

Chapter 1

The Cherry Orchard

In the southern part of Washington State, rocky bluffs of pine-needle green jut up from where the White Salmon River grapples with the mighty waters of the Columbia. And atop those bluffs roll acres of orchardland.

Not too many years ago a blue-and-white trailer nestled there amid a grove of cherry trees. Beside the trailer grew a garden. And in the garden Becka Bailey watered a last row of corn while her younger brother, Kurt, sampled a tomato. His straight, leaf-brown hair looked as if someone had overturned a glossy bowl onto his head and left it there.

“Oops!” the girl called out as the hose “accidentally” sprayed the boy.

His startled face melted quickly into a good-natured grin. “Aw, Becka!” he chided as juicy red dribbled down his chin. It mixed with cherry stains and dirt already there from earlier samplings.

The late-June sun had chased away the frequent westerly winds blowing up the Gorge, leaving the usual rustling orchard still and warm that morning. All Becka could hear was the plunk, plunk of cherries dropping into tin buckets, her mother’s singing, and the occasional clatter of boxes in her grandmother’s busy orchard. Then there were the chubby robins and rude crows arguing over the sweetest cherries, plump in their ebony jackets among the treetops.

Suddenly the motor of Grandma Shirley’s little orange pickup sprang to life, and so did Becka. She raced to turn off the faucet, then hiked toward her mother’s tree. Kurt tagged behind, her four-year-old shadow in shorts and striped shirt. After him followed their fluffy, white puppies, Sergeant and Trooper, all making a parade of sorts up the grassy hill.

Just then another motor caught Becka’s attention, this one deep and rattling. She turned and glimpsed a rusty car with no

COYOTES IN THE WIND

top pulling into their place, churning up clouds of dust. Through the dust peered two of the blackest eyes Becca had ever seen - eyes without a child's joy. But they belonged to a child, she noticed, a girl about six, her own age, with hair as dark as Becca's was sun-bleached.

"Oh, good!" she mused. "Someone to play with."

But later, when the strangers from the battered car donned pickers' buckets and climbed ladders, Becca suddenly felt shy in the face of the somber-eyed newcomer.

"I'm Flora," the girl said.

"I'm Becca."

"Where's your camp?"

"Oh, I live here - in that trailer," the blond girl explained. "That's my mother talking to my Grandma Shirley." She pointed to the petite woman whose long brown hair was tucked haphazardly under a straw hat.

Becca inched closer to the ladies and eavesdropped on their conversation while Flora plucked a Royal Ann from an overhead branch. She popped the cherry into her mouth, then meandered back toward her parents' tree.

Grandma was saying, "Well, now that I've hired these new folks, maybe I can let Mr. Professional Picker go."

"You mean fire him?" Mom asked.

Grandma nodded, sighing heavily. "I'd like to. He keeps filling his boxes with junk. It takes me hours to sort his cherries."

Mrs. Bailey shook her head. "I don't know, Mom. He's foul-mouthed and mean. No telling what he'd do if you made him angry."

The deep voice of Mr. Bob came drifting over from a nearby tree. "Do you want me to talk to him, Shirley?"

Grandma looked embarrassed. "No thanks, Bob! He's my responsibility." She glowered briefly at her watch. "I've got to get this load to the cannery first."

Mrs. Bailey laid a work-roughened hand on the older woman's shoulder. "Mom, you're exhausted. When you finish

COYOTES IN THE WIND

unloading this fruit, go down to your house and sleep a couple of hours,” she urged. “I’ll run the orchard for you.”

Grandma muttered a reluctant “OK,” climbed into her pickup, and drove off. While Becka watched the latest dust cloud settle, she wondered how Grandma Shirley could work as hard as she did all night at the hospital, then all day, harvesting fruit in her orchard. No wonder the tired look hardly ever left her grandmother’s face!

The girl then eyed old Mr. Bob as he lumbered down his tall ladder and dumped a full bucket of cherries carefully into a box.

Before he ascended the ladder again, he glanced over at the girl. “So, tell me, Miss Becka, how does your garden grow?” She smiled. “Very well, thank you!”

“Your puppies are growing just as fast,” he observed. “Gonna be monsters soon.”

“Sweet monsters,” she corrected him. “But they’ve got to grow really big, Mr. Bob, because we’re building a house on Underwood Mountain in a forest full of wild animals. And Kurt and I’ll need Sergeant and Trooper to protect us.”

