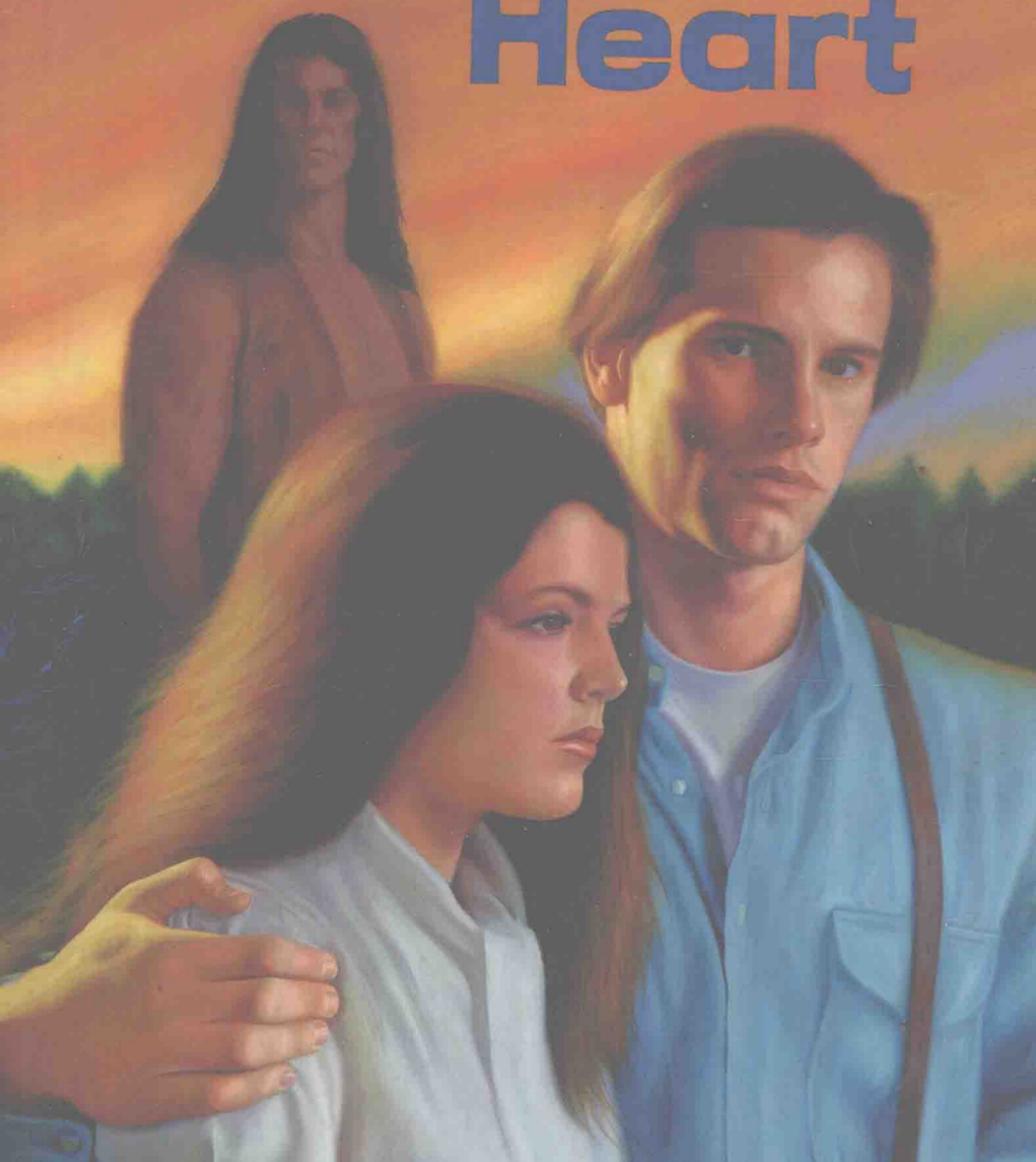


Judy Carole Rhodes

The Hunter's Heart



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by Judy Carole Rhodes

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Summary: Having inherited his grandfather's property in rural Arkansas, Benjy works the land with the encouragement of old Coot Hunter, whom he is able to help in return when a secret surfaces from Coot's past.

Sequel to "The King Boy."

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To you . . . the she-Wolf spirit.
Your blue-feathered love will always be my
PEACE.

The Hunter's Heart



1

COOT HUNTER STEPPED OUT ONTO THE PORCH OF this one-room cabin. The sun was just before announcing a new day as the shadows of the night faded away. Romeo and Juliet, two speckled hunting dogs, raised their sleepy heads and yawned a good morning to their master. Coot chuckled. "Get up, you ole mangy no-good-for-nothin' hound dogs." Both dogs responded to the familiar greeting and sat up, scratched at some bothersome fleas, and then sauntered over to Coot.

The old man seated himself in a cane-bottom

rocker that was worn and had seen its better days. Both dogs sat in front of him with their tails wagging and their eyes begging for his attention. The dogs were almost identical twins, and on first appearance the only noticeable difference was the size of their heads. Juliet was smaller and more petite, and her eyes were set closer together and always seemed a bit brighter. Romeo was big-headed, with lazy eyes that moved slow and looked sad.

