

## *The Time with Josie*

### CHAPTER 15

Outside it was almost dark. A sliver of moon curved over the Old Man's mountain, and a single star was just visible. "A planet, Hollis," Steven might say. "Get your astronomy in order."

If I cried again, the tears would freeze fast to my cheeks.

The snow was so dry I could hear the creaking of my footsteps as I went past the holly bushes. No one could guess they were there, mounded up like soft white pillows, and the river in front of me had disappeared.

I stood still to look at it all. I wondered how I could draw that to show the world underneath: sharp, shiny leaves hidden in the snow, the river running fast and cold under the ice.

In my mind was a picture of Beatrice brushing her hair off her forehead. "Drawing is a language," she had said. "You have to learn to speak it."

In the distance was the faint sound of a saw: Someone must be cutting wood for a fire. I closed my eyes. Steven and the Old Man

turning their heads. *Roger's saw, they'd say. He must be in the apple orchard, or Hopper's finally gotten to that dead elm.*

No, it wasn't a saw. It was the sound of a snow-mobile, probably on the other side of the mountain.

A clump of snow fell off the roof of the house. I looked back at it, at the house where I wanted to belong. Huge icicles hung from the eaves, and suddenly I was so cold I couldn't stay outside anymore. Upstairs in my bedroom I sat at the edge of the bed shivering, waiting until I was warm; then I went to my backpack and pulled out my pictures to spread across the bumpy white bedspread.

I saw how much blue I had used in those summer drawings: blue for the river, blue for the Old Man's rugs, blue for Izzy's locket; and green: a smudge of tree, a leaf, the edge of the mountain. Both colors I loved.

The pictures I had drawn of Josie lay in the middle of the bed. Josie on the pier, reaching for sea grass; Josie outside in her tree garden, shades of peach and lilac; Josie happy, Josie where she belonged.

Josie didn't belong here. She belonged in her house with Beatrice, and Henry, and the irritable pelican on her wall.

She belonged near the ocean.

I sat there for a long time, my head against the headboard, knowing what I had to do. I rubbed my hands, still icy cold. It was four miles to the telephone outside the grocery store, a long walk, but I could do it. I'd call Beatrice ... ask her, beg her.

We'd go home, Josie and I, Josie to Beatrice, me to another place. I looked at a half-finished picture of Izzy at the cemetery with a vase of daisies in her hand. What had she said that day? *"I wanted children for every corner of the house."* And what else? There was something more she had said, something about Steven and the Old Man. *"It's worse this summer."*

I'd have to stop thinking about Izzy, put all of them out of my mind. Before I left I'd get rid of all the pictures of them, burn the



drawings in the fireplace. I'd forget about Izzy and the Old Man, forget about Steven.

I stared down at the drawing of Izzy backing out of the door with my WELCOME TO THE FAMILY cake and saw something I hadn't remembered: the Old Man's hand on Steven's shoulder.

Me, catching my first fish. Steven in front of me with the net, the Old Man smiling. But he is looking at Steven, not at me. Looking and smiling.

And another: Steven hanging into the engine of a car, just the back of him visible, with mismatched socks, and the Old Man with his hands on his hips, but his eyes are soft.

Beatrice was in my head again. What had she said to me one time? *"Sometimes we learn from our own drawings; things are there that we thought we didn't know."*

My lips were suddenly dry.

I stood up, walked around to the other side of the bed. There they were in the boat. Steven laughing at something the Old Man had said.

How had I drawn all that and not seen it?

Of course the Old Man loved Steven. He was going to love him whether I was there or not. Had I given them up for nothing, the whole family?

*What do you know about a family?* Steven said in my mind. *You've never had one.*

I remembered what Izzy had said then: *"They have to find their own way."*

I picked up another picture: me with candy in my mouth. Then there was something else floating just on the edge of my mind. Something to do with the radio? Why the radio?

Wait, I told myself. What had Josie said about wanting Santa to bring a radio?

And then I had it. The two of us joking. *"Santa on a sleigh,"* I had said.

*"That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes ona ..."*

... a snowmobile? To bring the candy? Steven? The pancakes, and the applesauce?

I slid off the bed, the picture drifting out of my hand, my knuckles up to my mouth.

The sweater hanging on the shed doorknob.

Holly on the back step. *"Peace, Hollis."*

I felt as if I could hardly breathe.

And then I was flying down the stairs, my feet barely touching the steps, skittering on the Old Man's shiny floor, coming to a stop in front of Josie asleep on the couch.

I sat down next to her, one hand on Henry's rough fur. "Wake up, Josie," I said. "I want to ask you about Santa Claus."