



The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 16

Josie slept through my questions, her head nestled on the couch cushions, and Henry with her, purring faintly with his eyes closed. She slept as I shook her, slept as I begged her, "Please, Josie, I can't wait to know," slept as I offered her soup from a can, Izzy's candy, a cup of tea.

Then at last I gave up. I looked at the black square that was the window. The moon had disappeared behind the Old Man's mountain, and the star was gone.

I went into the kitchen to make something to eat: the rest of the tuna with canned pineapple thrown on top, and a few frosted flakes for crunch. I ate it at the kitchen counter, wolfing it down, made hot chocolate, and when it had cooled a little, put it under Josie's nose. "Smells good, doesn't it? Just open your eyes, take a sip, and talk to me."

She smiled in her sleep as I kissed her forehead, and then I went upstairs to bed, lying awake for a long time, feeling the tick of my heart in my throat.

Maybe the holly had just blown onto the back step. Maybe Josie had found the candy in the house. Maybe. Maybe.

But then as I fell asleep, I could almost hear his voice in my head. *Merry Christmas, Hollis Woods.*

I was awake at the first light the next morning. It was a beautiful day, with sunshine melting the ice on the window. I went downstairs and Josie was still asleep on the couch, but Henry was awake, stretching his skinny legs. I let him out and stood in the doorway, hugging myself, squinting at that glittering world, listening for the sawing sound of a snowmobile.

And then Josie opened her eyes.

I began slowly. "Christmas was yesterday," I said.

She smiled at me.

"Santa Claus is coming ...," I sang.

"... to town," she finished.

"He came to us," I said.

"In all this snow," she said.

"But what did he look like?"

She ran her hand over her face, thinking. "He looked cold," she said.

"And he gave you the candy."

"One time," she said, "when Beatrice and I were little, he brought mittens. Red for Beatrice, blue for me. We each swapped one. All winter, we wore one blue and one red."

I went over to her and touched her hair. "I'm going to call Beatrice," I said.

"Are we going home?" she asked.

"Maybe," I said. "I think so. Can you wait here? It's a long walk to the phone. I'll be gone most of the morning."

I heard a few fragments of song as she wandered into the kitchen. "If it takes forever, I will wait ..."

I made breakfast for both of us, a heap of frosted flakes; then I layered on sweaters, three pairs of Steven's socks, my jacket, and turned to Josie for one last try. "Where did you get the candy?" I asked.

"It's in a tin box," she said. "Orange and lemon. Makes your mouth wiggle."

"I'll be back." I opened the door, hearing the drip of melting icicles from the roof, and stepped back as Henry darted inside.

Outside I thought at first of taking the road. What difference would it make if I were caught?

But it would make a difference. I wanted to call Beatrice first. I wanted to hear that she'd come to live with Josie.

And suppose she doesn't? Steven asked.

I shook my head. *She will. I think she will.*

I brushed him away, trudging along through the trees, listening to the call of the crows, the screech of the blue jays. And all the time I was listening for that buzzing sound of the snowmobile, telling myself I had made the whole thing up, telling myself it wasn't Steven.

And what if it was Steven? I asked myself. What would I say to him?

It must have been almost twenty minutes later when I heard the faint sound of the motor. It could have been anyone, but still I ran toward the road, trying to pick up my feet in that deep snow.

I saw him, a helmet on his head, thick gloves on his hands, bent over the handles of the snowmobile, and I stepped out onto the road just in time for him to see me and glide to a stop.

I stood there, biting my lip, feeling that river of tears coming at last, waiting for that brief second as he pushed up the visor. "Hollis Woods," he said. "Where are you going?"

"Steven Regan," I said, my mouth trembling. "Happy birthday."

And then we were laughing, both of us, laughing instead of crying.

"Thank you for the candy," I said at last, looking at his face, thinner, bonier. Something about his eyes seemed older.

"Horrible stuff, that candy," he said.

"And the holly branch."

He tilted his head a little. "Hollis Woods," he said again.

"How did you know I was here?"

He raised one shoulder. "There was a letter from the agency looking for you."

I nodded, thinking about the mustard woman sending lost girl letters to every house I'd ever been in.

"I told Pop." Steven swiped at his glasses. " 'Hollis loves that house,' I said. But did he listen? Of course not."

I swallowed. "You and the Old Man are still arguing." "

'If she loved that house so much she'd be with us right now,' Pop said. But I knew. I've been here every day except during the big storm."

I was shivering in the cold, the wind blowing around us, my feet beginning to feel numb.

"We've been hoping you'd come home all these months," he said. "Why not, Holly?"

And then I was crying, big sloppy tears. I leaned against the handlebars, making terrible sounds in my throat, and I just couldn't seem to stop.

Steven stood there, his hands dangling in those huge gloves, and then he reached out, put his arms around me, pulling me toward him.

"The Old Man went down to Long Island when he heard you were missing," he said. "He's going crazy looking for you. He keeps going back and forth."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"I wanted to do that for you, at least that. Give you time." He paused. "You're famous. Your picture's in the newspapers. A pretty awful-looking picture, if you ask me."

As he rattled on, I kept sniffing and wiping my eyes, and then I'd start to cry again.

"I knew you'd be safe." He took one arm off my shoulder to wave it around. "As long as I kept an eye on you and your friend."

"You have a nerve," I said.

"You'd have starved to death without the food I brought." He frowned and began again. "I still don't know why ..."

"I thought ...," I began, and bit my lip. I'd never tell him what I had thought about the Old Man not loving him. "You were always arguing, and I thought it had to do with ..." I waved my hands.

"With you?" he said. "Oh, Holly. It doesn't have to do with anyone. I told you that. It's just the way we are."

I stared down the road, not a car in sight, the trees heavy with snow, bent and leaning.

"I'm a slob and he's neat. I forget, he remembers. We drive each other crazy. But it's all right."

I ran my hands over my cheeks, tried to dry them. As simple as that, just the way they were.

"I told you," he said, his head tilted, his eyes smiling. "You don't know about families yet." He leaned back against the snowmobile. "He knew the accident was my fault."

I sighed. "It was my fault."

"Everything has to be your fault all the time?"

I shrugged a little. "After the accident, Pop said they'd told him you never stayed in one place very long. But he said we were different, and that it must be something else. And that's what it was? You thought—"

"I messed up the family." "Wait till he hears this," Steven said. "Just wait."

I watched the snow drifting off the trees. *Old Man, I love you.* Steven rubbed my shoulders; he must have seen that I was shivering. "I put the fishing pole away for you in the shed, and looped the sweater over the knob."

"The fishing pole?" My hand went to my mouth. "I forgot about the fishing pole. All this time."

"Ha, Hollis Woods, there's hope for you, I told you that. I'm going to spend next summer fixing up the old truck. What do you say? Want to help? Want to come home?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't have to. I climbed up on the back of the snowmobile. "Take me to the telephone booth down at the grocery," I said.

He gunned the motor and the snow spewed out behind us as we flew up the highway to call Beatrice.