



AUTUMN 1942



CHAPTER ONE



THE SHOT RANG THROUGH THE TREES FOR MILES, echoing off the river bottoms until only a mumbled hush rustled through the leaves. The resounding bang from the shotgun set the pup's feet in motion. Without thinking of which direction to run, he fled from the sound as quickly as his paws could carry him. War Horse, a young Doberman named for his great size, did not yet have the courageous temperament to match his name.

"Go home, go home!" is what raced through his mind with every leap and bound. Tearing through the brush and trees toward home was all he knew to do. His feet were a step ahead of him, and he knew he would get to safety soon.

War Horse had his sight set on the distance when suddenly, he tumbled head over feet into the dirt. He lay there whining, more from fear than pain. His vision came into focus. Staring back at him was a gaze more horrified than his

own. He looked into the black, glossy eyes, afraid the beast would attack if he moved. The animal huffed and panted. Then, the light in its eyes faded to a cold, silent stare. War Horse whimpered again, hoping his people would hear him. Their scent was still in the air, so he knew they were nearby.

Fixated on the great animal seemingly made from flesh and branches, he rose slowly to his feet. He could hear the crunching of leaves in the distance and the children's voices coming closer. Although his heart still beat wildly from fear, curiosity drew him nearer to the lifeless creature that lay before him. Paw by paw, he inched toward the body. The smell was distantly familiar—like his own on a hot day. He sniffed deeply, moving closer to the unknown musk that filled the air around him. Confused, he began to bark and howl. He needed to be found. He needed his people to see what he had found.

The children weren't far behind, looking for him, and War Horse's loud cries made him easy to track.

"Well, I'll be." Jonas laughed. "This little pup of yours may be gun-shy, but he sure does have a nose on him. Look what he's barkin' at." Jonas pulled the branches back, casting light onto the dead buck. "Told ya he was a six-pointer." Jonas snickered and grabbed the buck by its antlers, lifting its head toward his sister, Kay.

Being fifteen, this was not the first time Jonas had taken a deer. He had gone on his first hunt with his father before he was ten. With his father away most of the time, this

kill was Jonas's own, and he felt accomplished. Although exhilarated by his self-reliance, he still sought recognition from Kay.

"Do you need to count these points for yourself?" Jonas grinned, waiting for a response.

"Yeah, yeah. You were right again," Kay admitted. "He has a six-point rack, but if it wasn't for War Horse, you would have never found him. You're lucky that buck dropped where he did."

War Horse, frightened and fascinated, pounced back and forth beside the dead deer, waiting for Kay to retrieve him. The tone of Jonas's voice filled War Horse with a sudden sense of pride. He wanted Kay to also relish in his glory, never mind that it was accidental.

Kay solemnly examined the animal she had been admiring just moments ago through distant trees. The buck had seemed so peaceful, so completely unaware that its life was about to end. She hadn't before, but now being closer, she recognized this buck. She had been nine or ten when she had first seen him, a velvety yearling. Over time, she had witnessed his antlers grow and harden. Each year, they became even more magnificent. At dawn and dusk, Kay would regularly see him step from the cover of the woods. He would graze on the grasses at the edge of the field where she would sit among the wildflowers. He had never fled when he sensed her closeness. He seemed to trust her. The two would find themselves locked in a gaze of what she felt

was shared understanding. Sometimes she thought if she reached out to beckon him, he would approach, and she would be able to feel his soft, shiny coat. The buck always kept his distance though, and she respectfully kept hers. His behavior and stature made him seem almost dignified.

Now, being as still and quiet as when she had first spotted him, the deer had been robbed of his majesty. His fur was flat and wiry, and his body no longer looked strong and spirited. She immediately regretted pointing him out to her brother. Jonas would have most likely frightened the deer off before ever seeing him had she not been there. She worried it was her scent, her presence, that kept the deer from being spooked. For one final moment, she found herself locked in a gaze with the buck, and she began to feel sick.

War Horse whined again, begging for Kay's attention. He was puzzled by the difference in Jonas and Kay's dispositions. Kay did not seem pleased with him like Jonas was.

"Don't you see what I am standing next to?" War Horse tried to ask, with a series of squealing yips. "Maybe she doesn't quite understand what a great job I have done." He shifted his weight onto his hind legs and dug his paws deep into the ground. "Look what I've found!" He began to yelp desperately, hoping Kay would come closer.

Kay ducked under the limbs and tried to coax War Horse out from the web of green briars, but he wouldn't budge. He was starting to get too heavy for her to carry. However, War Horse refused to come out of the branches

on his own. Kay had no choice but to kneel down and pull him out by his front legs. As she lifted him up like a child, the puppy wrapped his paws around her neck.

War Horse nuzzled into her coat. He inhaled until her warm scent filled his nostrils. He always felt safe in Kay's arms. Feeling the heat of his body against hers, Kay snuggled him back and kissed him between his eyes. This always made War Horse happy.

