

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 12

Half awake one morning, I heard the sound of a train. I looked up at the window to see a solid square of white: a storm, with pin dots of flakes covering everything. What I had heard was the roar of the wind coming down the valley.

I padded out of bed and went downstairs to see what was happening outside the big window. The holly bushes on one side of the house were just a blur; the narrow sliver of river and its snowy bank had disappeared in a mist of gray.

A little cold, I hugged myself, watching that world. It was like a plastic globe in one of the houses I'd been in. When I shook it, snow fell, covering a bright green Christmas tree in its center.

"Don't touch that, Hollis. Put it down."

I rolled a huge piece of wood onto the banked fire, thinking I'd have to drag more in from the porch later.

Henry looked up at me, meowing, waiting to go out. I reached for the knob, pulling, and when the door opened, a gust of wind blew a swirl of snow inside. Henry stared at me angrily. "Not my fault," I told him, pushing the door closed again.

He went back to the couch, skinny tail twitching.

"Sorry, cat." I ran my hand over the top of his head as I went into the kitchen to rummage through the cabinets.

Ah, how far away the mustard woman was, locked in her house somewhere. How far away everyone was.

I thought of the Old Man, and Steven, and Izzy. They were just a few miles away, but those few miles were forever. Did Steven like the snow, or were they so used to storms like this that they never paid attention to them? I wondered if they ever thought about me the way I did about them. I wondered how Steven was now.

I could hear the Old Man's voice in my ears. I closed my eyes. Don't think of that, don't ever think of that terrible afternoon again.

I took out the box of cocoa with marshmallows and boiled a pot of water on the stove, thinking of what I'd do today. Draw in front of that big window, I told myself. Figure out a way to shade in that soft line of trees, the gray ribbon of river. Charcoal would be wonderful for that; maybe I'd even be able to use a chunk of burned wood from the fireplace.

I'd done other pictures in the past few days and taped them up around the living room: a snowshoe rabbit with his tall ears, four deer nibbling at the bark of the evergreen, the bridge covered in clear ice. I'd done a few of Josie in the snow too, almost nothing but a few quick lines. She walked every day, down to the road, around the evergreens, coming back with her scarf blowing around her face.

What would happen if I left those pictures when we had to leave next spring? What would the Old Man say when he found them?

What would Izzy say? And Steven?

Spring. Could I call Beatrice then? She would have had months. What would happen to me?

Who cared? I'd think of something. But I'd never leave the pictures. I'd take them with me in my backpack.

Sitting at the table, waiting for the cocoa to cool, I thought about Christmas. I'd lost track of the days. I flipped Izzy's wall calendar

ahead to December, trying to figure it out. How long had we been here? Eight days? Nine? I counted back.

The water was ready. I mixed the cocoa and took a tiny sip, feeling the heat of it, the steam on my upper lip. Today could be Christmas Eve.

I stood there planning. When the snow stopped, I'd get myself outside and take some of the evergreen branches; there were so many trees we could fill rooms with them. We'd trim the mantel with great heaps of green and tuck Josie's ornaments in among the needles. Maybe we'd find a few pinecones too. We'd have a special dinner tomorrow night. Fruit cocktail and canned tuna, a feast. And popcorn.

I wished I had a present for Josie. The only thing I could give her was a picture of herself. But the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. I'd do that today instead of drawing trees. I took another sip of cocoa. What about Josie with Beatrice at the movies in front of their popcorn machine? Both of them would be eating, mouths full, arm in arm, smiling.

"Sleigh bells ring," Josie sang, coming into the kitchen behind me.

"I was just thinking that." I reached for another cup and poured in water for cocoa.

She stopped to peer out the window. "I've watched it snow on the ocean," she said. "It melts as it hits the water." She touched the glass with all five fingers. "There is nothing like the ocean."

I tried to think of something to change the look in her eyes. "I was thinking we'd have a party," I told her, "with your ornaments and tree branches from outside."

She smiled, looking up at the ceiling. "We could listen to carols on the radio," she said. "That's what Beatrice and I do every year—that and talk about when we were young. Where is Beatrice?"

"Painting," I said. "It's warm where she is."

Josie shook her head. "We always make almond cookies; we eat half and sell the other half at the movie."

"It would be nice if we had a radio." I popped two of our last pieces of bread into the toaster. "And too bad we don't have a few eggs around."

"Or almond syrup," she said.

"Or butter," I said, and we both laughed.

"We'd have to ask Santa Claus," she said. "He'd bring it all to us on his ..." She paused, thinking.

"Sleigh."

She shook her head. "That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes on a ..." She looked up at the ceiling.

I laughed. "A motorbike?"

"One of those snow things." She nodded, laughing too. "But how could we not have a radio? Everyone has a radio."

I finished off my cocoa, one sweet marshmallow left in my mouth, trying to remember. Had there been a radio here? There was never television, I remembered that. But Josie was right, there must be a radio. I wandered around, searching, and finally found one on a shelf, behind boxes of old jigsaw puzzles, the old cord wrapped around it. All that time Henry was stalking me, a line between his eyes as if he were frowning. He really wanted to go out.

I went to the door again and opened it a crack. The snow was worse now, much worse. The line of trees had disappeared, and even the shed seemed far away. I was almost afraid to let Henry out. Before I could shut the door again, though, he darted around me and was gone. I stood there, shivering, trying to see where he was, and then he was back, streaking through the door straight across the living room, into the kitchen, and onto Josie's lap.

I set up my drawing things in front of the window, beginning the rough lines that would turn into Josie. Josie was there on the other side of the room, at the table, fiddling with the radio knob until she found a station with Christmas music. The announcer's voice: "A lovely Christmas Eve morning."

I'd hit the date straight on the head.

The songs began, one after another: "Adeste Fidelis," "Silent Night," "Winter Wonderland," and one I'd never heard before: "Gather 'Round the Christmas Tree."

I leaned over the paper in front of me so Josie wouldn't see what I was doing. I sketched in the space around Beatrice first, the counter, the popcorn machine, and then began to work on the faces. Every few minutes I'd peer out at the snow coming down. Across the river the mountain was blurred, just a dark shadow rising into the pewter sky.

And then I thought about Josie sitting there, my figure in her hand, staring out the window too as she listened to the music, her face tilted, her eyes sad.