A flicker of amusement crossed the man’s sunburned face. “Is that so? Well, I’m sure they will,” he puffed as he climbed back toward the sky.

While Becka watched him disappear into the vast leafy regions above, she thought how nice Mr. Bob was. Every year he returned at cherry time “to help Grandma,” Mom had told her, not because he needed the money; he and his wife owned a beautiful home downriver in the city of Washougal. The girl always looked forward to his camping in Grandma’s orchard every summer, where some evenings Mr. Bob entertained Becka and her brother with tales of his adventures in the deep woods around Mount Adams.

Flora’s voice put an end to the girl’s daydreams. “Where can I get a drink of water?”

“In my kitchen,” Becka responded without thinking. Then she remembered the clean laundry strewn across the couch and the clutter of toys she and Kurt had forgotten to pick up. Too

COYOTES IN THE WIND

late to back out, Becka led the other girl over to the trailer, all the while dreading the messy scene that would greet them when she swung open the front door.

Becka would be glad when her family could move into their new house on Underwood Mountain. For three long years her parents had built on it - the four bedrooms; a spacious dining room and kitchen; a huge, six-sided sunken living room with a white-stone fireplace that stretched from floor to ceiling. There were windows galore, allowing the sun to flood the inside with light. And Becka would have her very own room, already painted pink just for her. No more cramped matchbox of a bedroom to share with her little brother!

When Becka turned the knob and stepped inside the cluttered trailer, she heard a gasp behind her.

“Oh! What a beautiful camp you have!” Flora sang out wistfully.

Becka blinked. “Beautiful? Camp?”

“You’re so lucky,” the other girl exclaimed, her gypsy-dark eyes feasting on the scene surrounding them, the living room in complete disarray, the kitchen counter hardly visible under stacks of dirty dishes.

Puzzled, Becka headed for the sink and filled two clean cups with water. Flora gulped hers quickly, then skipped through the trailer, “oohing” and “ahing” at the children’s bunk beds and their bathroom - “with a real toilet.” Then she stopped suddenly before the double bed that filled the back of the trailer.

“Is this where your mom and pop sleep?” she asked, ogling the room.

“Yes,” Becka replied stiffly, feeling uneasy about this strange girl intruding on such a private place.

“My folks sleep in the front seat of our car, and my baby brother and me sleep on the back seat,” Flora told her.

“But that’s just when you’re picking fruit,” Becka said. “Where do you live the rest of the time?”

“In our car,” the other girl replied without emotion.

Becka tried not to look surprised as they wandered back to the front door.

“Oh, it’s pretty comfy,” Flora noted, “except when it rains. The top’s all torn up, so we use a big piece of plastic to cover us. But then it leaks and wakes us up a lot.”

When the girls returned to the orchard, Becka fell silent. Deep in thought, she considered Flora and her family living all the time in the rusty, rattletrap car. Pity for them caught at her young heart, and Becka suddenly felt guilty for ever complaining about her cramped trailer. It seemed like a palace compared to Flora’s living quarters. And she hesitated to imagine what the migrant girl would think of the house that waited for the Bailey family to move in to!

“I’ll never tell her about that,” she decided.

Becka may have been only six years old, but she gathered some wisdom beyond her years that hot morning in June.

When Mom returned from inspecting the boxes of Mr. Professional Picker, she decided aloud, “As soon as he climbs his ladder again, I’m going to talk to him about the way he’s working.”

Becka’s eyebrows shot up. “But - but you said he’s mean.”

Mom frowned. “I know, but I’ve prayed about it, and I’m going to do it so Grandma Shirley won’t have to.”

With fear prickling the back of her neck, the girl motioned for Kurt to follow them. Her brother obeyed, while Sergeant and Trooper frolicked around his legs and nipped at his sneakers on their trek through the trees.

Moments later the Baileys stood like three wooden soldiers at the base of Mr. Professional Picker’s ladder. Mom took a deep breath and called up to the man. “Mr. Pratt, my mother-in-law’s a widow. This fruit is her only source of income for the entire year.”

Mr. Professional Picker stopped picking and glared coldly down at the woman. “Listen, lady, I’m a professional picker -” he began.

“So you’ve told us, Mr. Pratt! But you’re picking too many leaves and twigs and not filling your boxes to the top.”