"If ya didn't spoil that dog, maybe he would live up to his name," Jonas griped. "Now let him be, and help me get this deer out of the brush. He's got himself good and tangled in these thorns." Tossing a rope from his pack at Kay's feet, Jonas leaned back into the brambles, pushing the branches away. "We gotta get back before the old man does, or we are gonna be in a world of trouble."

"More like *you're* gonna be," Kay reminded Jonas. "You were the one who took his gun. I just came along to watch you miss the shot." Kay, letting her previous thoughts pass, smiled and winked at Jonas, but he didn't smile back. He stayed focused and kept working on pulling the deer from the brambles.

"Well, I didn't miss," Jonas snapped, "and maybe when you aren't hungry this winter, you'll quit hounding me about my shootin'. Now quit your chatter and help me get this guy on the sledge. If I don't get him dressed and salted before morning, you know all this meat will rot and go to waste. That'll stink to high heaven, and we sure don't need

no coyotes sniffin' around our farm for a smelly carcass with what little livestock we've got left."

Jonas finally freed the deer from the brush and pulled its massive body into a clearing. When he first thought about going hunting earlier that morning, Jonas was confident he could bag a deer—and he had been right. But now, staring at the size of the buck, he wasn't sure if he and Kay would be strong enough to get it home.

"I'm sure Daddy will help you quarter him when he gets home. He's gonna be real proud of you, Jo. Mama would be proud of you too." Kay stopped talking abruptly, knowing she had once again said the wrong thing. Sometimes, she couldn't believe what spewed from her own mouth. Not wanting to make eye contact with Jonas after her blunder, she snuggled her face back into War Horse's muzzle, hoping Jonas hadn't heard her.

Jonas did hear her though. He stopped what he was doing and stared at Kay in disbelief. He couldn't believe his own temper. His blood felt hot, and his skin burned. He fired back at Kay, "That old man ain't my daddy no more. He's just a drunk, and when he comes crawlin' back around, you know damn well he ain't gonna help us do nothin'! When are you gonna get that into your thick skull? And Mama, well, Mama is dead and in the ground. So I'm not real sure she's feeling proud or anything these days. Now, dang girl, help me drag this meat home so we can have somethin' to eat!"

Kay's cheeks began to flush, and her eyes stung. Jonas had never spoken to her with such callousness, no matter how foolish or hard-headed she could be.

War Horse glanced back and forth between the siblings. He loved them both so much, but he had never heard Jonas raise his voice toward Kay. The tone of Jonas's voice triggered something inside the pup that made the hair on his back stand up. Kay was his girl, and he wanted Jonas to stop yelling at her. Somewhere from deep in his body came a low grumble that made his lip curl above his front teeth.

Jonas heard War Horse growl and realized he was being far too harsh with his sister. He knew Kay didn't deserve to be hollered at. She wasn't who he was really angry at. He took a deep breath and apologized. "I'm sorry, Kay," he said. "I just know I'm the man of the house these days, and you bein' my little sister, I know I gotta take care of you. Now come on and help me. Please."

Gathering her emotions and trying to lighten the moment, Kay teased, "I'm goin' on thirteen, ya know. And the way you act, I'm gonna catch up to you real soon." Kay laughed when Jonas shook his head and smirked back at her. She knew Jonas was trying his hardest to take care of everything that needed to be taken care of. He was becoming more and more bossy and hot-headed toward her the longer their father was away though. Biting her tongue did not come naturally to Kay. The overwhelming urge to put her brother in his place when she felt wronged by him

always seemed to win over. Knowing Jonas had her best interest in mind, Kay put War Horse back on the ground so she could help her brother. She started strapping the deer down to the makeshift sledge Jonas had constructed from nearby tree limbs.

War Horse bounced and yipped at the dead animal lying on the sledge. He was still scared and confused, but with Kay being so near to him he felt a sense of bravery. "Why did the animal just lie there?" War Horse worried. "Why didn't it wake and fight or run?" War Horse mustered up enough courage to touch the bound beast. He darted forward with his fiercest growl. As his paws and nose touched the still-warm body, War Horse felt a sharp pain in his side as he was knocked over backward.

"Jonas! Don't!" Kay yelled. She ran to her puppy to pick him back up. War Horse whimpered and yelped until he felt the safety of her arms. "It's okay, War Horse," she said. She petted her pup under his chin. "You're fine, just fine," she told him.

Kay glared at Jonas. "You didn't have to kick him, Jo. He isn't big enough to hurt anything. He's only twelve weeks old."

"Three months and built like a horse! I don't understand why you're still trying to carry him around. I didn't even kick him that hard. Besides, he was about to ruin our meat!" Jonas scolded Kay. "I said you could keep him if he wasn't a bother and we could afford him. If he goes messin'

with our food, he goes. I am not about to go hungry for a good-for-nothin' dog."



