to me yet, so I probably wasn't in either side's game plan. And the sooner I left Greenwood, the sooner I'd be back in school, the less homework I'd have to make up. And I could start smoothing things out with Dad.

If I stuck around for the trial, I'd be wasting my time. I'd be in the way. Nothing would get accomplished. Nothing would get changed.

The positives outweighed the negatives by a ton. Now all I had to do was go home and call Mom and Dad to tell them I was coming home as soon as I could. Everybody would be glad: me, Grampa, Naomi, R.C. and his buddies, Mom, and probably even Dad. So it was settled: I'd run away from the trial.

But it wasn't settled. That knot in my stomach didn't go away; it got worse, almost making me want to puke over the bridge rail. All the positives in the world couldn't fool me. I knew what was right, and I knew if I was going to do what was right, I had to show up at the trial and if asked, tell everything I knew. A boy—a boy I knew—had been kidn-napped and murdered. And I knew who did it, at least I knew one of the people who had a part in it. Nothing would bring Emmett back to life, but the trial of his killers might be the start of things, might be a small step to making life for Negroes in the South—heck, in the whole United States—a little better. If nothing else, it might make me feel a little better.

I was Hiram Hillburn, and I knew what I was going to do: I was going to do what was right.

CHAPEr 14

The Tallahatchie County Courthouse sits smack in the middle of the town square of Sumner, a little town north of Greenwood, and you can tell that when it was built, people figured it had to last till doomsday. The building is three stories of solid brick with long windows on the first and second floors that have solid steel shutters that could be closed in case of atomic bomb blasts, riots, or invasion. Shops and a handful of cafés surround the courthouse. The rest of Sumner isn't much more than a few streets lined with the small houses of townspeople and retired farmers.

Early Monday morning, Grampa and I drove up to Sumner. We were both bleary-eyed and quiet because we'd been up late Sunday night arguing about whether or not I should tell everything if I got called on to testify. Around midnight when Grampa finally realized I wasn't going to
change my mind, he swore softly and said, “You’re getting to be more like your daddy every day.”

“And like you,” I said. “I’m like Dad and like you. Stubbornness runs deep in Hillburns.”

Grampa shook his head without smiling. “Well, then, Hiram Hillburn, we better be getting ourselves to bed. You may be going to that trial, but you’re not going alone, and if we don’t leave early, we’ll end up parking in Webb and hiking the last two miles to Sumner.

“You sure you want to do this, son?” he asked before I went upstairs.

“As far as I’m concerned, I’ve got no choice,” I said.

The morning air felt hot and heavy, more like August than September, and low, thick clouds dotted the Delta sky. Outside of Greenwood, the sun cast patches of light and shadows across the cotton fields revealing a thin gray mist, unstirred by morning breezes, that clung to the tops of the cotton plants.

For most of the way up Highway 49 into Tallahatchie County, Grampa sat like a man going to his own funeral. I couldn’t tell if he was tired or mad; I didn’t feel like talking to him, so I just concentrated on keeping the old pickup headed north.

The highway started filling up with traffic before we even got to Webb, and by the time we made it to the little cotton gin town outside of Sumner, we were backed up behind a long line of cars headed for the trial. “Knew there’d be a herd of people coming to this,” Grampa muttered.

As we got closer to Sumner, Grampa got more and more uncomfortable. He kept shifting in his seat, rolling his window up, then down again, turning around to look at the cars behind us. At one point he blew air out of his mouth and said, “You know, Hiram, neither one of us got any business being here. We could be setting in the comfort of our home enjoying Ruthanne’s fine breakfast. Instead, we’re up here in this, this . . . mob.”

When we finally reached the edge of town, the streets around the courthouse were so crowded that the local sheriff had blocked off the town square and was directing cars to the side streets beyond the square. Grampa, swearing and slapping his hand on the dashboard every time traffic got too tight, directed me to a back street a couple blocks from the square. We parked across a bayou east of the courthouse and walked over the bayou bridge and into the crowd waiting for the trial to begin.

From the sounds of their voices, I could tell most of them were local people, but on one corner of the square an NBC-TV camera had been set up; scattered through the crowd, reporters and photographers were talking to people and snapping flash photographs. Everyone near us was white, but closer to the front of the courthouse a large group of Negroes gathered in the street kitty-corner from the entrance, and even though the streets around the town square were packed with people standing shoulder to shoulder, a clear space separated the Negroes from everyone else.

Around eight o’clock a heavy policeman came out of the main doors and stood on the steps, looking over the crowd.
When he spotted the Negroes, he lifted a bullhorn to his mouth and started talking in their direction.

