

## *The Time with Josie*

### CHAPTER 4

“Company's coming,” Josie said. I looked up from my pad. I was drawing a picture of a boat I had seen at Josie's canal: white with thin blue lines of trim, the name in script on back, Danbar-J, and the captain hosing down the deck. I couldn't remember what he actually looked like, so I sketched in his back, bent over, a watch cap on his head.

“Who's coming?” I asked, but Josie had pattered away down the hall, with Henry following her.

“It's Monday, right?” she called back. “It is,” I said, squiggling the pencil for shadow.

“The movie is closed. My cousin Beatrice comes on Mondays.” She smiled. “I forgot. You don't know that. Remember, Beatrice had a lingering cold?”

Ah, I thought. A lingering cold. Perfect for my next absence note. I looked around the kitchen. “Not much to eat in here.”

She came back into the kitchen, a thin line of red on her lips. “Ah, but Beatrice brings dinner. Wait and see. It will be ...” She patted her lips together.

"Delicious?"

She frowned. "Yes, but ..."

"Ah," I said, trying to guess. "Stew? Pasta? Hero sandwiches?"

She shook her head. "Delicious."

I finished my drawing and propped it up on the counter to see what I thought about it. And then I heard the back door, Beatrice bustling in, her arms laden with bags, and the smell ...

"Chinese food," I told Josie.

"Of course," she said. "That's what we always have."

I put the plates out, the knives and forks, and Josie ladled the food into bowls: cashew chicken, moo goo gai pan, bean curd, the smells making my mouth water.

Beatrice stood in back of me. I looked over my shoulder. She was leaning over, her head tilted, looking at my picture. "Did you draw this?"

I nodded.

She took off her glasses and chewed on one stem. "Surprising, isn't it?" she asked Josie.

"More than that," Josie said, beaming, moving Henry off her chair before she sat down.

As I reached for a shrimp roll, Beatrice slid into the seat opposite me and spooned rice onto my plate, the picture still in her hand.

"Don't eat," she said.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Not yet. Trot out some more of your pictures, please."

I went into Josie's peach living room with the lilac couch. We had tacked up a few of the pictures I'd done: Henry and the pelican, the rock jetties, Josie's thin tree figures in the back garden.

I pulled out the tacks and brought the drawings into the kitchen. There was no room for them on the table, so I pulled up an extra chair and piled them on that.

"Now you can eat," Beatrice said, reaching for the top one.

"Thank you." I scooped up the chicken, piling as many cashews as I could on the spoon.

She didn't eat, not until she had looked at all of them, holding each one up to the light. Josie kept nodding, reaching over with her fork to point at a line or a figure.

And then Beatrice sat back. "Imagine. I never saw anyone who was able to do this," she said, "and I was an art teacher for forty years."

"We taught that long?" Josie said.

"Forty-four for you." Beatrice brushed at her hair. "But did I ever once ..."

"No, neither did I." Josie smiled at me, reaching across to touch my wrist with one hand.

Beatrice took a forkful of food, eating absently, staring at me the whole time. "We worked with all those kids who didn't have any concept of perspective, or even if they had that, the composition was all wrong. If only you'd been in one of those classes, Hollis." She shook her head, then smiled at Josie. "Never mind, she's here's now."

I couldn't swallow what was in my mouth. It was there in a lump, almost as large as the lump in my throat. "Thank you," I managed to say.

They were both looking at me, at the tears in my eyes.

"Spicy, that chicken," Beatrice said.

I managed to nod, to chew, at last to swallow, thinking of the Old Man: "*Where'd you ever learn to do that?*" And Izzie. "*You have a gift, pure and simple.*"

After dinner Beatrice spread the pictures out on the table, reaching for my pad on the counter, one eyebrow raised to ask if she could have a piece of paper. With a twist of her pencil she showed me how to deepen the shadows on a drawing of the sea.

"Do it on my drawing," I said.

"Never," she told me. "It's your world, it belongs to you." She ran the pencil through her hair, separating the thick strands. "Drawing is what you see of the world, truly see."

"Yes, maybe," I said, not sure what she meant.

"And sometimes what you see is so deep in your head you're not even sure of what you're seeing. But when it's down there on paper, and you look at it, really look, you'll see the way things are."

I frowned. "Look at a picture one way and you'll see one thing," I said. "Look again and you might see something else. That's what the Old Man ..." I shook my head. "A friend of mine said that once."

"Ah, yes," Beatrice said, sketching in an eye, bushy eyebrows, sharp lashes as she spoke. "But that's the world, isn't it? You have to keep looking to find the truth." She ran one pinky finger over the eyebrow; the pencil smeared just enough to curve it upward, almost like a question mark; the other pinky softened the lashes.

I watched her, fascinated. "And something else," she said. "You, the artist, can't hide from the world, because you're putting yourself down there too."

"I'm not hiding," I said, my eyes sliding away from her.

She laughed. "Good thing, because your soul is right there in front of you." She pointed to the sketch I'd drawn of Josie in her scarf. "You see, it's what you think of her." She turned to Josie. "Maybe I can take that trip now, leave you in Hollis's hands. She loves you already."

I could see that Josie didn't know what Beatrice meant. "A trip?"

"To the Southwest."

Josie nodded then. "Yes. Adobe houses, desert, flat rocks everywhere."

"I'll paint them all," Beatrice said.

I looked from one to the other. Beatrice had picked up the pencil again, sketching herself, drawing a suitcase in her hand. And then

she looked at me once more. "You're going to be something, you and that language you speak on paper." She drew her other hand waving. "I love what you have to say, Hollis Woods."

I sat there, hardly breathing.

"You have that," she said. "It's more than most people ever have. Count yourself lucky."