R.C. might be holding that Negro boy somewhere right now. There’s no telling what he might have done.”

That’s exactly what I was afraid of.

Ruthanne showed up to work the next morning looking exhausted. She’d been out to Emmett’s uncle’s home trying to offer what help she could. “Uncle Mose is sick with worry,” she said. “Those white men came into their home in the middle of the night with a flashlight and a gun and demanded to see Bobo. Uncle Mose begged them to leave him there; he promised he’d give Bobo a good licking himself, but they wouldn’t listen.” Her eyes glistened with tears. “They made the boy get dressed and dragged him out to their car, and nobody’s seen or heard from him since.” Ruthanne held back a sob, but her voice quivered when she said, “That poor boy and his mama. This is plain awful.”

The next evening’s paper had little to say about the kidnapping. “Negro Youth Still Missing,” read the front-page headline. The short article summarized the details in the case, including that the police were still looking for a third man and that they were conducting intense searches for Emmett up around Money.

I wondered if they’d find R.C.

I wondered if they’d find Emmett.

Wednesday evening’s paper answered one of my questions: They found Emmett.

MISSING CHICAGO NEGRO YOUTH FOUND IN TALLAHATCHIE RIVER

August 31, 1955

The body of a 14-year-old kidnapped Chicago Negro boy was found floating in the Tallahatchie River this morning. Discovery of the body was made by a young fisherman named Mims, who was inspecting his trot line. The body was in shallow water near the bank, it was reported, and was found at Pecan Point near Phillipp.
Young Mims notified Sheriff H.C. Strider at Charleston in Tallahatchie County of his find. He immediately called the sheriff's office in Greenwood and reported the matter.

Deputy Sheriff John Edd Cotran and Deputy Sheriff Ed Weber went to the scene and carried Mose Wright, uncle of the youth, along in order to make identification of the body. It was brought back to Greenwood and turned over to the Century Burial Association, local Negro undertakers.

Officers said that the body had been weighed down with a cotton gin pulley tied with barbed wire. There was also a bullet hole in his head.

Three white men and a woman took the boy from his uncle's home early Sunday after the boy allegedly made "ugly remarks" to a white woman.

Two white men, Roy Bryant and his half brother J. W. Milam, have been charged with kidnapping. The sheriff's office said that an additional charge of murder will be made since the turn of events.

Sheriff George W. Smith said several days ago after the happening that he was afraid of foul play.

Young Till allegedly made the ugly remarks to Mrs. Bryant, wife of the storekeeper who faces a kidnapping charge. The youth was visiting his uncle, Mose Wright, a tenant farmer.

Sheriff Smith said Bryant admitted taking the boy from his uncle's home but said the youth was released when Mrs. Bryant said he was not the boy who made the remarks to her.

Sheriff Smith said the investigation showed:

Young Till and several other Negro youths went to the Bryant store in the Money community and Till went in and allegedly made the remarks.

Early Sunday, a car carrying three men and a woman drove up to Wright's house. One of the men asked Wright if the boy from Chicago was there. Two men brought the boy out of the house.

Wright asked where they were taking his nephew. One of the men replied, "Nowhere if he's not the right one."

When I put the newspaper down, my hands were shaky and cold. Emmett was dead, murdered. The article said nothing about R. C. Rydell, but I figured the sheriff must still be looking for him. Was R.C. involved in the murder? I knew he was, and I hoped the police would find him—soon.

And what about Naomi? If R.C. skipped town or ended up in jail, she'd be left alone with her dad. I didn't even want to think how much more miserable her life might become in that shack down along the Yazoo.

Grampa interrupted my thoughts when he whistled softly after reading the article. "I can't believe they killed that boy." He rubbed his hand across his face and muttered to himself, "There's going to be hell to pay now." He still looked pale as he folded the paper on his lap, creased it carefully in half, and set it on the table next to his chair. "Hiram, those boys went too far, way too far. For his sake, I sure hope your friend wasn't involved in this mess. I never
did think much of R. C. Rydell, but I never took him for a murderer."

"R.C.'s not my friend, Grampa," I reminded him without looking at him. "I told you how he acted."