“Listen here. Listen here! Let me have y'all's attention.” The crowd quieted down. “I'm H.C. Strider, sheriff of Tallahatchie County, and I'm under the direction of Judge Curtis L. Swango to make sure things stay orderly. Ya'll been waiting a while, and you're gonna be waiting a little more yet. We can't sit but about three hundred people in the courtroom, so the judge wants family and subpoenaed witnesses to enter first. Then the press—if you've got proper credentials. After that, it's first come, first serve. Coloreds come last, of course. We got three benches for them set up in back." He looked at the group of Negroes and his eyes narrowed. “Don't want no trouble here, won't tolerate none.” Then to the main crowd he said, “All right, folks, we'll be opening the doors shortly,” and stepped back inside, closing the doors behind him.

The crowd swelled forward moments later when two deputies opened the doors. “Ya'll hold on now,” shouted one. “Family and subpoenaed witnesses first. Step on back and let 'em get up here.” People grumbled but let us through. Two women with some young children went in first, then some white men, each holding up his subpoena for the deputy. One of the deputies checked my subpoena and let me and Grampa in. Five or six Negroes came in after us, heads down, trying to look invisible.

When we were all inside, a deputy led us upstairs to the courtroom and searched everyone before we could go in. The deputy told me and Grampa to sit up front on the right side of the room; it'd be a good place to see everything and they'd know where to find me if they wanted me to testify.

Trial hadn't even started, but the room felt like an oven, and as people came in behind us, they started fanning themselves right away. By 9:00 A.M., the courtroom was packed. All the regular seats were taken, so deputies brought in more chairs to line the aisles and the walls. Three wooden benches were pushed up near the back, and when the room looked packed enough to explode, a deputy led a group of Negroes in and directed them to sit there. The benches filled up fast, and those who didn't get a seat had to stand outside in the hallway.

When it looked like everyone who was going to get a seat had one, there was a commotion outside the courtroom door. Somebody said, “I'm Charles C. Diggs, elected congressman from the state of Michigan, and I insist on being given a seat in the courtroom.” He argued with somebody for a moment, and then a deputy stuck his head in the doorway and called to an officer inside the courtroom, “There's a nigger here who says he's a congressman.”

“A nigger congressman?”

“That's what this nigger said.”

The deputy laughed. “Hell, that ain't even legal.”

A Negro man in a dark suit appeared in the doorway and flashed something from his wallet to one of the deputies, who looked at it a moment, shook his head, and pointed to the benches inside the door. “Set over there with the other niggers, and don't give us no more trouble.”
I'd expected the courtroom to be quiet and serious, like a church, but the crowd buzzed like they were waiting for a carnival to start. A few people smoked cigarettes, and some, only the white people, sipped ice water the deputies had brought in. The Negroes talked quietly among themselves. Grampa guessed about 300 people were sitting there waiting for the trial to begin; I counted only thirty-five Negroes, and most of them looked like they'd rather be anywhere but sitting in a hostile courtroom.

That first day of the trial wasn't a trial at all. We just sat and watched the district attorney, Gerald Chatham, and his assistant argue with the defense lawyers over who'd be on the jury. The main lawyer for Bryant and Milam was J. J. Breland, an attorney from Sumner who Grampa knew from some previous dealings. "Good man," Grampa said. "Knows the law inside and out, and he's a Southerner born and bred." He had a whole army of assistants, Mr. Carlton, Mr. Kellum, and a few more that Grampa didn't know.

Mr. Chatham started the questioning by announcing to everyone, "This case has received wide publicity. The state is going to take every precaution to see that we have a fair and impartial jury." Most everybody nodded, but I heard some people whisper and chuckle, and when they did, Judge Swango was on them like a rattlesnake. He banged his gavel on his desk and said, plenty loud, "We'll have none of that here—not today, not until this trial's over. You people who can't be respectful of the law might just as well leave now, because if I hear any more nonsense, I'll have the bailiff throw you out."

The room got quiet right away, and Mr. Chatham waited before talking. He looked at the judge and then at the men waiting to be interviewed and said, "I'm not going to give the prospective jurors a chance to disqualify themselves because they don't believe in a death sentence," and as soon as he said it, almost everyone in the room started talking while Judge Swango banged his gavel again. It took a minute or two, but as soon as it was quiet again, Mr. Chatham cleared his voice and said, "The state will not seek the death penalty in this case." Grampa didn't look surprised at all, but I couldn't believe it. No death penalty for kidnapping and murder? What kind of trial was this going to be?

Then the interviews began. As a prospective juror stood to be questioned, Mr. Chatham asked the same things over and over: "Would you be prejudiced because of race? Did you contribute to the fund for the defense, or would you contribute if you were asked to?"

Mr. Breland had his own set of questions for each man. "There's been a whole lot of publicity about the alleged events regarding this Emmett Till boy. Will you let that in any way influence you?" If the man said no, Mr. Breland then asked, "If you decide to convict, will you be sure beyond a reasonable doubt that the dead body found in the river was the body of Emmett Louis Till?"

