



 CHAPTER I 

*The Best Critter God Made*

I'd seent plenty of animals by the time I was old 'nough to start talking, but only one kind worked me up so much that it pult the first real word I said out my mouth.

And 'cording to the only folks who was there to witness the whole fuss, the word kept tumbling outta me o'er and o'er for more'n half a day.

Long 'nough for Ma and Pap to wonder if I'd banged my head on something and got tetchted. Long 'nough for 'em to start looking 'round for something to tie 'crost my mouth to hesh me up.

I don't know what it was 'bout this critter that riled me

so, 'cause when you holt it up next to other animals, there ain't that much that's spec-tac-a-lar 'bout it.

It ain't nowhere near's big as a b'ar. And it can't knock the biggest, strongest man down with one swipe.

It ain't nowhere near's sly nor quick as a cat; it ain't no good at all at mousing nor catching holt of birds without a lot of help.

And it ain't got nothing as bad a rep-a-tation as a snake; it don't get nowhere near the 'mount of talking 'bout in the Bible that snakes do.

I'd seent all them critters and plenty more, but it wasn't till Pap set the puppy that growed up to be Pinky next to me in the dirt of the front yard that I said, "Dog!"

I guess I done more than just say it; it's tolt that I screamed, "Dog! Dog! Dog! Dog! Dog! Dog! Dog! Dog . . ."

Pap tells me, "Little Charlie, neither you nor the pup hadn't showed signs of being nothing but dour and gloom-ish, but when we put you one next to the other . . . well, sir, it was though someone struck a flint on gunpowder! Sparks flew; y'all both made noises that neither pup nor babe had ever made afore, all the while rolling and laughing in the dust, then, like y'all had a talk 'bout it and took a vote, tore off in them woods together."

Which was shocking, Ma and Pap said, since I hadn't even started crawling proper.

Ma tells me, “We was worried sick ’bout you, Charlie. Why, if I had a penny for each person what axed me if you was a dimwit, I’d be rich as George Washington! I don’t know how many times I had to tell folks you was just a babe, and not five or six years old, that that was why you wasn’t walking or talking.”

I figger the real reason was I hadn’t seent nothing worth talking ’bout till I seent Pinky, and nothing worth getting up and chasing after till that particular minute neither.

Ma said the way I chased after that puppy brung to mind this contraption she’d seent at a fair in the city of Charleston when she was a girl.

“A automaton,” she called it. “’Twas one-half fancy pocket watch, one-half tin can, and one-half little boy, and it moved jus’ as stiff and wobblish as you done running after that puppy, Charlie.”

I don’t remember doing the talking, but the picture of that wiggling, squirming, wet-tongued, fat ball of fussing and fur is in my head so strong that it’s something I’m-a be pondering ’bout for the rest of my days. And I’m a real big ponderer.

When me and Ma is working the fields and the time’s dragging, I learnt to make myself think on things so’s I won’t go dim-witted. I seent what’s happened to Ma, how

she keep on chopping or digging or weeding without doing no thinking. I seent how if you keep working without doing no thinking in the field, it 'come a bad habit and you can't help but do it elsewhere too.

We look at it different.

She says the best way to get through working the fields is to make her head be still and quiet as a pond. I want mine to be a river crashing through a waterfall. I got to be thinking 'bout something or else my head'll pop.

That's how I figgered out why dogs has worked their way so far 'neath my skin; now that I'm older and had lots of chances to see and be 'round other critters, I think it come down to the eyes.

At that first meeting-up with Pinky, n'en one of us couldn't talk, but we traded looks and both seent something one in the 'nother. When I looked in that puppy's eyes, I seent myself looking back! Sure's if her eyes was mirrors or a couple of shined-up silver cups. Not jus' the 'flection of me, but something that said, "This here critter knows you."

And I knowed when she was looking in my eyes she seent the same 'zact thing.

It didn't take but a half a second, but that look's what got us both to cavorting and carrying on so. And that's a

look that no animal, other than a dog, has ever give me since.

No other animal and not very many people neither.

Stanky, whose ma was Pinky, had give birth to a litter of six pups and they all lived. After they was 'zactly forty-nine days old, Pap said me and him had to look 'em o'er to see if there was a hunting dog in the bunch.

Pap tolt me, "A good dog is the same as a good person; they's born that way, not made. Ain't no silk purse ever been made out of a sow's ear."

The pups was squirming and sliding o'er one the 'nother, carrying on something fierce, nipping at anything that moved, not caring if they was biting their brother or sister or even their own selfs. Jus' looking to get any kind of puppy meat that they could in them sharp pinnish teeth.

All their antics was first-rate nonsense to me.

I'd axed Pap, "But how can you tell if they's gonna be any good hunting when they's acting so coltish and foolish, Pap?"

"There's a couple ways we do it."

Pap brung one the wood crates out the shed and set it on the forest floor behind the cabin. Then we brung the

pups and put 'em inside the crate. They was still so small that they had plenty room to move 'bout.