The two-mile trek back to the farm was made in silence. Jonas pulled the sledge behind him over the muddy trail as Kay walked ahead, clearing the path of branches and stones. War Horse followed behind Kay, pouncing at her heels. Here and there, he would bring a stick back to her that she had just pitched aside. Even though playing fetch was more work for her, the game made Kay giggle. Each time War Horse returned, she patiently took the stick from him and lobbed it through the air again.

War Horse, presuming Kay was pleased, continued doing his best to help. He wanted to be helpful, and he never wanted to let her out of his sight. He knew she would always be there to protect him, and he loved her for that.

As the sun was setting, the children made their way from the edge of the piney woodland to the open field and the homestead below. The sky was on fire with hues of red and orange. Although dark inside, the old house glowed a soft yellow from the fading sunlight reflecting off the home's peeling white paint. Jonas let down the sledge and took his sister's hand for a moment.

"Do you remember how Mama used to bring us up here to see?" Jonas asked Kay.

The low rolling hill was just high enough to see past the farm and down to the river. Following the river east toward the ocean, they could see the clouds of smoke and steam floating upward from the cargo boats at the landing. Whenever Jonas or Kay were scared or sad, their mother would walk them up on the hill and point to the little port far off in the distance. Although they could not see the boats, the children always felt better knowing the harbor was where their father was at.

“He will be home soon,” their mother would say. “And he will bring you something to make you smile. Just give it some time. In time, you will always find something to make you smile.” She would take Jonas and Kay by their hands, and together the three would run down the hill through the field toward home.

Remembering the last time she had stood on the hillside with Jonas and their mother, Kay replied, “Mama loved this place and all that it was. At least, I thought she did.” Kay looked out at the sun setting and the way the light lit the house up, making it seem almost welcoming.

The small patch of wildflowers that stretched out before the house was still blooming with black-eyed Susans and asters even though it was late October. Kay would never forget planting all the seeds that she and her mother collected on their walks. She remembered how eager she was to plant them. That was, until she realized how hard it was to pull out all of the clumps of weeds to get to the soil.

“Oh, how I fussed when we tilled up the ground with a hoe because Daddy wouldn’t let us use the tractor,” she said to herself.

“That’s a waste of good kerosene,” Luke had said. “Those flowers will never take root, anyhow.”

Her mother just laughed at him. “We’ll just see, now won’t we, Luke?” Remembering that phrase made Kay smile. Her father always ate his words when her mother said that, and Kay knew he loved her mama’s teasing. In her mind, Kay could still see and hear her mother jumping up and down at the window. She could see her mother clapping her hands and hear her singing the little song she had made up the day the first few flowers finally bloomed. Kay’s eyes glistened as she pictured her mother laughing and rubbing it in to her father that those old seeds did take root.

And her father, he just put his arms around her mother and smiled. He gave her a stinky kiss on her cheek and said, “You’re right, Joy. Happiness grows where it is planted.” Kay thought about her father and his stinky kisses. How he would gently lip bite and kiss her mother’s cheek when she was being sassy.

Her mother would press into her father’s chest and say, “I love you, Luke. I love us.” Kay’s favorite memories were of her parents laughing. Those moments when her mother would tease her father because she was right and he was wrong. She remembered how smart and strong she believed her mother was.

"Mama was always right," Kay said aloud.

"She wasn't always right." Jonas grumbled and let loose Kay's hand. "If she was always right, she would still be here right now, wouldn't she?"

Jonas gave one last heave to the sledge with all his strength and started the downhill trek to the barn. He had a long night ahead of him butchering the meat with no one to help him. Even though Kay said she would, Jonas knew she didn't want to. The last time he asked her to clean a simple catfish, she cried through the whole process and then she barely touched her dinner. With food being scarce these days, Jonas couldn't chance having her not eat what he put on the table. So he lit the lantern and closed the barn doors behind him. He knew the closed doors would signal to Kay that it was best for her to make her way back into the house.

Kay sat on the hill, watching the sun set over what was once a place she loved and thought she would never want to leave. There were so many good memories she didn't want to let go of. Suddenly, one memory overpowered them all, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't forget it.

War Horse climbed onto Kay's lap and nestled into her sweater. The sound of her breathing and the beating of her heart comforted him.

"One day, War Horse," Kay said, "one day, we are going to plant happiness. I just don't know if it will be here."

War Horse looked up at Kay with his big golden eyes. He wanted so badly to know what she was saying to him.

He could feel that she was sad, but he didn't know why. So he rolled out of her sweater, wiggled his bottom, jumped around her feet, and barked his best bark.

Kay couldn't help but chuckle at his obvious affection for her. She hopped up and began to run down the hill. "Come on, War Horse!" she shouted. "We have to go home."

At the word "home," War Horse perked up his ears—this, he understood. Without waiting another second, he too was running down the hill toward home.