The whole time the questioning was going on, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam sat at a wooden table in the front of the courtroom. Milam, a big man who was mostly bald, looked about ten years older than Bryant. They each had one of their little sons on their laps, and when one of the
boys got fussy, they'd hand him over their shoulder to their wives, who sat in the row of chairs just behind them. Watching them sit there playing with their sons, reading the paper, smoking, or drinking a Coke, I never would have guessed they were on trial for murder. Once in a while they'd talk to each other or point out something in the newspaper they had spread on the table in front of them, but neither one ever said anything to their lawyers or paid any attention to what was going on.

After a couple hours of watching both sides interview white men for the jury, Grampa leaned over and nudged me. "J.J. really knows how to work the law, doesn't he? That old Chatham doesn't have a chance, not one chance in hell."

"You think he's ever going to interview any women?"

"Women can't be on juries in Mississippi," Grampa said.

"What about Negroes?"

"You've got to be a registered voter to be called into a jury pool, and Negroes don't like to vote in the Delta, so none of them ever bother to register."

"Why don't they want to vote?"

Grampa answered without looking at me. "That's just the way things are down here."

During the noon recess Grampa bought me lunch at a crowded café across the street from the courthouse. Neither one of us had eaten breakfast, so we inhaled the chicken salad sandwiches and potato chips Grampa ordered. After we each had a piece of pie, Grampa leaned back and sighed. "I can't help but feel like we're wasting our time up here, Hiram. Chatham's not cooperating at all. If he'd just go along with J.J. Breland, they'd have had that jury picked and seated before lunch." He looked at me carefully. "You still sure you want to stick around for all this?"

I wondered that myself. At the rate the morning had gone, this trial might last for weeks, and I wasn't sure how long I wanted to sit there sweating about being called up to testify. But when I thought about what had happened to Emmett Till, that old Hillburn stubbornness kicked in. "I'm staying until the trial's over, but you don't have to come back, Grampa. There's no good reason for you to be here."

He pulled out his wallet to pay for lunch. "I got my reasons," he said. And under his breath he muttered, "Too many damn reasons for my own good."

Grampa's reaction surprised me. I had thought that all his fuss about me being at the trial was because he was worried about me, but now I wasn't sure why he didn't want me mixed up in the trial.

On the way out of the café, Grampa stuffed a few dollar bills into a fruit jar labeled "Bryant and Milam Defense Fund: Contributions Welcome" on a table by the door.

The jar overflowed with money.

When settled into our courtroom seats Tuesday morning, we figured to see the jury selection get finished and the trial begin. We hadn't been sitting very long when there was some talking and moving out in the hallway. A moment later a well-dressed Negro woman about Mom's age came
in, and the Negro congressman and another man led her to the benches in the back. When the Negroes sitting there saw her, they all stood up, and a few women hugged her and some others started crying.

"The nigger boy's mama," someone said. "Come down from Chicago." It didn't take long for the word to spread around the courtroom, and pretty soon white people were turning around in their seats staring at her, mean, hateful stares.

A minute later Sheriff Strider pushed through the crowd, walked back to the Negro benches and handed her an envelope. "You've been served," he said without looking at her. "Don't leave the area without notifying the court."

She only nodded and sat down.

Tuesday morning dragged like Monday had, but finally, after the lawyers had interviewed more than 100 white men, Judge Swango ordered the twelve jurors and one alternate to sit in a group of chairs on his right and gave them instructions, stuff we'd all heard several times from the lawyers. When he finished, he announced that the trial would be postponed until Wednesday morning because the prosecution and the defense wanted to interview surprise witnesses the prosecution had just subpoenaed. Then he rapped his gavel on his desk and left the courtroom.

A few people applauded, and everybody except me started talking all excited about what had happened so far and what would be next.

I didn't want to think about it, but I knew everything would start tomorrow.

After supper that night I wanted to go out and see if Naomi might be waiting by the bridge, but Grampa wouldn't let me. "There's trouble brewing, son. This trial's got people riled up, and no telling what some hothead might do, especially if he knows you're on the potential witness list."

I knew he was talking about R.C., but I didn't say anything.

"Best thing for you to do is stay inside, listen to the radio or read a while, and then get to bed. Tomorrow'll be a long day, and even though the paper says both sides want a fast trial, we might be wrapped up in this a lot longer than either of us wants to be."

"You think I'll have to testify?"

Grampa shrugged. "You're on their list. Are you still willing?"

"I never wanted to, but I will if I have to."

"You're letting a bunch of knucklehead lawyers decide what's going to happen to you, Hiram." Grampa's voice shook, and his face turned red. "A man's got to take charge of his own life. He's got to do what he thinks is right."

I didn't remind him, but that's exactly what I was doing.

Wednesday morning the courtroom was noisier, hotter, and more crowded than ever. The judge reminded us all to behave ourselves and chewed out a couple of photographers for taking pictures in the courtroom; then the trial began.

