

The Hanging Woods

Chapter 1

In 1975, when I was thirteen, I killed a fox. It happened a few weeks after I'd snuck into my mother's room and read her diary. That diary told me a lot of things that I didn't want to know. Or maybe I did want to know them. I can't say for sure. But what I can say for sure is that killing the fox wasn't pretty. And it wasn't an accident. I beat it over the head with a piece of stiff hickory about as long, but not quite as thick, as a baseball bat. I'm sure if my grandfather's .22 had been available, I'd have had an easier go of it.

Beating the fox was my first experience with death. I mean real death. Death by my own hands. I'm not talking about catching a catfish out of the Tallapoosa, throwing it on the bank, and watching as its pulsing mouth gasped for air. It wasn't the same as that. Killing the fox was brutal. I didn't enjoy it, exactly, though in a strange way it did fascinate me.

My grandfather, Papa, had taught me the basics of trapping the winter before. The first thing I ever saw caught was a big female raccoon. I actually heard it before I saw it. When we approached the set, near a small creek in a dense wood of live oaks and sycamores, the chain of the trap rattled through the morning air as the coon scooted from side to side. The steel jaws clamped her front right paw, and she hissed when she saw us. In the silt, on the edge of the creek, her little handprints overlapped one another as she stomped around, trying to free herself. The black band on her face couldn't hide the fear and hatred in her eyes. Papa walked up to the coon as casually as if he were lighting his pipe. He stuck the barrel about an inch from her head and fired. One shot and the coon was dead.

"You gotta be humane, Walter," he said as he picked her up, squeezing the release prongs, freeing her leg. "They should suffer as little as possible. You got it?"

"Yes, sir," I said, "but without a gun it's going to be hard."

He dropped the coon into the oversize wicker rucksack resting on his back, then reset the double-spring trap. "Your mama don't want you out here with a gun yet. You know how she worries. In a few years, maybe, but not yet."

"But how am I gonna do it?"

"You're gonna use a stick and hit it over the head," he said in his usual matter-of-fact way. "That's the way I learned when I was a boy, and you'll do the same. It ain't an easy thing to do, but it's important. With a stick you feel the life escape the animal's body, run up through the wood, and then into your hands and arms. It's a might troubling, but necessary."

"But why?" I asked. "Seems like it'd be easier with a gun."

"Because you'll respect the animals in these woods, that's why. Get an idea of how flimsy life is. There ain't no feeling with a gun. You pull the trigger and it's over. That's the easy way, and you gotta learn the hard way, really feel it with your hands, so you can appreciate the easy way. Got me?"

"Yes, sir," I said, "but I'd still rather use a gun."

After that first season of instruction, Papa told me I'd be ready to go out on my own the following year. I waited impatiently through the spring, summer, and fall, excited about the prospects of trapping solo. When the time finally came, Papa set me up with a half dozen Victor Oneida double-spring leg holds and let me loose.

Papa lived in a rundown house in the country, not much more than a shack really, on the other side of the Tallapoosa River, several miles from Woodley. During

the trapping season, Mom dropped me off after school on Fridays and picked me up on Sundays. I liked spending time with Papa on weekends because he never bothered me or made fun of me. I felt at ease around him; it was definitely better than having to stay at home with my parents. Especially my father.

Every weekend, as soon as Mom dropped me off, I would grab the traps that hung on sixteen-penny nails in his toolshed and take off running through the woods. I placed sets near the creek for coon, and a couple in the field for fox. Since it was winter and the sun set early, I had to hustle. Alabama winters weren't all that frigid compared to most of the country's, but I still didn't want to get caught in the woods after dark. Things sometimes got eerie out there.

After several weekends went by and I hadn't caught a thing, I found that trapping wasn't as easy as Papa had made it look. But I stayed optimistic. On that third Saturday morning, I sprang out of bed feeling confident, but by the end of my round of checking traps, I had been shut out once again.

