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PART ONE



THE KILLING

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CHAPTER 1

On a cold morning in early October of 1946, Pete Banning awoke before sunrise and had no thoughts of going back to sleep. For a long time he lay in the center of his bed, stared at the dark ceiling, and asked himself for the thousandth time if he had the courage. Finally, as the first trace of dawn peeked through a window, he accepted the solemn reality that it was time for the killing. The need for it had become so overwhelming that he could not continue with his daily routines. He could not remain the man he was until the deed was done. Its planning was simple, yet difficult to imagine. Its aftershocks would rattle on for decades and change the lives of those he loved and many of those he didn't. Its notoriety would create a legend, though he certainly wanted no fame. Indeed, as was his nature, he wished to avoid the attention, but that would not be possible. He had no choice. The truth had slowly been revealed, and once he had the full grasp of it, the killing became as inevitable as the sunrise.

He dressed slowly, as always, his war-wounded legs stiff and painful from the night, and made his way through the dark house to the kitchen, where he turned on a dim light and brewed his coffee. As it percolated, he stood ramrod straight beside the breakfast table, clasped his hands behind his head, and gently bent both knees. He grimaced as pain radiated from his hips to his ankles, but he held the squat for ten sec-

onds. He relaxed, did it again and again, each time sinking lower. There were metal rods in his left leg and shrapnel in his right.

Pete poured coffee, added milk and sugar, and walked outside onto the back porch, where he stood at the steps and looked across his land. The sun was breaking in the east and a yellowish light cast itself across the sea of white. The fields were thick and heavy with cotton that looked like fallen snow, and on any other day Pete would manage a smile at what would certainly be a bumper crop. But there would be no smiles on this day; only tears, and lots of them. To avoid the killing, though, would be an act of cowardice, a notion unknown to his being. He sipped his coffee and admired his land and was comforted by its security. Below the blanket of white was a layer of rich black topsoil that had been owned by Bannings for over a hundred years. Those in power would take him away and would probably execute him, but his land would endure forever and support his family.

Mack, his bluetick hound, awoke from his slumber and joined him on the porch. Pete spoke to him and rubbed his head.

The cotton was bursting in the bolls and straining to be picked, and before long teams of field hands would load into wagons for the ride to the far acres. As a boy, Pete rode in the wagon with the Negroes and pulled a cotton sack twelve hours a day. The Bannings were farmers and landowners, but they were workers, not gentrified planters with decadent lives made possible by the sweat of others.

He sipped his coffee and watched the fallen snow grow whiter as the sky brightened. In the distance, beyond the cattle barn and the chicken coop, he heard the voices of the Negroes as they were gathering at the tractor shed for another long day. They were men and women he had known his

entire life, dirt-poor field hands whose ancestors had toiled the same land for a century. What would happen to them after the killing? Nothing, really. They had survived with little and knew nothing else. Tomorrow, they would gather in stunned silence at the same time in the same place, and whisper over the fire, then head to the fields, worried, no doubt, but also eager to pursue their labors and collect their wages. The harvest would go on, undisturbed and abundant.

He finished his coffee, placed the cup on a porch rail, and lit a cigarette. He thought of his children. Joel was a senior at Vanderbilt and Stella was in her second year at Hollins, and he was thankful they were away. He could almost feel their fear and shame at their father being in jail, but he was confident they would survive, like the field hands. They were intelligent and well-adjusted, and they would always have the land. They would finish their education, marry well, and prosper.

As he smoked he picked up his coffee cup, returned to the kitchen, and stepped to the phone to call his sister, Florry. It was a Wednesday, the day they met for breakfast, and he confirmed that he would be there before long. He poured out the dregs, lit another cigarette, and took his barn jacket off a hook by the door. He and Mack walked across the backyard to a trail that led past the garden where Nineva and Amos grew an abundance of vegetables to feed the Bannings and their dependents. He passed the cattle barn and heard Amos talking to the cows as he prepared to milk them. Pete said good morning, and they discussed a certain fat hog that had been selected for a gutting come Saturday.

He walked on, with no limp, though his legs ached. At the tractor shed, the Negroes were gathered around a fire pit as they bantered and sipped coffee from tin cups. When they saw him they grew silent. Several offered "Mornin', Mista Banning," and he spoke to them. The men wore old, dirty

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overalls; the women, long dresses and straw hats. No one wore shoes. The children and teenagers sat near a wagon, huddled under a blanket, sleepy-eyed and solemn-faced, dreading another long day picking cotton.