Mr. Chatham went first. He faced the jury and said, "The
state has found six new witnesses who will place the defendants”—he pointed at Bryant and Milam—“with the Negro boy several hours after he was taken from Mose Wright’s shack. These witnesses will present absolutely newly discovered evidence that will convince you, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam kidnapped and murdered the child named Emmett Till.”

The first witness was Emmett’s uncle, Mose Wright, a poor sharecropper and part-time minister from Money. The courtroom was so packed with spectators that the small old Negro man had to push his way through the crowd to get to the witness chair. The chair was almost too big for him, and he sat at the edge of it, uncomfortable. After he sat down, Bryant and Milam glared at him for a moment, and then they sat back and ignored him.

Mr. Chatham approached the witness chair like he thought a fast move might scare Mose Wright out of there. “Uncle Mose,” he said, “what was your relationship with the deceased child?”

“Bobo Till was my nephew.” His voice was clear and strong; not a hint of fear in it. “He come down from Chicago to visit family for a spell.”

“Tell us what happened early on the morning of Sunday, August twenty-eighth.”

Mose Wright straightened up, looked at Bryant and Milam, and then at Mr. Chatham. “‘Bout two o’clock somebody come pounding at the door. They said, ‘Preacher, Preacher.’ One of ‘em said, ‘This is Mr. Bryant.’ I got up and opened the door. Mr. Milam was standing at the door with a pistol in his right hand and a flashlight in d’other.”

“Uncle Mose,” said Mr. Chatham, “do you see Mr. Milam in the courtroom?”

Nobody moved, not even the children who had been playing on Bryant’s and Milam’s laps. It felt like everybody was holding their breath, waiting for a bomb to go off.

Mose Wright stood up from his chair and pointed a knobby finger at J. W. Milam. “There he is.”

Everyone who’d been holding their breath let it out all at once and started talking. Someone shouted “Lyin’ nigger!” and “Lynch him!” A woman moaned. Somebody was crying. It took Judge Swango a lot of pounding and shouting to get things orderly again.

While all this was happening, Mose Wright stood as calm as Jesus on stormy water; like he couldn’t see or hear the hell that had broken loose in Judge Swango’s courtroom. When the judge had the room quiet again, Mr. Chatham walked up to the witness chair and rested one hand on the armrest.

“Uncle Mose, do you see the other man who was on the porch that night?”

“Yessuh. That’s him there.” He pointed at Bryant.

“Mr. Roy Bryant?”

“Yessuh.”

“Objection!” J. J. Breland jumped to his feet. “Objection! Your Honor, I object to this wild unsubstantiated testimony.” Mr. Breland looked ready to deliver a speech, but Judge Swango stopped him in mid-sentence.
"Overruled. You'll have your chance to cross-examine."
Mr. Chatham nodded to the judge, and then turned back to his witness. "What happened next, Uncle Mose?"
"Well, Mr. Milam had that pistol, and he asked me if I had the boy out of Chicago. Then one of the men said, 'I wants that boy who done that talk at Money.' They shoved past me and went looking in the back bedrooms, and a minute later they dragged Bobo from his room, shaking him and sayin' hateful things. Poor old Bobo was a-tryin' to get dressed as they dragged him to the front door.

"I was scared. I didn’t want them hurtin’ my nephew, so I asked them what they was going to do with the boy, and Mr. Milam, he said, 'If he's not the right boy, we are going to bring him back and put him in bed.'

"Before they got to the door, one of the men asked me how old I was, and I tol’ him sixty-four, and he said, 'You better not cause any trouble, Preacher, or you’ll never live to be sixty-five.'

"By then my wife heard all the fuss and come outta the bedroom a-cryin’ and beggin’ them to leave the boy home. That made the men real mad and one of them hollered, 'You git back in the bed, and I want to hear those springs.' My wife said, 'Listen, we’ll pay you whatever you want if you release him,' but they just ignored her.

"I stayed on the porch while they dragged Bobo out to their car. They hit him a couple times to make him stop complaining. The car didn’t have no lights on, and they pulled Bobo up to the back door and asked somebody inside, 'Is this the boy?' and somebody said, 'Yes.'"

"Was that a man’s voice or a woman’s?" Mr. Chatham asked.

Mose Wright shifted in his seat. "It seemed lighter than a man’s."

"Was there anyone else in the car?"
"Yessuh. Looked to me like a man was sitting in the back-seat along with her."

"What happened next, Uncle?"

"I heard them slap the boy a few more times, heard him cry out. Heard car doors open and close; then they drove away with the lights still off." His face turned sad. "Didn’t never see the boy alive again."

"Were you at the Tallahatchie River when a body was pulled out three days later?"
"Yessuh."

"Did you identify the body?" Chatham asked.

"It was Bobo, Emmett Till. I watched the sheriff and his helpers pull him out of the water; and I got a good look at him. He had no face hair—Bobo never did have no face hair on him—and the boy didn’t have no clothes on, but they did find a ring on one of his fingers, with the initials L.T. on it."