"Usually when you think it ain't never gonna happen is when it does," said Papa as I walked into the kitchen, miserable and dejected after my latest effort. He sat on a wobbly chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him, rubbing little circles into his glasses with a bandanna.

"Then I guess it's gonna happen real soon," I said, "because right now I don't think I'll ever catch a thing."

"It'll happen," he said with a smile. "Just keep at it. A weasel don't always catch a chicken the first time it enters a henhouse."

When I awoke the following morning, rain bounced off the tin roof, tapping beats like a child on a snare drum. I pulled on my flannel jacket, laced up my boots, and grabbed the heavy walking stick Papa had fashioned for me. He'd whittled off all the bark and carved my initials at the top. Smooth and sleek, the stick felt comfortable in my hands, as if it belonged there, as if it had grown in the woods all those years just for me. As nice a fit as it was, all I wanted to do was crawl back into bed, sleep, and wait for the smell of frying eggs and sausage. But Papa would never allow it. Checking the traps first thing, no matter how I felt or how nasty the weather, was his strictest rule. So I headed out, still eager despite the rain and cold.

I had trouble seeing more than a few feet in front of me as I made my way through the fog. My eyes still hung heavy with sleep. The morning light barely seeped through the loblolly pines that stood tall and thin all around. A cold, wet grayness surrounded me, and I started shivering within five minutes of being exposed to the chilly air.

I jogged to the first set in order to stay warm. It held nothing, but I wasn't surprised; I had gotten used to it by then. I walked beside the creek, which now rushed along, white and foamy from the heavy rainfall. Leaves and branches rolled and tumbled through the water as they journeyed to meet up with the larger body of the Tallapoosa. The rest of the coon sets were also empty, so I headed to the edge of the field where I had a fox set. The trap lay on the far side of an old rock wall that had once been used as a field divider. I climbed up and over the fallen stones to get to it, nearly slipping on a slick patch of moss growing on the rocks.

The wet leaves softened my steps, so as I approached the trap, I saw the animal before it saw me. A large gray fox, about the size of a small German shepherd, lay on its stomach, its whitish gray coat matted and soaked from the pelting rain. It had little pup tents for ears, and its black snout rested on the moist, rotting leaves. I took a step forward. As I did so, the fox immediately sprang to its feet and

yipped with such vigor that chills shot through my body. I'd never heard anything like it in my life; it was worse than a fork raking across a chalkboard.

I didn't know what to do, so I did the only thing that seemed natural. I panicked. I gripped my walking stick tightly, which turned my red hands white. The fox hobbled around as best it could, pacing back and forth, though the few feet of chain didn't allow for much mobility. The hackle of its orange neck stood stiff and upright.

The fox's eyes locked on me and never strayed. The yipping continued, and I felt an overwhelming urge to let it go, but I saw no way of doing it. In order to open the jaws of the trap, I'd have to step on the release prongs, and there was no way to do that without being attacked. I thought maybe I should run back to the house and get Papa to come with his .22, but I didn't want him to think I was a coward.

The moment I'd been dreaming of had come, and I realized it had turned into a nightmare. One part of me kept saying to let it go. The fox hadn't done anything to anyone; the only thing it had done wrong was to have the bad luck of stepping into my trap. But the other part of me, the stronger part, said that I had to kill it. And I always seemed to listen to my stronger part.

I grabbed my stick tighter still, as though preparing to swing for the fence. I took a couple of steps forward, which sent the fox into a fury. The fox kept attempting to walk backwards, trying to break free, but its captured leg prevented it from going more than a foot or two. I'd secured the trap by twisting thin baling wire around the steel trap chain, and then wrapping the other end of the wire around the trunk of a pine sapling. The young tree bent and shook as the fox tugged; tiny drops of water flew from its needles, but the trap held fast.

