

• CHAPTER 3 •

Jessa woke with leaves pressed into her face and tangling her hair. She rubbed her still-swollen eyes and rolled over, struggling to make sense of where she was. In the dim light she could just make out the rough interior of the tree and the stone shelves she'd built and decorated with collections of rocks and feathers. The tree's hollow was large enough for her to stand upright in the center, and when she reached out her arms, she couldn't touch the sides. She'd played here on weekends and sheltered here during rainstorms. The hollow tree was so special she'd never shared it, even with her closest friends.

Cassie snuggled against her, and Jessa recalled the fluffy puppy they'd bought after her mother's last miscarriage. "Cassie, you were to be my sister, for the sister I was never going to have. I heard Mommie and Daddy talking about a name for the baby, and if it was a girl, they were going to call her Cassie."

With a jolt, the enormity of her loss hit her. Never again would she feel her father's hug or giggle over a shared secret with her mother. *This can't have happened! It just isn't possible!* Part of her stubbornly refused it: *Not an orphan! No!* She beat the ground with her fist and dust filled the air. Gradually the scene in front of her house came back, the patrol car slowing to a stop, the men talking to Mrs. Forsythe. Her mind reeled with images of an accident, sirens and lights flashing, stretchers... She moaned.

Cassie was searching Jessa's face, and the love in her brown eyes penetrated Jessa. "Sweet Cassie, you can't understand it either." Jessa buried her face in the dog's hair and hugged her. *I have to take care of my Cassie—she's all I've got.*

"Cassie, let's go find food!"

Cassie jumped up and barked joyfully. "Oh, no, *shhhhh*. You *have* to be quiet, Cassie," said Jessa. "We're hiding like in hide and seek. Remember when I made you be *very* quiet?" She put her finger to her lips and grabbed the dog's muzzle firmly to remind her of her training.

They emerged from dappled forest green into sunlight so bright it hurt Jessa's eyes. Across the field was the farmhouse, garden, orchard, and barn—the remains of the farm where Grandad had grown up and he and Grandma had raised Jessa's mother. She thought of the milk cow, the herd of goats, the harvests of corn and hay. Over time they'd gotten rid of the animals, and the old gray cat had died. After the chicken-house roof collapsed, Grandad let the chickens range free. He'd refused to move into town after Grandma died. He said he couldn't live without the garden, the orchard, and his bees, because it was in his blood.

Cassie ran ahead to the garden. When Jessa caught up and stood surveying it, tears filled her eyes. The poor garden was overgrown with weeds! Grandad hadn't been able to keep up, and she knew it was because of his arthritis. He would have welcomed her help, but she'd been so busy with the children's program at the library, then church camp, then school. If only she could work in the garden with Grandad one more time...

She thought again of the accident and wondered why they were going to Landsdowne. Had Grandad gotten sick suddenly? Did he have a heart attack? Now, she might never know—but knowing wouldn't change anything. Jessa stamped her foot angrily. Cassie looked up, alarmed, so Jessa touched her head. "There's nothing in a garden for a dog to eat, or not much, so

we'll have to go to the house." Her stomach was beginning to growl. "Heel, Cassie," she said, to keep the dog close to her.

The house was near the road, and there might be traffic, so they approached the farmhouse from behind. Jessa said, "Sit girl, stay," and jumped onto the end of the back porch, as she always did. She tried the doorknob. Locked—the men had probably done that. She was surprised it had a lock. Her parents locked the music shop, and when they went on a trip, they locked their house, but she'd never known the farmhouse to be locked. From what the men had said, the front door probably wasn't locked, but the long front porch was visible to anyone in a passing car.

She checked the kitchen window. The screen wasn't hooked, and the window was raised a few inches. Jessa dug with her fingers around the frame, but it wouldn't budge. She searched for something to pry with, but only found a shovel leaning against the porch. She stuck the point of its blade under the edge of the screen's wood frame and pried it loose at the bottom so that it could swing out, hinged at the top. Now she could push the window up halfway.

Jessa reminded Cassie to stay. She grabbed the ledge and pulled herself up and through the window. It was strange to look down from the counter at the rocking chairs and the enameled table where they'd eaten breakfast so many times; strange to be breaking into this house that had been a second home.

Jessa went to the refrigerator, which was humming encouragingly. She saw cheese, butter, an open can of evaporated milk, bacon, salami, and a bowl of leftovers that looked like canned corn. She couldn't resist the evaporated milk, so she drank a long swig from one of the triangular holes in the lid. She wiped her lips and considered which food to load into a paper grocery bag. She added a jar of peanut butter, two chipped teacups, pie pans, a case knife, spoons, a stack of napkins, and a jar of

her grandmother's strawberry jam. On top, she stuffed a loaf of bread and a box of saltines.