Mr. Chatham turned to face the jury. "You saw the ring?" he asked without looking at Mose.

"Yessuh. Exact same ring the boy’s daddy, Louis Till, used to wear. I seen it on Bobo many times."

Mr. Chatham nodded at the men in the jury, then said, "No further questions, Your Honor."

As soon as Mr. Chatham sat down, J. J. Breland jumped
out of his seat to start questioning. “Mose, you got a porch light on that old shack of yours?”

“Nosuh.”

“So at two a.m. things would be pretty dark out there?”

“I reckon so.”

“Didn’t you tell defense lawyers that the only reason you thought it was Mr. Milam at the door was because he was big and bald?”

Mose sat silent.

“All you saw was a bald-headed man?”

“That’s right.”

“And had you ever seen Mr. Milam or Mr. Bryant before that night you claim the boy was kidnapped?”

“Nosuh.”

“Was there ever any light turned on in the house?”

“Nosuh.”

“Did you ever see the flashlight shine in Mr. Bryant’s face that night?”

“I could see him good enough.”

“So, old Mose, it was completely dark inside and out, and the only light came from a flashlight, a flashlight shining directly in your face.” Mr. Breland grinned and shook his head. “And yet you could see clearly, clearly enough to accuse two white men of murder, to claim that the men on your porch were Mr. Bryant and Mr. Milam over there. Could have been any two men, white or black, for all you could see, Mose.” He looked at Mose, his smile gone now.

“You got a problem with white people, Mose? Are you trying to even some old score?”

Mose didn’t answer.

“You hear me, boy? Do you have a problem with white people?”

“No.”

“No problem with white folks, yet there you sit accusing two of our upstanding white citizens of barging into your home in the middle of the night, pointing a gun and a flashlight in your face, and hauling off your nephew. That sounds pretty far-fetched to me, Mose. Does it to you?”

Mose looked him in the eye and swallowed before answering. “No, it don’t. It’s what happened, and that’s God’s honest truth.”

Mr. Breland smiled again. “The state’s only eyewitness to this ‘crime’ is an old man seeing things in the dark. Wonder what those other surprise witnesses have seen. I tell you what, Mose, this sure is somebody’s kind of truth, but I wouldn’t be ascribing it to God.” People in the courtroom laughed and somebody shouted something, but Judge Swango quieted them all down by pounding his gavel. Mr. Breland shook his head like a little kid in trouble and sat down.

Next Mr. Chatham called Sheriff Smith to the stand. When I heard his name, my stomach about dropped right out of me. Was I next? Would the sheriff tell what I had told him about R.C.? I shivered as he was sworn in.

As soon as Sheriff Smith sat down, Mr. Breland stood up.

“Objection, Your Honor. We object to this witness and insist the jury be excused until we can see if this witness is qualified to testify as to facts pertinent to this case.”
“Sustained,” the judge said, and while the jury moved out of the courtroom, Sheriff Smith shifted uncomfortably on the stand.

“Proceed with your questions, Mr. Chatham,” the judge said when the jurors were gone.

“Sheriff, I believe that early on the morning after Emmett Till’s abduction, you arrested Milam and Bryant on suspicion of kidnapping.”

“That’s right.”

“And what did they tell you when you picked them up?”

“Well, sir, they admitted they had kidnapped the boy. Mr. Bryant, he said he went down there to Mose Wright’s house and brought the boy up to his store in Money, and he wasn’t the right boy, the one who did the talking and the whistling, and he turned him loose.”

“So they confessed to you, Sheriff, that they had kidnapped Emmett Till?”

“Yessir.”

“No further questions, Your Honor.”

Mr. Breland stood up. “Your Honor, this testimony has no relevance to the charges of murder for which this court is convened, and I move that it be disallowed from jury and the trial records.”

Judge Swango thought a moment and said, “So granted.” When Mr. Chatham stood to complain, the judge motioned for him to sit back down. “The state must first prove Emmett Till was murdered. The only proof is that the boy is missing. There’s no evidence of criminal homicide. You can step down, Sheriff.”

When Sheriff Smith left the witness stand, I let out a sigh of relief. If his testimony wasn’t relevant, mine probably wasn’t going to be either.

When the jury came back in, the next witness was Chester Miller, a Negro undertaker who had helped with Emmett’s body when it was pulled out of the Tallahatchie. “It was a Negro boy, for sure,” he told Mr. Chatham, “bruised and beat up something awful. The whole top of his head was crushed in so bad that a piece of his skull bone fell out in the boat when they pulled him out of the water.”

“Was there a ring with the initials L.T. on the boy’s hand?” Mr. Chatham asked.

“Yessuh.”

Mr. Chatham thanked him and sat down.

Chester Miller looked scared when Mr. Breland started questioning him. Before he asked his first question, Mr. Breland stood in front of the witness chair and stared at him for a few seconds. Then he asked, in a real loud voice, “Chester, what kind of training do you have?”