Pap said, "I'm thinking it's that black one with the white spot on her tail. We'll see how good my eye is."

I couldn't let Pap know, but that one's name was Ashes.

When the pups had been first born, Pap got vexed with me once I started naming 'em. I couldn't unna-stand why, but he'd made me stop.

I named 'em anyway and kept it to myself.

"Keep a sharp eye on 'em and tell me what you see."

Pap had gone to the shed and brung out four of his bullets and his pistol. He kept 'em hid under the floorboards wrapped up in a fancy piece of thick purple curtain that had beautiful gold tassels sewed on 'longside the fringe.

The curtain was well knowed throughout all of South Carol-liney. It was so fancy 'cause Ma had bought it offen a woman who is the cousin of George Washington. The woman tolt Ma that George give a whole set of 'em to his wife, Martha, for her birthday and Martha got vexed, saying George had gone cheap on her, paying only five hunnert dollars 'stead of the five thousand dollars she was 'customed to having spent on her. She couldn't 'bide having nothing so common in her home and sold the curtains to George's cousin for next to nothing.

Ma had tolt me that meeting the woman was a sign that the luck of the Bobos was changing. She said in life, there was good luck followed by no luck, followed by bad luck, followed by tragical luck, followed by the luck of the Bobos.

Pap reached in the crate and pult out the first of the pups, Ashes. He flipped her on her back and helt her down by her belly.

She squirmed for a second, then set still.

Pap kept her pinned down.

After a bit she began tussling to get set free, even biting at Pap's hand.

Pap shook his head and smiled.

He done the same with each of the rest of the pups.

Some of 'em fought like badgers to get up soon's they was flipped, some of 'em jus' laid there waiting to see what was gonna happen. Curly and Nippy done the same as Ashes.

Pap put 'em all back in the crate and unwrapped the pistol out the curtain.

He loaded it up with four bullets and raised it o'er his head.

I covered my ears.

Pap pulled the trigger and the forest shook from the boom.



Me and all six of them pups flinched.

Pap waited a second, then fired the next three bullets fast-fast.

Sagebrush, Ol' Thunder, and Squalane kept on flinching with each shot that come, then pressed theyselves into the corners of the crate, whining and spinning in circles.

Ashes, Curly, and Nippy was different. They come to 'tention after that first flinch and was staring up at the gun with their front legs stiff as stone and their chests all bowed out and their eyes burning. Their ears was perked up and, 'stead of being scairt by the noise, they was looking for more of it. These was the same three that stayed still at first when Pap flipped 'em but soon tired of the whole thing and fought.

Ashes was even making a huffing sound, as though she wanted to bark but wasn't sure if she should.

I set to com-fitting the scairt puppies. I didn't want Pap to know I'd disobeyed his orders, so 'stead of using their proper names I didn't say nothing more than "It's all right, li'l pup" and "There, there, girl."

Pap laughed and shouted, "Man alive! That ol' dog done birthed three hunters! Come on, boy; don't tell your ma, but once they's growed and I gets 'em trained, she gonna be getting a store-bought dress! And you's gonna be

getting some proper shoes! Three hunters outta one litter! We'll keep one of 'em, and you get to decide which."

I didn't let another second get by; I said, "We'll keep the one with the white-tip tail!"

Pap didn't suspect nothing. I said, "And I'm gonna call her Ashes," which only made sense since that was already her name.

Pap roughed up Stanky's neck and said, "What a dog!"

The next day, when me and Ma come out the field toward dusk, I was washing off at the pump. Soon's she seent me, Stanky starts up doing something she ain't never done afore. She gets to whining and rubbing herself 'gainst my legs, acting cattish!

I pushed her off twice, then on the third time, I was fixing to give her a good swat, but I seent how upset she was, so I helt up.

What come to mind was that one the pups must've got sick or maybe even died. Without drying off or nothing, I went 'round back of the shed to see if that's what got Stanky so jumpy.

I looked down in the crate where she kept 'em and couldn't believe my eyes. Only Ashes, Nippy, and Curly jumped up to give me greetings. Sagebrush, Ol' Thunder, and Squalane wasn't nowhere to be seent.

I looked to the woods and whistled for 'em, but nobody answered.

“Where they at, Stanky?”

She kept looking at me all pitiful, whining and sniffing at the crate.

I tolt Ma.

She cut her eyes and said, “They probably done run off, Charlie. Or maybe they was sick and Stanky took 'em out in the forest to let nature have her way. I don't know, son, there's other things to fret 'bout. Let me scare something up for you to eat.”

And even though I had my 'spicions 'bout what really happened to them three pups that had flinched with every shot, first thing after I woke up for two weeks straight, afore I went off to the fields, I'd stand behind the cabin and try whistling 'em up and calling 'em home.

I guess it mean ain't no doubt I'm a Bobo; I didn't have no luck at all.