There was a school for Negroes on the Banning land, one made possible by the generosity of a rich Jew from Chicago, and Pete's father had put up enough in matching funds to see it built. The Bannings insisted that all the colored children on their land study at least through the eighth grade. But in October, when nothing mattered but the picking, the school was closed and the students were in the fields.

Pete spoke quietly with Buford, his white foreman. They discussed the weather, the tonnage picked the day before, the price of cotton on the Memphis exchange. There were never enough pickers during peak season, and Buford was expecting a truckload of white workers from Tupelo. He had expected them the day before but they did not show. There was a rumor that a farmer two miles away was offering a nickel more per pound, but such talk was always rampant during the harvest. Picking crews worked hard one day, disappeared the next, and then came back as prices fluctuated. The Negroes, though, did not have the advantage of shopping around, and the Bannings were known to pay everyone the same.

The two John Deere tractors sputtered to life, and the field hands loaded into the wagons. Pete watched them rock and sway as they disappeared deep into the fallen snow.

He lit another cigarette and walked with Mack past the shed and along a dirt road. Florry lived a mile away on her section of land, and these days Pete always went there on foot. The exercise was painful, but the doctors had told him that long walks would eventually fortify his legs and the pain might one day subside. He doubted that, and had accepted

the reality that his legs would burn and ache for the rest of his life, a life he was lucky to have. He had once been presumed dead, and had indeed come very close to the end, so every day was a gift.

Until now. Today would be the last day of his life as he knew it, and he had accepted this. He had no choice.

Florry lived in a pink cottage she had built after their mother died and left them the land. She was a poet with no interest in farming but had a keen interest in the income it generated. Her section, 640 acres, was just as fertile as Pete's, and she leased it to him for half the profits. It was a handshake arrangement, one as ironclad as any thick contract, and grounded on implicit trust.

When he arrived, she was in the backyard, walking through her aviary of chicken wire and netting, scattering feed as she chatted to her assortment of parrots, parakeets, and toucans. Beside the bird haven was a hutch where she kept a dozen chickens. Her two golden retrievers sat on the grass, watching the feeding with no interest in the exotic birds. Her house was filled with cats, creatures neither Pete nor the dogs cared for.

He pointed to a spot on the front porch and told Mack to rest there, then went inside. Marietta was busy in the kitchen and the house smelled of fried bacon and corn cakes. He said good morning to her and took a seat at the breakfast table. She poured him coffee and he began reading the Tupelo morning paper. From the old phonograph in the living room, a soprano wailed in operatic misery. He often wondered how many other folks in Ford County listened to opera.

When Florry was finished with her birds, she came in the rear door, said good morning to her brother, and sat across

from him. There were no hugs, no affection. To those who knew them, the Bannings were thought to be cold and distant, devoid of warmth and rarely emotional. This was true but not intentional; they had simply been raised that way.

Florry was forty-eight and had survived a brief and bad marriage as a young woman. She was one of the few divorced women in the county and thus looked down upon, as if somehow damaged and perhaps immoral. Not that she cared; she didn't. She had a few friends and seldom left her property. Behind her back she was often referred to as the Bird Lady, and not affectionately.

Marietta served them thick omelets with tomatoes and spinach, corn cakes bathed with butter, bacon, and strawberry jam. Except for the coffee, sugar, and salt, everything on the table came from their soil.

Florry said, "I received a letter from Stella yesterday. She seems to be doing fine, though struggling with calculus. She prefers literature and history. She is so much like me."

Pete's children were expected to write at least one letter a week to their aunt, who wrote to them at least twice a week. Pete wasn't much for letters and had told them not to bother. However, writing to their aunt was a strict requirement.

"Haven't heard from Joel," she said.

"I'm sure he's busy," Pete said as he flipped a page of the newspaper. "Is he still seeing that girl?"

"I suppose. He's much too young for romance, Pete, you should say something to him."

"He won't listen." Pete took a bite of his omelet. "I just want him to hurry up and graduate. I'm tired of paying tuition."

"I suppose the picking is going well," she said. She had hardly touched her food.

"Could be better, and the price dropped again yesterday. There's too much cotton this year."

"The price goes up and down, doesn't it? When the price is high there's not enough cotton and when it's low there's too much of it. Damned if you do, damned if you don't."

