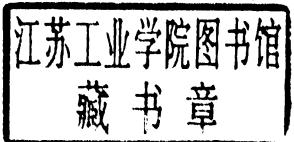


HANGING WOODS

A NOVEL BY SCOTT LORING SANDERS





This book is dedicated to my wife, Jocelyn, who never stopped believing in me.

And also to my son, Mason, the light of my life, who keeps me alive and strong.



This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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I wish I could
recollect that novel or short
story (by some contemporary writer,
I believe) in which, unknown to its author,
the first letters of the words of its last paragraph
formed, as deciphered by Cynthia, a message
from his dead mother.

-Vladimir Nabokov, The Vane Sisters

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

—William Shakespeare

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 midswing, 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," 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 ax 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