As she turned to leave, Jessa noticed Grandad's jacket hanging on the back door. She lifted it off the hook and buried her face in it, absorbing scents that evoked memories of riding on his shoulders and being boosted into an apple tree. As she stood there, hugging the jacket, Grandma's warm presence seemed to flow down the hall towards her. For a moment, everything was whole again, and Jessa was wrapped in love. Then the magic was broken, the house cold and empty, and Jessa was in a panic to get out. She shoved the jacket through the open window and slid through onto the porch, dragging the paper bag across the counter after her. She surveyed the kitchen. Nothing seemed out of place, so she pulled the window nearly closed and pushed the screen in firmly.

Jessa listened for traffic before she jumped down and patted her thigh, a sign that Cassie was to stick close. They ran down the slope beyond the garden. The sound of rushing water and the clean fragrance of mint reached Jessa long before she could see the water. The spring rushed out of the hillside, so cold it could turn bare feet blue in the summer. Cassie waded in and drank. Jessa pulled out a cup and lay down on the flat rock to dip the cup into the deep pool below. Through the clear water she could see polished stones and little periwinkle snails. Sitting cross-legged on the ledge, she peered into the sack and pulled out salami and bread. Her mouth watered.

"We'll each have one slice of salami and save the other two." Cassie bounded toward her from the water's edge. "Cassie! Stay back! You're wet."

The dog sat abruptly on the dry gravel, her focus on the salami. Jessa made two fold-over sandwiches and held one out to Cassie, who wolfed hers and then ate the pieces that fell from her mouth. Jessa ate almost as quickly. Still hungry, she made

a peanut butter sandwich with the strawberry preserves. When she saw Cassie watching it intently, she split it with her.

The sun had warmed the rock, so Jessa called Cassie to sit beside her. “Cassie, sit here and listen.” Jessa took a deep breath. “We’re on our own. We’ve got to be smart and take care of ourselves, because there isn’t much food in Grandad’s house.” A lump filled her throat, and for a while it was all she could do to hug Cassie and fight back tears as she twirled the dog’s fur around her fingers. She shook her head vigorously, trying to drive away thoughts of her mother calling her to breakfast and her father’s cheery “Mornin’, Punkin.” Nobody would ever care for her the way her parents had... “No, no, nooooo...” She put her hands over her face and sobs racked her until she choked with anger and grief. The dog pressed against her and licked at the tears until her mistress was able to return her affection.

Finally, haltingly, Jessa spoke. “Cassie, listen to what we have: we have a good, dry tree to live in. There’ll be pears getting ripe, and late apples. We didn’t really explore the garden, but it’s bound to have plenty of food—like carrots. We’ll collect nuts in the forest, too. They’re good for dogs—you’ll love them.” Cassie was cocking her head from side to side as she caught a familiar word.

Then Jessa remembered Grandad’s hens. He fed them in the winter, but most of the year they ranged all over the farm and roosted in the barn, taking care of themselves. That was how it had been when he was a child, when there was very little food, even for the people.

That gave Jessa an idea. “Cassie, you can be smart and take care of yourself! Remember how you always wanted to be a hunting dog? Daddy said that was ridiculous, but Mommie said poodles were originally duck retrievers. You can hunt mice and maybe rabbits and squirrels—we need to survive, and you’ll have to hunt.”

Full of plans, they set off for the tree. In the farmhouse or out

in the open, Jessa always felt hunted, but the tree was a natural hideout. There, she could pretend nothing had happened and she was just camping out with her dog. Jessa stooped to enter the tree and tossed her grandfather's jacket over the bag of supplies. She invited Cassie to join her. It was important to begin planning for their new life. They should properly survey the garden, check the orchard, and see about the hens. She liked the idea of checking the hens and looking for eggs best, so they set off together.

The barn was close to the road, so Jessa and Cassie hid among the trees along the fence row as they approached it. Jessa encouraged Cassie to hunt, and the dog zig-zagged from one point of interest to another, nose to the ground, now and then stopping to sniff. When nothing came of her efforts, Jessa called her and together they raced across the open stretch to the back of the barn. If she could find a way to get in on that side, they wouldn't need to open the big barn doors.

Cassie sniffed loudly at holes while Jessa searched for loose boards. She found two boards with a gap between them where she could pry the bottom of one with a stick, forcing the nail to pull out with a loud screech. Now she could bend the wide board out far enough to squeeze through.

Shafts of light entered between the boards that formed the barn's walls. When Jessa's eyes adjusted, she realized she was in one of the stalls where the goats had been milked. She saw a depression with three eggs in it, not a foot from where she stood. She gathered the eggs into her jacket pockets. Hens were coming into the barn through a small opening at the front, and in the hayloft, doves were cooing.

Jessa missed her grandfather with every step. They had often cared for the hens and collected the eggs together, and she had seen the gentle affection he lavished on his flock. She was sorry to have nothing to give the hens that ran expectantly toward her. Miserable at not being able to follow the rituals

that involved her grandfather, she gave up and backed into the bright light, located the nail, and pushed it through the hole to keep the board from banging in the wind.