Coot reached out with both hands and began scratching the dogs behind their ears as he spoke in a low, gentle voice. "Romeo and Juliet, two best dogs in the county. Can't nobody outhunt you, outrun you, outsmart you, or outeat you." The old man's scratching and soft, rhythmic voice was like a lullaby to a newborn baby. The dogs let their eyes close halfway in contentment.

Coot kept scratching the dogs as he sat waiting for the sun to peer over the oaks that surrounded his cabin. A familiar sadness filled him as his eyes scanned the woods that lay before him. It wouldn't be long now, he thought to himself. The uninvited outside world was slowly but surely making its way to his door, and he was powerless to stop it. His cabin was in the heart of the prime woodlands, which had stood proud and unmo-

lested for centuries. These woods were priceless to the logging companies. Coot had been watching their progress for the past two years, and he knew it was just a matter of time before the very oaks he sat watching would be cut and hauled to the lumberyards.

Coot returned his attention to the dogs and murmured, "It's a miserable thought, but we won't be here when they come. I don't know where we'll go or what we'll do, but I can't stay and watch it happen. It just ain't in me." Juliet licked at the old man's hand, and Romeo lay down like a burden had been placed on his back.

Coot stood up and walked over to the well bucket and took the dipper that hung from a nail on the side of his cabin. He dipped the water that was still cool from the night air and let out a satisfying "ahhhh" as he finished the last drink. Coot lowered his head and reached into the bucket with cupped hands. He splashed the water to his face and then rubbed vigorously as if trying to erase his first thoughts of the morning.

Hanging on the wall was a broken mirror, which revealed only one part of his face. Coot said to no one, "Just perfect for a man blinded in one eye." He looked into the mirror and with his finger traced the long, ugly scar that trailed down

from his bad eye and stopped at his chin. He allowed himself this time each morning to remember his past and say a silent prayer. It was a ritual that was just as necessary for his survival as food and water. It wasn't good to start a new day with sad old thoughts, but it sure helped to get them out and then go on with living.

As Coot walked back to the cabin door, he ran his fingers through his hair and the long beard that hung down midway to his chest. That would be all the grooming either would get for the day. He reached inside the door and grabbed his hat and then started out to do a few morning chores before breakfast. He slapped the side of his thigh and Juliet fell into a prance behind him, excited that she had been invited. Romeo hesitated and then lumbered across the yard as though failing to see the necessity of the trip.

This was the sight the sun witnessed as it shone its first ray of light across the small clearing in the backwoods of southern Arkansas.



2

BENJY AWOKE AT THE BREAK OF DAWN AND ROLLED over, hoping to go back to sleep. It was Saturday morning, and even though a day's work in the field awaited him, he wanted to sleep in. As he tossed and turned, he felt the soreness in his muscles. He had been putting up winter hay for the cows all week and his body was tired. Feeling guilty, Benjy finally gave in and got up from his warm bed. He walked past his grandpa's room and instinctively glanced at the emptiness. When he had moved into the old farmhouse, he hadn't

been sure if he would ever get used to his grandpa not being there. Two years had passed since his grandpa's death, and everything had been left to Benjy in the will. All the land, the house, the truck, and a sizable bank account now belonged to a boy learning quickly to become a man with all the responsibilities he had inherited.

His grandpa's only request had been that Benjy finish his schooling before taking over the farm. Until that time, Mr. J. B. Harris, a neighboring farmer, had agreed to oversee the King Farm, as long as he could run his own cattle on the land. The arrangement had worked out just fine for a year. Then Mr. Harris got sick. He had tried his best to keep things up, but the farm had suffered from lack of full-time attention.

Benjy had finally struggled through and finished school in May. It had seemed like such a useless waste of time when he knew that farming would be his life. But on graduation day, the effort became a valuable memory. Seeing his momma and papa filled with joy and pride added to Benjy's sense of accomplishment. Graduation wasn't all about books and learning. It was about earning some self-respect, something nobody could take from you once you felt it. He knew that now.

Moving away from home had been difficult. Benjy was hoping that his momma and papa would move to the King Farm with him and help work it. One night he sat down with the both of them and asked if they would consider the idea. His papa thought for a minute and then tried to explain. "Son, I don't expect you to understand this, but that old farmhouse don't hold nothing but bad memories for me. When I went over to take care of my daddy's body, it was the first time I had been back in that house in over twenty years. When I walked through the door, I saw my brother, Buddy, playing cowboys and Indians and riding his stick horse around the room, with me chasing right behind him. Those were the happy times and the good memories, and it was almost like time had stood still for me. But when I walked into Daddy's bedroom and saw him lying dead in his bed, I remembered my momma dying the same way, with me sitting beside her.

"And that's when all my memories went bad. I couldn't remember any more good times. It was just Daddy ranting and raving all night about how Buddy let our momma die. It was the beatings Buddy got with a leather strap for no other reason than Daddy needing someone to blame for her dying. When Buddy ran away, I hated my

daddy. I still can't help but believe that my brother would be alive today if Daddy had been more understanding instead of crazy and mean to Buddy.