"Of course he's not your friend. A Hillburn usually has better sense than getting mixed up with people like these." Grampa rapped his knuckles on the folded newspaper. "People all over the United States are hearing about what's happened down here and wondering what kind of uncivilized brutes live in Mississippi. Those peckerwoods who did this are a shame to all of us in the Delta. No self-respecting Southern gentleman would lower himself to go this far."

Grampa's reaction bothered me. He seemed more concerned about the negative press than about what had happened to Emmett Till.

He kept on complaining. "The radio said that colored boy's mama up in Chicago is blaming everyone in Mississippi for what's happened, said she said, 'The entire state of Mississippi is going to pay for this.' The woman's grief is understandable, Hiram, but she's got no cause to blame all of us for what a couple redneck peckerwoods did in the middle of the night."

"Before we know it, the NAACP and all those bleeding-heart Northerners are going to use this as another excuse for integration. They're going to come down here and cry about how we treat our Negroes and how we've got to mix the races in our schools. That's what really makes me mad, son: Those ignorant boys have stirred up a hornet's nest of trouble."

"But what about Emmett?" I asked. "They killed him. Doesn't that make you mad?"

"Of course those boys went too far. Whatever that colored boy deserved, he didn't deserve getting shot and tossed into the Tallahatchie, that's for sure."

I wanted to yell at Grampa. A boy was murdered just for acting cocky! I wanted to say something, something mean and hard that would knock some sense into him, but I knew nothing I could say would change him, and I had a glimpse into why Dad and Grampa never got along.

"Mr. Hiram," called Ruthanne from the front door, "you got a visitor." I left Grampa sulking in his chair and went to the front porch where Ruthanne stood talking to Naomi. Naomi had her head down, as she always did when she spoke to adults. "Miz Ruthanne," she said, "I just want you to know how awful sorry I am for what's happened to your cousin's nephew. It's an evil thing, a terrible hateful thing." A tear rolled down her cheek and Ruthanne hugged her.

"Now thank you, honey," said Ruthanne. "Lord knows it surely does help to share grief with somebody else." She sighed and let go of Naomi. "Child, I do appreciate your sympathy, but you didn't come here just to talk to me. I'm heading on home anyway, so you and Mr. Hiram can set out here and talk if you like."

Naomi nodded and sat in the porch swing while Ruthanne stood there looking washed out and exhausted. I remembered how I had felt when Gramma died and wondered how Ruthanne was feeling. Emmett's death had been a surprise, just like Gramma's had been, but his was a
brutal murder, not a quiet slipping away in the middle of the night.

"Ruthanne," I said, "I feel terrible about Emmett. I don't know what I can do or say. I wish I could have . . . I'll remember him and his family in my prayers."

"Thank you, Hiram. We'll all be praying too, praying for the good Lord's mercy. Good night, you two," she said and went down the front steps.

When she had gone, I sat next to Naomi.

"I can't believe it, Hiram," she whispered. "They killed that boy. When I think about how he must have felt, what he must've been thinking those last hours . . . how afraid he woulda been." She shivered. "Why do men do things like that? Why do they have to hurt people?"

I had no answer, so we sat without talking as our swing rocked gently in the late August breeze. Even though the horrible things that had been done to Emmett filled my head, it was comforting to be with Naomi. Like Ruthanne said, it helps to have someone to share grief with.

After a few minutes, Naomi leaned her head on my shoulder and said, "I feel awful. And I'm just so scared."

For the next two days Greenwood hummed with talk about Emmett Till. Some wondered who the third man might be. Others hoped Bryant and Milam got the full punishment of the law. A few thought Bryant and Milam had done nothing wrong. "Nigger boy shoul'da knowed better," I overheard someone say at the River Café. "I'm mighty glad we still got men in the Delta who won't put up with uppity niggers from the North. Maybe that message'll get around."

That night, Grampa pointed to a front page article he had just read in the Commonwealth. "They got that right," he said. "Got it dead right. Listen to this, Hiram."

Grampa read the article aloud, sounding as dramatic as a radio announcer:

A Just Appraisal
(An Editorial)

September 2, 1955

The State of Mississippi, and Leflore and Tallahatchie counties in particular, have been brought into the focus of national attention within the past few days as a result of the brutal murder of Emmett Louis Till, a 14-year-old Chicago Negro boy. This deplorable incident has made our section the target of unjustifiable criticism, thoughtless accusations, and avenging threats.