COYOTES IN THE WIND

“Listen here, lady!” he growled. “I’ve picked all over the West, and no one else has ever complained. I’m a professional -”

Mom cut him off again, this time in a singsong voice. “I’m complaining, Mr. Pratt. If you can’t pick just the cherries and fill the boxes to the top, then you’d better find work elsewhere. My mother-in-law can’t afford to pay you full price for half-boxes.”

Becka stopped breathing when the scowling man rose to full height atop his ladder and tried to stare a hole through her mother’s head. Then, quite unexpectedly, a slow grin spread across his face, and he said, “You know, if you weren’t such a pretty little thing, I’d climb down there and smash you right between the eyes!”

Mom smiled meekly back up at him. “Why, thank you, Mr. Pratt - I think!”

Becka craned her neck to watch his reaction. His grin had faded to a sneer. “Tell your precious ma-in-law I’ll be back for my check tonight after supper,” he grumbled.

Mrs. Bailey’s hands were trembling as she gathered Becka and Kurt to her and suggested it was a good time to eat lunch. Later over peanut butter sandwiches, Becka said the blessing, adding, “Thank You, Lord, for keeping Mom - and Grandma - safe from Mr. Pratt.”

Grandma Shirley returned a few hours later, looking somewhat rested - and greatly relieved when she discovered Mr. Professional Picker gone.

As the day wore on, Becka spent some time helping Flora baby-sit her small brother inside the musty smelling car. Then she helped Grandma Shirley sort cherries. But when she heard the familiar sound of her father’s purple logging truck roaring up the road, Becka scampered after Kurt, leaving all thoughts of the orchard behind.

She lived for this time of day when her father returned from the woods. Although weary and dirt-smeared, he talked and listened to the children while he pattered around the truck. His blond hair hung over his tanned forehead, and his pale blue

COYOTES IN THE WIND

eyes always looked interested in whatever Becka and Kurt reported. Sometimes he even let the youngsters use his grease gun or turn a bolt.

With supper and the children's baths over, Mom returned to the orchard to pick until dark. Later, Becka heard her mother return and utter a faint, "Oh, no!"

Draped in her nightgown, the girl tiptoed to the kitchen. "What's the matter, Mom?" she whispered.

"This is Thursday night, and I just remembered I promised Bob I'd bake him and his wife one of my sugarless cherry pies so he can take it home with him tomorrow afternoon." Her mother looked as if she would cry. "And I'm so tired."

"Why don't you bake it next Thursday instead?" the girl asked.

Mom considered her suggestion a moment, then shook her head. "No, I shouldn't put off a good deed."

"Then I'll help you," Becka offered. She wrapped an apron around herself and began pitting cherries while her mother thawed some frozen apple juice and measured whole-wheat pastry flour for the crusts. About halfway through her task, Becka's shoulders began to droop.

"That's OK, honey," her mother said. "You've really been a big help. Now wash your hands and go back to bed."

The girl didn't argue, and in moments she was fast asleep, waking in the morning to the sweet smell of cherry pies wafting through the trailer.

That afternoon, Bob took his pie with him to Washougal, and Mom quit early to tidy the house for Sabbath. Even Dad pulled in long before sunset. After baths and supper all four Baileys piled onto the big bed to listen to Dad read Bible stories.

But one by one they fell asleep, first Kurt, then Mom, then Becka. The next thing the girl knew, she was waking in her own top bunk, and her mother was telling her to get dressed for church.

COYOTES IN THE WIND

Sabbath passed too swiftly, and Sunday morning Grandma Shirley moved all the ladders and boxes down the road to the orchard nearest her house.

When Mr. Bob drove into the yard, he handed Becka an empty pie plate. "Tell your mother the pie was delicious. Hard to believe something that good could be so healthy!" The girl grinned proudly because of her part in making the dessert.

That afternoon Becka and Kurt decided to surprise Grandma Shirley by washing her dishes. Before they had progressed too far with their project, however, their grandmother charged into the house, grabbed the phone, then exclaimed into it, "Someone's fallen out of a high tree. Get an ambulance down here!" After adding hasty directions to her house, Grandma raced back outside.

The children exchanged frightened glances. Becka knew they were both thinking the same thing: Mom was picking in one of the orchard's tallest trees. Was she the one who had fallen?