When I got within a few feet of the fox, it pulled as far away from me as it could. I raised the hickory over my head and swung with all my might. The stick struck the ground, jolting my frozen hands. While I had been in mid-swing, the fox had leaped to the side. Just after it jumped, however, part of the chain somehow wrapped around the exposed root of a large loblolly, now making the fox immobile. I raised the stick again and swung. I heard the thud of the heavy wood connect with the fox's skull the same instant that I felt it. Its life seemed to flow through the hickory and into my body, just as Papa had said it would.

A heavy gasp exhaled from deep within the fox's chest. The fox instantly dropped to the ground, landing on its stomach, its legs splayed out spread-eagle style. Its tail stood straight up in the air, so I pulled back and smashed its skull again, and then again, thinking it was probably still alive. After the third blow, the tail gradually dropped to the ground, almost in slow motion, like the black-and-white barrier at a railroad crossing.

It looked beautiful. Hardly any blood leaked from the head, and only a trickle seeped from its mouth. Its tongue stuck out over the side of the ridged black jowls, and if not for that, the fox would have looked asleep instead of dead.

I poked its ribs with my stick a couple of times. I still wasn't completely convinced that it wouldn't wake up and attack. After a few moments of prodding, when it didn't stir, I finally opened the trap, picked the fox up—the soft fur and warm body comforting my numb hands—and placed it in Papa's rucksack. I then slung the pack over my shoulder.

The rain had stopped and the sun had peeked out from a window in the clouds by the time I made my way out of the woods. The warmth of the rays thawed my frozen skin. My clothes felt five pounds heavier from the rain, and the fox in the rucksack must have weighed at least twenty more. I panted and felt exhausted as I

neared the skinning table that Papa kept set up in the backyard during the season. He stood on the deck filling his bird feeder, which was screwed into the trunk of a magnolia. The tree's glossy leaves hung over the deck, giving shade in the summer and fat white blossoms in the late spring.

"How'd you make out?"

"I got a fox," I said through a forced grin. "A gray."

"Get out of town, boy. Did you really?"

"Yes, sir, I really did."

"Well, hot damn, son, pull her out and let's take a look," he said, climbing down the steps to meet me.

"She" actually turned out to be a "he," which was easy enough to figure out when Papa helped me skin it. He pulled the pelt over a wire stretcher when we finished, but I didn't really pay attention to the process. He talked and rattled on and seemed so excited about the whole thing that he never looked at me. I automatically nodded when he asked me something, but my mind and thoughts had flown far away from that pelt on the skinning table. I couldn't think about anything except the feeling that had shot up through my arms and into my brain, settling there with a dull buzz. The new knowledge—that I possessed the power to kill—overwhelmed me.

The following weekend, instead of setting traps on Papa's property, I chose to stay close to home. It was an unusually warm day for December, so I decided to find my two best friends, Jimmy and Mothball. They lived down the road, and since I had given up trapping, I figured I'd see what they were getting into.

I set out walking down Douglass Street. Every house in the neighborhood was an exact replica of the one next to it. They were small two-story, two-bedroom houses that had been constructed by the Simmons pulp mill after World War II, when Woodley became a booming pulp town. Practically every man in Woodley worked there, including my father, as well as Jimmy's and Mothball's. Now, thirty years since that war, and with Vietnam only ending during the last year, the pulp mill still ran, but not the way it had in the past. Layoffs had hit families left and right, though so far my family had been spared.

The slowing down of the mill took its toll not only on the neighborhood but on the town of Woodley as well. Most of the houses were in various stages of ruin, and many of the stores had closed shop in the past few years. The five-and-dime, the grocery store, the only restaurant, they were all abandoned. The Phillips 66 sign, pocked with rust, still stood atop a white pole in front of the only gas station, though the pumps now sat useless under a thin, dusty layer of Alabama red clay. To purchase fuel, or just about anything else, we had to travel twenty miles to Lafayette—pronounced "La-fette" by everyone I knew. Lafayette barely fared better than Woodley, and I'd heard Dad say many times over that he didn't know what we'd do if the mill ever shut down. He'd even threatened that I might have to get a job.