Cassie was by the side of the barn, pulling out a nest of baby mice. “Oh *yuck*, Cassie!” she exclaimed before she remembered this was just what she’d told the dog to do. “You’re a good dog, Cassie. You’re just taking the place of Grandma’s old cat, Pilot!”

Cassie made fast work of the nestlings. The last baby mouse was inching its way across the fine nesting material when Cassie picked it up, deposited it by Jessa’s feet, and looked up expectantly. “Sweet Cassie! Those pinkies are for Cassie! Thank you, but I don’t want your yucky baby mice! You’re good. You need to eat it. It’s for *Cassie*.” Jessa knew the dog needed the protein, so she made herself pick up the squirming baby mouse and hold it out. Cassie sat up for it.

They ran to the spring and Jessa rinsed off the barn dust and the mousy feeling while Cassie plunged in, drinking loudly. “Good—you get clean. There’s still time for you to dry before dark.” The thought of another night in the tree sent a chill through Jessa, but she put it out of her mind.

“Cassie, let’s run to the orchard—it’ll warm us up!” Jessa cradled the eggs in her thin jacket pockets as they climbed up the bank through bushes and blackberry canes to reach an open field where they could run. Jessa’s skirt was torn, and her bare legs were scratched and bleeding, but she smeared the blood across her legs, repeating crossly, “Nothing matters anymore—I don’t care, I don’t care.”

The orchard wrapped around a hillside, ragged with dry orchard grass and old, neglected trees. The plums and cherries had long ago been harvested. Jessa recalled when she and her parents had climbed the old orchard ladder to the topmost part of the cherry tree. They always celebrated Father’s Day by making cherry pies for her father and grandfather from the tart cherries

of that tree, but this last year it had been so sad because sweet grandmother had died in the summer. Impulsively, Jessa ran up to the cherry tree and hugged it. The rough bark and scars from limbs that had broken off scratched her and provided no comfort, so she backed off and brushed her cheeks, ashamed of her action. “You’ve gotta be smart, Jessa!” she reproached herself.

She climbed higher on the hillside. The apple tree her grandfather called “winter banana” and two pear trees were hanging heavy with fruit. Pears were lying under one tree and wasps gathered on the sun-warmed fruit.

Jessa picked up a golden pear, shook off a wasp, and took a bite. It was crunchy and delicious, so she ate it around to the bruised spot and tossed it aside, licking her fingers. Cassie lay under the tree, holding a pear in her paws as she gnawed it. Jessa reached up to gather another lumpy yellow pear to eat and several for them to have at the tree.

These pears would be over-ripe in a week, and Jessa needed to preserve them—she didn’t want to think for how long. Grandma had told her how they dried fruit when she was a girl, splitting open the apricots and plums and laying them on a window screen to dry in the sun. Coring and slicing the apples and pears took hours and hours, but in good years, the air and sun dried the fruit, which they bagged and hung in the attic for winter pies. If the weather turned rainy or cold, the fruit would mold, or sometimes a varmint might steal it. One year a raccoon tipped all the screens over, and Jessa could tell from the way her grandmother pursed her lips that that had been a sad time for the struggling family.

Gradually, Jessa was formulating a plan. She thought: *I have lots of skills. If I live here and take care of Cassie, it’ll prove I don’t need foster parents. After a while, I’ll go back to town and show them I can cook, keep house, and go to school. I’ll carry on Daddy’s work with the school board and tell them how much we’ve learned from Mr.*

Alton's music program. I'll convince them to keep music in the white schools and add it to the colored school. I know I can do it!

Buoyed by the dream, she stashed the eggs and pears in the tree. Then she announced, "We need to make a list." Jessa felt this was what her family would do. She got out her school notebook. "You may like eating your pinkies and eggs raw, Cassie, but I need to cook."

She sat down, leaned against the tree and flipped past the algebra assignment to a clean page:

#1 Place to make fires.

She explained to Cassie: "We need a fire pit for small cooking fires."

#2 Water supply.

"We need something to hold water for a supply in the tree."

#3 Cooking pots.

"We need pots, and a pan for frying, because that's a good way to cook over a fire."

#4 Matches.

"There's sure to be matches in the house."

At the thought of the farmhouse, Jessa sank back with a moan. *I don't like this! I want Grandad back! I want Mommie and Daddy to come home. I want us to all eat dinner together!* She gripped the pencil and threw it into the forest with all her might. It was just too hard. She sobbed aloud and Cassie pressed against her. Jessa buried her face in the dog's wooly tangles and cried until she was exhausted.

When she woke with a start, falling leaves had blanketed them. It was dark and Jessa shivered. Her stomach told her they had had their one real meal long ago. She took the notebook into the tree, rummaged around to find a piece of bread, and followed it up with a pear. She spread Grandad's jacket to make a bed for them both, talking encouragingly to the dog and trying to pretend this was a camping adventure.