He looked confused and said nothing.

“I mean, what qualifications do you have?” Chester stared into his lap, barely breathing.

“Lookit here, boy”—Mr. Breland’s voice turned mean—“you’ve got to answer me when I talk to you!”

“Y-yessuh.”

“Do you have any medical or undertaking training?”

“Ain’t never been to a doctor, suh.”

The audience snickered, and Mr. Breland turned and looked at us like a teacher who just doesn’t know what to do.
with a dumb student. He turned sideways and sighed.
“Chester, can you tell me what you do for a living?”
“Collect folks’ dead ones and get ’em buried.”
“So you’re a mortician?”
Again Chester looked confused.
“An undertaker?”
“Yessuh.”
“Chester, when you first saw this body, did you recognize it? Was it Emmett Till?”
“Well, his head was beaten up pretty bad, so it’d a been hard to tell right off who it was no matter what, but—”
Breland interrupted him. “When you first inspected it, did you or did you not know the body was that of Emmett Till?”
“I never knowed the Till boy,” Chester said softly, “so right then, without a picture or a family member, there’d a been no way to tell—”
“So,” Breland said impatiently, “you were never able to make a positive identification of this body.” Then, in a kind voice, he asked, “You didn’t know who it was, but did you determine the exact cause of death?”
“Nosuh. I couldn’t tell any one thing for sure. The boy’s body had bruises and cuts all over, and his head was pretty much caved in, from a beatin’ and being shot, I guess. And somebody had wired an ol’ pulley around his neck. And there was one other thing.” He paused and stared at the floor, nervous and embarrassed. “The boy’s manhood’d been cut clean off.”

Hearing what had happened to Emmett chilled me to the bone, and I would have been sick if I hadn’t seen the look on Mr. Breland’s face. The description of Emmett’s corpse didn’t even faze him; you could tell he didn’t care a hoot about this Negro boy who’d been tortured and murdered. I wanted to jump up and scream at him, at all the hardheaded, heartless people in the room.

“Have you ever been to a school for undertakers, Chester?” Mr. Breland looked irritated. “Have you had any training, an apprenticeship in the mortuary profession?”
Chester paused. Finally he said, “Nosuh. I ain’t never been to no school.”
Breland nodded, and with his hands folded behind his back he walked over to face the jury.
He looked like he was trying not to laugh. “No, of course you wouldn’t have,” he said almost to himself. “So, other than the experience you have collecting dead folks, you really have no expertise at all to make a positive or scientific identification of a corpse. You see”—he swept his arm from the jury to the witness chair—“even one of their own cannot testify with a surety as to the identity of the body that was pulled from the Tallahatchie River.”

The next witness was Sheriff Strider, who had also been at the river when Emmett’s body was pulled out. When Mr. Chatham asked him if he knew the cause of death, the sheriff looked smug and said, “He had a bullet hole just above the ear.”
I closed my eyes and squeezed the armrests of my chair;
I didn’t want to think about the awful stuff that had happened to Emmett.

Mr. Chatham thanked him and sat down. Then Mr. Breland said to Sheriff Strider, “Sheriff, sounds to me like you know more about undertaking than some folks around here.” The courtroom audience laughed, and Judge Swango pounded his gavel again. Mr. Breland looked up at the judge with a kind of “I couldn’t help it” smile, and then asked the sheriff to describe the body.

“Well, he sure was dead,” he said with a grin, then seeing that no one laughed, continued. “Shot to the head. Looked to have been in the water at least ten days, maybe a couple weeks or more. A big old cotton gin pulley had been tied round his neck with barbed wire. Whoever dropped that body in the river sure didn’t want it floating up any time soon.”

“Did you notice anything in particular about this corpse, anything that could help identify it?”

“All I could tell about that body was that it was human; it was in such bad shape, I couldn’t even be sure if it was white or Negro.” He looked at Mr. Breland, waiting for another question, but Mr. Breland said nothing, so the sheriff continued. “You know, there’s some folks, some groups, rabblerousers and the kind, that would do anything to stir up trouble down here. They’re bent on disrupting our way of life, and I wouldn’t put it past them killing somebody, sticking some boy’s ring on him, and throwing his body in the river. Could be that Till boy is right now sitting in Chicago or somewhere up north having a good old time with all this trouble going on down here.

“No, sir, that body’d been in the water a good two weeks, long before that Negro boy got himself kidnapped. The corpse they pulled out the Tallahatchie was no more Emmett Till than I’m a jackass.”

When Emmett Till’s mother walked up to the witness chair, I was afraid people in the courtroom were going to jump out of their seats and knock her down. Looks of hate, pure meanness, followed her all the way to the stand, and I wondered, if we hadn’t been in a courtroom full of police, would some people have hauled her out and lynched her?

She spoke clearly, and she didn’t look either scared or mad, just kind of sad, like she was still hurting something awful for Emmett.