The only house that looked different from any of the others was Mothball's. He lived in an old farmhouse positioned at the far end of the street. Mothball's farmhouse made the rest of the houses in the neighborhood look pristine by comparison. The only shutter left attached to the facing boards hung cockeyed, ready to drop at any moment. Lying in the bushes or leaning against the house were the remnants of other shutters that had already fallen. The once white siding now showed gray exposed boards beneath the patches of peeling paint. The wooden fence around the yard looked similar, with most of the railings either busted or hanging at forty-fives, barely clinging to the vertical oak posts. Rusted bicycle frames, with rusted

chains and rusted wheels, lay scattered around the yard with the dead weeds of last summer still poking through the spokes. Peahens and chickens roamed freely around the yard, pecking the ground.

When laughter arose from the back of the house, I figured Jimmy and Mothball were in the chicken shack, so I headed in that direction and walked in.

“Look, Mothball, it’s Davy Crockett, back from the wild frontier,” said Jimmy as I walked under the low doorway of the coop.

“Where’s your coonskin cap?” asked Mothball. “I thought you’d have made something by now with all them furs you been catching. Maybe a coat for your mom out of that fox.” They both laughed, and I felt my cheeks flush.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I said. “Y’all are funny. I did what I wanted to do, and now I’m moving on to bigger and better things.” I’d told them about the fox earlier in the week. I didn’t want to go over it again, so I said, “Looks like you’re up to no good, Mothball.”

Mothball stood in the middle of the coop in front of an oak log cut into a firewood-size section. The log stood on its end, knee high, serving as a chopping block. The square coop, made of rough-cut boards, leaned so much to one side that with only a little push, it seemed, I could have toppled it over. And chicken shit lay everywhere. White streams of it stained the walls like dripping paint. Crusty clumps—turned green and gray with age—mingled with the moldy straw on the dirt floor. The odor was enough to knock out a pig.

Mothball, who was short and round with a baby face, had an axe in his hand and brandished it like a prison guard holding a rifle. He’d been dubbed “Mothball” when we were younger, back in the third or fourth grade. His older brother, Carver, had asked him if he’d ever smelled mothballs. When he replied that he had, Carver asked him how he’d gotten the moth’s little legs apart to sniff them. Jimmy and I had fallen out laughing while Mothball’s cheeks burned red. His lips puckered up as though he’d been sucking on persimmons from the tree in the backyard. The name stuck.

Jimmy, on the other hand, had a strong jaw line and sharp features. He possessed a thin frame and stood the same height as I did. We were similarly built, nearly the same exact age—I was two months older—and had the same green eyes. We were sometimes mistaken for brothers, though I didn’t have the good looks that he had. Most of the girls at school made a big fuss over him, which didn’t seem to bother Mothball, but I have to admit I got jealous sometimes. At the moment, he had a tiny sliver of wood in his mouth and sucked on it like a toothpick as he walked over and leaned against the side of the doorway next to me.

“Seems like both my friends have turned into murderers,” said Jimmy. “You won’t even believe what Mothball’s up to.”

“I’m not a murderer, y’all,” said Mothball. “I’m going to be famous.”

“Yeah, I’m not a murderer either,” I said, though I wasn’t necessarily convinced of that.

“Okay, Mr. Mothball the Famous,” said Jimmy as he swept the sliver of wood across his lips, “why don’t you tell Walter what you’re planning to do and then we’ll let him decide.”

“Check this out, Walter,” said Mothball. He smiled as he talked, his big brown eyes flickering with excitement. “I’m gonna be in *The Guinness Book of World Records*.”

“For what?” I asked. “Having the dumbest nickname?”

“No, dickfor—I’m gonna cut off a chicken’s head and keep it alive.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked. “That’s impossible.”