"I know you didn't learn the truth about your grandpa until after he died, and it was hard for you to believe that the man you loved so much could be so cruel. But I've been living with it all my life, and I just hope you'll understand that I can forgive, but I can't forget. And I can't live in that house again. Maybe someday I'll be able to, but not now. I'll come over and help you when I can, but we ain't moving. Mr. Harris said he wouldn't be able to help you anymore, but I think you can handle it now."

Benjy understood what his papa was saying, but it still didn't seem right that he should be the only one to enjoy all he had been given. "Papa, if you don't want to live there, won't you at least take some of the money and buy a logging truck or pay off your land? It just don't feel right that I should be getting all this and you're getting nothing."

His papa smiled a thank you. "Your grandpa knew what he was doing when he left everything to you. It's only right that the farm stay in our family, and I'm glad we've got you to make sure that happens. I didn't want nothing from my

daddy when he was alive and I sure don't want it now. Everything I got, I got on my own, and that means something to me. In this part of the country, a common man either makes his way logging or farming. Don't get me wrong; I ain't complaining. Logging is a good, honest way to make a living, but it's also a good way to die young and poor. You've been given a good start in life, and I'm happy for you. That's my daddy's gift to me. There's no need in you feeling guilty over good fortune."

Benjy had begun moving from his home the next day. He was scared about being out on his own with all the responsibilities of running a farm, but he knew it was the right thing to do.

Benjy walked into the kitchen and made a pot of coffee and started frying a full skillet of bacon. He laid two biscuits next to the pan to warm. His momma had brought a full batch over yesterday morning, and he had eaten on them all day. His momma's cooking was the one thing he missed the most. The mingling smells of coffee and bacon filled the kitchen, and Benjy smiled. It was the same way his grandpa had started each day.

Benjy poured a cup of coffee and put the bacon

inside the biscuits. He walked out onto the front porch and seated himself in his grandpa's rocker. He noticed his dog, Blue Jr., was nowhere around, and he remembered hearing the dog's baying bark last night before falling asleep. Unlike the dog's father, Ole Blue the First, Blue Jr. had turned out to be quite a hunter. It wasn't unusual for him to hunt for two days straight without coming home. The first morning when Blue didn't show up, Benjy was in a panic and spent the whole day searching up and down the roads for his dog. Late that evening when Benjy returned home, there was Blue Jr. on the front porch. He was covered with mud and beggar's lice, and briars were tangled in his fur. He looked at Benjy as if to say, "Where you been all day? I'm hungry."

Benjy knew his dog was out hunting again, but he still felt an uneasiness with Blue gone. He took his first sip of coffee, made an awful face, and swallowed. His momma had shown him twice how to make a good pot of coffee, but he just couldn't seem to get it right.

He looked out across the hay fields and thought of the day that lay before him. Saturdays had been his day to spend with Coot Hunter. He and the old man had become good friends as well

as good hunting buddies. It was like nothing Benjy had ever experienced to be in the woods with the old man, who in every way lived up to his legend of being the best hunter in the county. There wasn't an animal alive that Coot couldn't imitate in sound, and it was amazing to hear him call them up out of the woods. No sign went unnoticed; Coot was an expert in recognizing animals by just the marks they left behind.

Unless Coot was in need of fresh meat or a particular pelt was bringing a good price, they never killed anymore. Benjy noticed this change in Coot, and when he asked the old man about it, Coot thought for a minute and then said, "I don't know, boy. I guess the older a man gets, the more he understands about being alive. It don't feel too good to take life away from anything." Benjy learned that hunting didn't always mean killing, and some of the best hunting trips were when they left the dogs at home and became quiet observers of the animals.

Thinking about Coot and hunting helped Benjy make up his mind about the day. His grandpa had always said, "Make hay while the sun shines." But today's hay was going to have to wait.

He finished eating all but one half of his biscuit and stood up and whistled for Blue Jr. He thought he heard a yelp and called out, "Blue, you better come get this biscuit before I eat it." Benjy heard a faint whimper, and he jumped from the porch and took off running in the direction of the sound. He stopped halfway to the hay barn and called again. Blue Jr. yelped once more, and Benjy knew something was wrong. He ran inside the barn and found his dog curled in the hay, licking his leg. Blue tried to get up when he saw Benjy, but the boy was quick to his side and gently pushed the dog back down. As Benjy touched the dog's leg, Blue licked at his hand as if to say, "~~Be careful. It~~ hurts awful bad."

Benjy scratched behind the dog's ear and spoke in a soft, reassuring voice. His eyes saw the tiny fang marks in the swollen flesh of Blue's leg, and he knew the dog had been snake-bitten. Relief overcame Benjy. A snakebite could be fixed. He had been afraid of finding a wild-animal wound, which always meant the possibility of rabies. Benjy had also seen what a steel trap could do to a dog's leg. Most of the time the damage was so severe that the dog died, and if he lived, he never walked the same again.

Benjy smiled into the sad, drooping eyes that