We can understand the heartbreak of the mother of the dead boy and we offer our sympathy and express our deep regret that this terrible thing has happened to her, but her determination to see that "Mississippi is going to pay for this," charging the entire state with the guilt of those who took the law into their own hands, is evidence of the poison selfish men have planted in the minds of people outside the South. If the mother had
expressed the determination to see that the guilty parties “must pay for this crime,” she would have expressed the sincere desires of the people of Mississippi.

The NAACP has only revealed again its blindness and injustice in charging that “Mississippi has decided to maintain white supremacy by murdering children,” and that “the killers of the boy felt free to lynch him because there is in the entire state no restraining influence, not in the state capital, among the daily newspapers, the clergy, nor any segment of the so-called better citizens.” From its headquarters in New York it has charged every citizen of the state with being an accomplice in the crime. On the basis of one murder it has judged the character, honor, and integrity of the entire population. One wonders why it did not judge the people of our state by the incident of a few months ago when a ten-year-old white girl in the same community risked her life in the same river, only a few miles from where the body of the fourteen-year-old boy was found, to save the life of a Negro woman who was drowning.

The citizens of this area are determined that the guilty parties shall be punished to the full extent of the law and that justice shall be administered irrespective of the color of the victim or the criminals. The greatest enemies of this justice are the outside groups and individuals who chill the flames of indignation aroused by such crimes by wholesale and indiscriminate accusations against the law-abiding and justice-loving people of our state. If the NAACP and other groups want justice, then let them cease throwing stones at the prosecution, judge, and jury. If they’re as concerned about this matter as they claim, then let them judge the evidence in the case and cease using the case as manufactured evidence to wage war against segregation.

The people of Mississippi are no more responsible for this tragic murder and no more condone it than the people of New York, or any other state, are responsible for and condone murders committed there, but every decent and respectable citizen of this state will assume his or her responsibility for seeing that justice is administered through the courts of law and that guilty parties shall pay for their crime.

He set the paper down. “See here? We can’t be blamed for the sorry actions of a couple local hotheads who haven’t got an ounce of common sense between them. Those boys being from Mississippi shouldn’t condemn the whole lot of us. Just because we believe in segregation, in the inequality of the races, or just because we might even know a couple dumb peckerwoods from the next county doesn’t make us evil. Those boys did the killing, not me, you, or the entire state of Mississippi.”

He shifted in his chair, looking like he’d made up his mind about something. “No blame here, no sir, and I don’t care what that boy’s mama or the NAACP say about it.”
“But what about R.C., Grampa? The paper’s been saying that there was a third man involved in it.”

“The law’ll take care of him. Sooner or later R.C. Rydell’s going to end up in a bad way, Hiram. If he doesn’t get hung for this, it’ll be something else down the road. The boy’s got bad blood and that’s all there is to it. And, Hiram, I’ve been thinking about this, and it seems to me there’s no need for you getting mixed up in this mess. R.C. has dug his own grave. My guess is that once the sheriff catches up with him, things’ll be plain as day and you won’t need to say anything about anybody. You’ll be on your way back to Arizona before you know it.”

I hoped Grampa was right, but I knew that if I did have to say anything to Sheriff Smith about R.C., I’d be lucky to get out of Greenwood alive.

CHAPTER 12

Most of the next day I fretted about what to do. Had R.C. heard that I’d talked to the sheriff? Was he looking for me? If he was, would he come at night, catch me in the backyard when I wasn’t expecting him? Would he pull me into an alley when I was downtown? Would he be hiding out near one of my fishing holes, waiting to ambush me? Or would he be crazy and cocky enough just to walk up to the front door and knock?

When we were kids, I figured R.C. was plain mean, but after what happened to Emmett, I knew R.C. was worse than mean. For the first time in my life, I worried about dying, not just the death part, but the messy and painful things that would lead up to the dying, the kinds of things that would make a guy welcome death. I wanted to forget the sheriff’s orders, pack up my things, and jump on the next train out of Greenwood.