“Is not. I’ll prove it.” Mothball forcefully slammed the axe into the oak log and reached for a worn, wrinkled soft-cover copy of the *Guinness Book*. It lay face-down and splayed open on a roll of chicken wire. The cover had a few splatters of chicken shit on it, and when he picked up the book his fingers landed in the stuff, smearing it across the word *Guinness*. But he didn’t even flinch. Apparently the book had been opened right to the page he wanted, because he said excitedly, “Listen to this,” and started reading aloud.

“Longest surviving headless chicken. On September 10th, 1945 a Wyandotte chicken named Mike was decapitated, but went on to survive for 18 months. The cut had missed the jugular vein, and much of the brain stem had been left intact. His owner, Lloyd Olsen (USA), fed and watered the chicken directly into his gullet with the aid of an eyedropper. Mike eventually choked to death in an Arizona motel.”

“So what do you think?” asked Mothball.

“Is there a picture?” I asked.

“No, there ain’t no picture.”

“Without a picture, I don’t know if I buy it.”

“Yeah, and what was he doing in a motel?” asked Jimmy. “That’s what I want to know. Meeting up with a hen or something?”

“Shut up, y’all. I’m gonna do it. I’ll take care of it, and feed it, and everything.”

“And you’ll love him, and squeeze him, and call him George,” said Jimmy.

“Whoa, Jimmy,” I said, “Since when did you start reading Steinbeck? I didn’t even know you knew how to read.”

“Steinbeck? What the hell is that?”

“You know, John Steinbeck? You just quoted him.”

“I did not, dipshit. That’s from *Bugs Bunny*.”

I started to reply, but Mothball interjected.

“I’m serious, y’all,” he said. “I bet I can make it live for four or five years. I’ll crush the record. I’ll be famous.”

Jimmy almost choked on his toothpick as he started laughing. I couldn’t help but join him.

“If you don’t wanna watch, then don’t,” said Mothball, “but I’m gonna try it right now.”

“Won’t your ma get pissed if you kill all the chickens?”

“I ain’t gonna kill all the chickens, Walter. I’m gonna try it on one, and if it dies, then we’ll just eat it. Next time Ma wants me to get one for supper, I’ll try it again, and keep trying until I get it right.”

“You’re crazy,” I said.

“And a murderer,” added Jimmy.

“I’m not a murderer,” Mothball shot back. “If we eat it then it ain’t murder. Walter killing a fox for no reason but to sell its skin, now that’s murder.”

“Well, let’s see it then, if you’re gonna do it,” I said, ignoring Mothball’s dig.

In the back corner of the shadowed shack sat a small cage about the size of a couple of stuck-together milk crates, crudely fashioned out of pine slats and chicken wire. A hen the color of a rusty beer can bobbed its head within its confines and nervously paced around, though she didn’t have a lot of room to do either. Mothball grabbed the cage and set it on the flat surface of the log next to the lodged axe. He

unfastened the door, which was bound with a leather thong tied in a bowknot. The hen scuttled to the back corner, rattling the wire with her flapping wings, sending pieces of straw and shit into the air. She clucked angrily at Mothball, but he paid her no mind. With a strike quicker than a cottonmouth, his hand darted in and snatched the legs of the hen in one fluid motion. Her wings beat faster still, and she cackled with fear as he pulled her out. He held her as if she were a bouquet of flowers, and stroked her back, which hunched with every caress. She calmed down immediately.

“Move the cage out of the way, will ya?” he asked Jimmy.

Jimmy worked the homemade toothpick back and forth across his lips as he moved the cage and set it on the dirt floor.

Mothball continued stroking the back of the bird, talking in a gentle whisper, saying, “It’s okay, little hen. I won’t hurt you.”

“Yeah, right,” said Jimmy.

“You gotta be quiet,” said Mothball. “I gotta soothe her before I do it.”

He went on petting the bird and talking to it for a couple of minutes. The hen kept cocking her head back and forth, blinking her eyes repeatedly, but she remained calm.

“All right, this is where I could use y’all’s help,” he said.