“Emmett was born and raised in Chicago,” she told Mr. Chatham, “so he didn’t know how to be humble to white people. I warned him before he came down here; I told him to be very careful how he spoke and to say ‘yes, sir’ and ‘no, ma’am’ and not to hesitate to humble himself if he had to get down on his knees.”

Mr. Chatham looked sympathetic. “Mrs. Bradley, when your son’s body arrived in Chicago, were you able to identify it as him?”

“Yes, sir, positively.”

“How did you do that?”

“A mother knows her child, has known him since he was born. I looked at the face very carefully ... I just looked at it
very carefully, and I was able to find out that it was my son, Emmett Louis Till.

Mr. Chatham went to his table, picked up a large photograph, and walked back in front of Emmett’s mother: “Mrs. Bradley, I have a photograph here, taken at the Century Burial Association, of the body that was removed from the Tallahatchie River on August thirty-first. I’d like you to look at it and tell me if you can identify this body.”

He handed her the picture. Her face became even more somber as she looked at it and nodded; then handed it back to Mr. Chatham. “That’s my son,” she said softly, “my son, Emmett Till.” Her voice broke, and she took off her glasses to wipe away tears.

“Are you sure?” Mr. Chatham asked gently.

“If I thought it wasn’t my boy, I would be out looking for him now.”

I could hardly stand to look at Emmett’s mother, and I prayed she wouldn’t look at me. I was afraid if she did that, I’d just fall apart crying, that I’d confess all the things I didn’t do, things I might have done that could’ve saved Emmett. I’d stand up and shout to the judge, jury, and everybody in the courtroom that R. C. Rydell had been a part of this, that he told me he was going to do something. But she never did look at me, never even glanced in my direction.

The next witness was Willie Reed, a Negro kid about my age. He was so scared that he could hardly talk, and Judge Swango had to keep telling him to speak up so the jury could hear. It looked to me like Willie didn’t want anybody to hear him, didn’t want anything at all to do with this trial, but as I listened to him tell what he had seen and heard after Emmett had been kidnapped, I admired him. As a Negro testifying against two white men, he’d never be able to stay in Mississippi, probably never even be able to visit here again. He had a lot more guts than I did.

When Willie said that he saw some white men in a blue Ford pickup with Emmett Till in the back, Grampa’s breathing started getting noisy. His face turned fish-belly white, and sweat poured off his forehead. He didn’t even notice me looking at him, so I touched his arm and said, “Grampa, you okay? You didn’t forget your medicine this morning did you?”

Grampa looked at me glassy-eyed, like he’d just come out of a dream.

“Are you feeling all right?” I asked. It looked like maybe his diabetes was acting up; I hoped it wasn’t another stroke. “Do you need a drink or something?”

“That Sunday morning, you fixed us breakfast,” he said, his voice raspy, “and we played cards, remember?”

“Yessir. Stayed home all morning because neither one of us felt any good.”

“That’s right. Yes, of course, that’s right.” I had no idea what he was talking about, but whatever had hit him must have passed, because the color came back into his face. “I’m fine, son,” he said quietly. “Just been sitting in this hot old courtroom for too long.” He sat up straighter and looked at
the witness stand real serious, like he was trying to hear every word.

Willie Reed was talking about how he saw some white men come out of a barn, a barn on the plantation owned by Leslie Milam, J.W.'s brother. "I heard someone getting licked pretty good inside there, and lots of crying. After some more licking, he cried, 'Mama, Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy!' and I went running to my aunt's house to ask who was gettin' beat over in the barn."

"Did you recognize any of the men?" asked Mr. Chatham.

"Mr. J. W. Milam. I saw him leave the barn and get a drink from the well and then go back inside."

"Objection!" shouted Mr. Breland. "Your Honor, I object to this witness!"

"Grounds?" asked the judge.

"This testimony does not officially connect my clients with whatever was going on in that barn. This witness is merely speculating about what might or might not have happened."

"Overruled," said the judge. "Continue your questioning, Mr. Chatham."

Mr. Chatham nodded to the judge. "Willie, did you notice anything else about Mr. Milam when you saw him outside that barn?"

"He was wearing a pistol, had it strapped in a holster on his hip."

"Objection! Objection!" Mr. Breland was on his feet this time. I didn't hear all that he said, because I was still worried about Grampa. His breathing had gotten easier, but he was fidgeting in his chair now; he couldn't seem to get comfortable. The judge overruled whatever it was Mr. Breland had been complaining about, and Mr. Chatham asked Willie Reed another question.

"What did you do next?"

"I went to the country store to get some things; then I went home and got ready for Sunday school."

"On the way back, did you see or hear anything or anybody?"

"Nosuh."

"Was the pickup gone?"

"Yessuh."

When Mr. Breland had his turn to ask Willie questions, he looked like a bull about to rip into a poor old farmer, and Willie looked scared. "Do you know Mr. J. W. Milam?" he asked.

"Nosuh, but I've seen him round the plantation three or four times."