"I suppose." He had toyed with the idea of warning his sister of what was to come, but she would react badly, beg him not to do it, become hysterical, and they would fight, something they had not done in years. The killing would change her life dramatically, and on the one hand he pitied her and felt an obligation to explain. But on the other, he knew that it could not be explained, and attempting to do so would serve no useful purpose.

The thought that this could be their last meal together was difficult to comprehend, but then most things that morning were being done for the last time.

They were obliged to discuss the weather and this went on for a few minutes. According to the almanac, the next two weeks would be cool and dry, perfect for picking. Pete offered the same concerns about the lack of field hands, and she reminded him that this complaint was common every season. Indeed, last week over omelets he had lamented the shortage of temporary workers.

Pete was not one to linger over food, especially on this awful day. He had been starved during the war and knew how little the body needed to survive. A thin frame kept weight off his legs. He chewed a bite of bacon, sipped his coffee, turned another page, and listened as Florry went on about a cousin who had just died at ninety, too soon in her opinion. Death was on his mind and he wondered what the Tupelo paper would say about him in the days to come. There would be stories, and perhaps a lot of them, but he had no desire to attract attention. It was inevitable, though, and he feared the sensational.

"You're not eating much," she said. "And you're looking a bit thin."

"Not much of an appetite," he replied.

"How much are you smoking?"

"As much as I want."

He was forty-three, and, at least in her opinion, looked older. His thick dark hair was graying above his ears, and long wrinkles were forming across his forehead. The dashing young soldier who'd gone off to war was aging too fast. His memories and burdens were heavy, but he kept them to himself. The horrors he had survived would never be discussed, not by him anyway.

Once a month he forced himself to ask about her writing, her poetry. A few pieces had been published in obscure literary magazines in the last decade, but not much. In spite of her lack of success, she loved nothing more than to bore her brother, his children, and her small circle of friends with the latest developments in her career. She could prattle on forever about her "projects," or about certain editors who loved her poetry but just couldn't seem to find room for it, or fan letters she had received from around the world. Her following was not that wide, and Pete suspected the lone letter from some lost soul in New Zealand three years earlier was still the only one that arrived with a foreign stamp.

He didn't read poetry, and after being forced to read his sister's he had sworn off the stuff forever. He preferred fiction, especially from southern writers, and especially William Faulkner, a man he'd met before the war at a cocktail party in Oxford.

This morning was not the time to discuss it. He was facing an ugly chore, a monstrous deed, one that could not be avoided or postponed any longer.

He shoved his plate away, his food half-eaten, and finished his coffee. "Always a pleasure," he said with a smile as he stood. He thanked Marietta, put on his barn coat, and left the cottage. Mack was waiting on the front steps. From the porch Florry called good-bye to him as he walked away and waved without turning around.

Back on the dirt road he lengthened his stride and shook off the stiffness caused by half an hour of sitting. The sun was up and burning off the dew, and all around the thick bolls sagged on the stems and begged to be picked. He walked on, a lonely man whose days were numbered.

Nineva was in the kitchen, at the gas stove stewing the last tomatoes for canning. He said good morning, poured fresh coffee, and took it to his study, where he sat at his desk and arranged his papers. All bills were paid. All accounts were current and in order. The bank statements were reconciled and showed sufficient cash on hand. He wrote a one-page letter to his wife, addressed and stamped the envelope. He placed a checkbook and some files in a briefcase and left it beside his desk. From a bottom drawer he withdrew his Colt .45 revolver, checked to make sure all six chambers were loaded, and stuck it in the pocket of his barn jacket.

At eight o'clock, he told Nineva he was going to town and asked if she needed anything. She did not, and he left the front porch with Mack behind him. He opened the door to his new 1946 Ford pickup, and Mack jumped onto the passenger's side of the bench seat. Mack rarely missed a ride to town and today would be no different, at least for the dog.

The Banning home, a splendid Colonial Revival built by Pete's parents before the crash in 1929, sat on Highway 18, south of Clanton. The county road had been paved the year

before with postwar federal money. The locals believed that Pete had used his clout to secure the funding, but it wasn't true.

Clanton was four miles away, and Pete drove slowly, as always. There was no traffic, except for an occasional mule-drawn trailer laden with cotton and headed for the gin. A few of the county's larger farmers, like Pete, owned tractors, but most of the hauling was still done by mules, as were the plowing and planting. All picking was by hand. The John Deere and International Harvester corporations were trying to perfect mechanized pickers that would supposedly one day eliminate the need for so much manual labor, but Pete had his doubts. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered but the task at hand.