“*Our* help?” said Jimmy. “I thought this was *your* record. You gonna give us credit in the book if we provide our most valuable assistance?”

“Yeah, I’ll give you some credit, but dammit, Jimmy, this is serious. If you don’t want to help then you can go on home, but stop making fun of me. I’m trying to work.”

Jimmy looked at me and raised his eyebrows. I shrugged my shoulders in response.

“Walter, pull the axe out, will ya?”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. I reached over and dislodged it. The wooden handle felt smooth and comfortable in my hands, just like the hickory stick had, though the steel blade made it top-heavy.

“Now I’m gonna set her head down nice and gentle on the stump,” said Mothball. “And when I do, I want you to chop her at the back of the neck, but at an angle toward the head. Kind of take off the back of it. I think that’s how the guy did it.”

“You want *me* to do it?” I asked. “No, way. I’m not doing it.”

“Oh, come on, Walter. I need your help.”

I immediately thought of the fox and almost felt the death flowing through the axe handle. The idea sort of fascinated me, but I said, “I’m not doing it, Mothball. I’ll hold the bird or something, but I’m not chopping its head off.”

“Jimmy?” implored Mothball.

“Nope. No way. I’m with Walter. It’s your record, you gotta do it.”

Mothball looked at us with disbelief. “Well, shit, then. Some friends you are,” he said. “And y’all want credit? Give me the axe.”

He reached for it with his right hand, still holding the hen in the other. I slipped him the handle. He grabbed it near the curved neck, just below the blade.

“I’ll hold her and do it, but at least pet her back while I get ready,” he said. “Usually I can do it by myself, but I gotta be real careful so I don’t mess up.”

I complied with his request, reaching over and stroking her soft feathers. She twitched every time I touched her. Mothball slowly lowered her toward the face of the log, and I dropped my hand with him, still stroking the bird. When her neck

stretched across the wood, Mothball's grip on the handle tightened. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and licked a light bead of sweat from his upper lip.

"Here it goes," he whispered.

He pulled up, but a little too quickly, and the hen, either startled by the movement or just sensing her demise, shifted at the last second. Mothball caught her square across the back of the neck. I heard the brittle snap as the steel sliced through her vertebrae and sank firmly into the wood. Rolling over the surface of the log, the head flopped onto the ground and settled in the dust.

"Son of a bitch," yelled Mothball, letting go of the legs as soon as he had decapitated her. The hen actually landed on her feet and took a few steps before toppling over, resting next to her head. The one eye that I could see remained open, and I could have sworn it blinked. Blood emptied from her body, pooling around the head in the dirt.

"You scared her, Walter," yelled Mothball. "She jumped just before I hit her."

"Me? I didn't do a thing except pet her like you told me to."

"That wasn't bad for your first try," said Jimmy. "She stayed alive for nearly five, no, maybe even ten seconds."

"Shut the hell up, Jimmy. Just shut the hell up."

"At least you got supper," he said.

"Would y'all just go on home and leave me alone?" said Mothball. "I gotta think of a new way of doing this."

"All right," I said, "but all I did was pet her. I swear."

Jimmy and I turned around and left the chicken shack. I thought about saying something further but decided it really wasn't worth it. On the way home, we discussed Mothball's antics.

"You have to give him credit," said Jimmy as he spat his makeshift toothpick into the street. "If nothing else, he's determined."

"That's for sure," I said. "I've never seen him this serious about anything in his life."

"Did you see the way that thing jumped around without a head?" asked Jimmy. "That was pretty cool."

"It was weird, is what it was," I replied.

When we reached Jimmy's house, about halfway between mine and Mothball's, we parted.

"I'm gonna get something to eat," said Jimmy. "All that chicken killing has got me hungry."

"All right," I said. "I'll catch up with you later."

I walked the rest of the way home, not feeling at all hungry like Jimmy. The only thing I thought about was that chicken's head covered in dust and how it winked at me.