"Have you seen that blue Ford pickup before?"

"Nosuh."

"Then you can't say for sure that it belongs to either of my clients, is that right?"

"Yessuh."

"Did you see Mr. J. W. Milam driving the truck?"

Willie shifted in his chair, looking more and more nervous. "I don't know, suh."

"You wouldn't say Mr. Milam was inside the truck?"
“Nosuh, I wouldn’t.”

Hearing that made Mr. Breland loosen up a little. “Willie, how far were you from the barn when you saw who you thought was Mr. Milam?”

“Don’t know, suh. . . . A ways away.”

“A ways? How far exactly is ‘a ways’?”

Willie didn’t answer.

Mr. Breland turned and pointed to the back of the courtroom. “Is ‘a ways’ from where you sit to the courtroom doors?”

“Nosuh.”

“Farther?”

Willie nodded.

“Twice as far?”

“Don’t know, suh. I wasn’t thinking about the distance at the time.”

“Well, boy, what were you thinking about? If you weren’t thinking, how in the world can you be so sure you saw who you claim you saw?”

Again Willie said nothing.

“Think hard, boy. From where you were standing when you heard the licking and the hollering, how far is it to the barn? One hundred yards? Two hundred? Three hundred? Think, boy! You’re sitting in a court of law, sworn to testify in front of these good people, and we’re all waiting for your answer. C’mon, Willie!”

Willie mumbled something too softly to be heard.

“Speak up, boy,” said Mr. Breland.

Willie looked embarrassed and confused. “Guess maybe it was round four hundred yards.”

“Four hundred yards?” Mr. Breland whistled. “That’s nearly a quarter of a mile. You’ve got yourself a damn good set of eyes, boy. Better get yourself off to Korea and let the Army use you as a sharpshooter.”

Willie tried to say something more, but Mr. Breland wouldn’t let him. “You’re done. Just go set down for a while.”

Looking relieved, Willie left the witness chair and walked straight out of the courtroom without once looking up. After Willie was gone, Mr. Chatham looked down at the papers spread out on the table in front of him like he was hoping to find something he’d forgotten or overlooked.

“Does the state have any more witnesses?” Judge Swango had to ask him twice before he finally looked up. Mr. Chatham rose slowly and glanced around the courtroom. Then he looked at the judge and said, “No, Your Honor. The state rests.”

Mr. Breland and his lawyers smiled when they heard that. A couple of his assistants even patted him on the back.

“Does the defense have any witnesses?” asked Judge Swango.

“Mrs. Carolyn Bryant,” said Mr. Breland.

Mrs. Bryant, a pretty young woman, patted her husband on the shoulder and stepped around him to walk up to the witness seat. Mr. Breland made a big show of acting like a gentleman and helped her get seated; then he asked her to
tell what had happened to her at her husband's store in Money on the night of August 24.

Before she could start talking, though, Judge Swango dismissed the jury. "This event happened too long before the abduction of Emmett Till," he said. "It is not immediately relevant to this case and may prejudice the jury's deliberations. However, I will direct that it be entered into the court record."

Mrs. Bryant smiled shyly at the judge and waited until the jury had left the room. She kept shifting in the witness stand, not sure where to put her hands, not sure where to look. When she made eye contact with her husband, she nodded and stopped fidgeting, and that's when I remembered what the paper had first reported about the kidnapping: there had been three men and a woman in the car that night.

She told Mr. Brelan that she had been working in their store alone because her husband was on a business trip. "While I was working, a Negro boy came into the store and stopped at the candy counter. I noticed that he spoke with a Northern brogue. He ordered some bubble gum, and when I held out my right hand for some money"—she shivered—"he caught my hand and wouldn't let go. I tried to pull my hand away, and he said, 'How about a date, baby?'"

The courtroom had been deadly silent, but then a woman gasped, and I heard muttered swearing. A man behind me said, "No wonder that nigger ended up in the river. I hope they made him pay good before they tossed him in."

The evil emotion in the room almost choked me. Didn't these people know they were talking about a fourteen-year-old boy?

"I shook my hand loose and started to the back of the store. He caught me at the cash register..." Her voice shook. "And he put both hands around my waist. He said, 'What's the matter, baby, can't you take it'? I pulled myself away from him, and all the while he was saying filthy, unprintable words, words which I will not repeat. Then he said, 'I've been with white women before.'"

The murmur in the courtroom grew louder, and Judge Swango banged on his desk to quiet everyone down. Mrs. Bryant waited until the judge signaled her to continue.

"Then another Negro came in and pulled him out of the store. I started to go to the car to get my pistol, and he was still on the front porch of the store. He smiled and whistled at me, then ran off with his friends, got in a car, and drove away."

"Was this Negro man who accosted you Emmett Till?"

She paused and looked at her husband a moment before answering. "I don't know Emmett Till. I've never known Emmett Till, or any other Negroes, for that matter."