Cotton blown from the trailers littered the shoulders of the highway. Two sleepy-eyed colored boys loitered by a field road and waved as they admired his truck, one of two new Fords in the county. Pete did not acknowledge them. He lit a cigarette and said something to Mack as they entered the town.

Near the courthouse square he parked in front of the post office and watched the foot traffic come and go. He wished to avoid people he knew, or those who might know him, because after the killing any witnesses were apt to offer such banal observations as "I saw him and he seemed perfectly normal," while the next one might say, "Bumped into him at the post office and he had a deranged look about him." After a tragedy, those with even the slightest connections to it often exaggerate their involvement and importance.

He eased from his truck, walked to the letter box, and mailed the envelope to his wife. Driving away, he circled the courthouse, with its wide, shaded lawn and gazebos, and had a vague image of what a spectacle his trial might be.

Would they haul him in with handcuffs? Would the jury show sympathy? Would his lawyers work some magic and save him? Too many questions with no answers. He passed the Tea Shoppe, where the lawyers and bankers held forth each morning over scalding coffee and buttermilk biscuits, and wondered what they would say about the killing. He avoided the coffee shop because he was a farmer and had no time for the idle chitchat.

Let them talk. He expected little sympathy from them or from anyone else in the county for that matter. He cared nothing for sympathy, sought no understanding, had no plans to explain his actions. At the moment, he was a soldier with orders and a mission to carry out.

He parked on a quiet street a block behind the Methodist church. He got out, stretched his legs for a moment, zipped up his barn jacket, told Mack that he would return shortly, and began walking toward the church his grandfather had helped build seventy years earlier. It was a short walk, and along the way he saw no one. Later, no one would claim to have seen him.

The Reverend Dexter Bell had been preaching at the Clanton Methodist Church since three months before Pearl Harbor. It was the third church of his ministry, and he would have been rotated onward like all Methodist preachers but for the war. Shortages in the ranks had caused a shifting of duties, an upsetting of schedules. Normally, in the Methodist denomination, a minister lasted only two years in one church, sometimes three, before being reassigned. Reverend Bell had been in Clanton for five years and knew it was only a matter of time before he was called to move on. Unfortunately, the call did not arrive in time.

He was sitting at his desk in his office, in an annex behind the handsome sanctuary, alone as usual on Wednesday morning. The church secretary worked only three afternoons each week. The reverend had finished his morning prayers, had his study Bible open on his desk, along with two reference books, and was contemplating his next sermon when someone knocked on his door. Before he could answer, the door swung open, and Pete Banning walked in, frowning and filled with purpose.

Surprised at the intrusion, Bell said, "Well, good morning, Pete." He was about to stand when Pete whipped out a pistol with a long barrel and said, "You know why I'm here."

Bell froze and gawked in horror at the weapon and barely managed to say, "Pete, what are you doing?"

"I've killed a lot of men, Preacher, all brave soldiers on the field. You're the first coward."

"Pete, no, no!" Dexter said, raising his hands and falling back into his chair, eyes wide and mouth open. "If it's about Liza, I can explain. No, Pete!"

Pete took a step closer, aimed down at Dexter, and squeezed the trigger. He had been trained as a marksman with all firearms, and had used them in battle to kill more men than he cared to remember, and he had spent his life in the woods hunting animals large and small. The first shot went through Dexter's heart, as did the second. The third entered his skull just above the nose.

Within the walls of a small office, the shots boomed like cannon fire, but only two people heard them. Dexter's wife, Jackie, was alone in the parsonage on the other side of the church, cleaning the kitchen when she heard the noise. She later described it as the muffled sounds of someone clapping hands three times, and, at the moment, had no idea it was

gunfire. She couldn't possibly have known her husband had just been murdered.

Hop Purdue had been cleaning the church for twenty years. He was in the annex when he heard the shots that seemed to shake the building. He was standing in the hallway outside the pastor's study when the door opened and Pete walked out, still holding the pistol. He raised it, aimed it at Hop's face, and seemed ready to fire. Hop fell to his knees and pleaded, "Please, Mista Banning. I ain't done nothin'. I got kids, Mista Banning."

Pete lowered the gun and said, "You're a good man, Hop. Go tell the sheriff."