

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 2

I had been at Josie Cahill's house for three weeks. One morning when I awoke, I realized my thumb was blistered, but I didn't mind. We 'd been cleaning up the grove of trees. I liked the feeling of hacking and slashing and getting things done. A pile of wood rested under Josie 's back table now. "Not all of it is for whittling," she had told me. "As soon as it's really cold, we 'll make enormous fires in the fireplace."

I knew she was wondering if I'd still be there when the cold came.

I wondered too.

I stretched, not ready to get up, and looked around the bedroom. It was wonderful, the first place the sun hit every day, so that squares of light turned the room to lemon gold. I stayed under the rose-and-white quilt for a few moments, then pulled on my clothes to go down to the kitchen.

Josie was bent over the table, eyeglasses perched on the end of her nose, working on a piece of wood. From the hall I could see her reflection in the kitchen window. She knew I was there but she just cut another sliver off the wood and blew it away.

I slid onto a seat opposite her at the table. In front of me were a box of cereal, two bananas, and a Danish neatly cut in half. The Danish was a little stale and the bananas beginning to freckle. Other days chocolate chips were sprinkled into the cereal, but they must have been all gone.

Still, it was a terrific breakfast, with Rice Krispies crackling in the speckled bowl. Fall leaves swept across the garden, and Josie's plane went across the wood with a *swish-swish* sound.

I sat there with my mouth full, looking around at her kitchen. It was like the rest of the house, filled with surprises: The walls were creamy yellow, and ships sailed along blue ocean moldings. A painted pelican was perched over the stove.

The pelican looked as irritable as Henry.

I told myself I'd have a house like that one day: hatboxes and wigs drawn on one bathroom wall, and high-heeled shoes, dozens of them, marching along in watercolor in a tiny bedroom at the end of the hall.

That yellow kitchen was huge. A couch sat under the window, piled high with embroidered pillows that said things like HENRY'S HOME, V FOR VICTORY, SAVE THE SARGASSO SEA.

I'd never even heard of the Sargasso Sea.

I had drawn the house with paper from my backpack and fat bits of charcoal I had found somewhere. It was lovely to sketch the house, and Josie with her scarf. She watched me sometimes as I drew Henry sitting on top of the old-fashioned radio, and the pelican with beady eyes.

Too bad you don't have your drawing box, I imagined Steven saying, *all those yellows and blues.*

I was all right, though.

"We'll take a drive in the Silver Bullet today," Josie said, sounding pleased with herself. She brushed a few shavings off the front of her dress onto the faded linoleum floor. "I have things to show you, Hollis."

No school on a Monday? I shrugged to myself. If she wanted to forget about it, that was fine with me. I spent most of the time in the back of the classroom sketching, or drawing faces in ink on the plastic desk and erasing them with one wet finger.

I had taken only two days off so far, reminding myself that the mustard woman would probably be checking up on me. And the absence notes I wrote myself and signed in a spidery hand that looked like Josie's were masterpieces: *Hollis had a high fever over the weekend. Please send her home if she looks flushed. Or Hollis had a severe rash. We learned that she's allergic to tomatoes. Pity. She really enjoys them.*

I shoved the last of a banana into my mouth and watched as Josie plopped a straw hat with a rose onto her head and wrapped one of those filmy scarves twice around her neck; then I followed her out to the garage.

The car was ancient, a Buick from the eighties. The fenders were dented and a streak of white paint ran across the door, but inside, the seats were soft and furry, and hanging from the windshield was a small tree figure of a man with gray whiskers. No, not a man. It was Henry standing on his back legs.

"I put acorn boxing gloves on him but they kept falling off," Josie said. "You don't have to worry about Henry. Henry's ready to stick up for you whenever the chips are down."

I had to laugh, thinking about Henry in boxing gloves fighting for me. My main concern about Henry was how to keep out of his way. I stepped back as he jumped into the car and hopped across the backseat to sit on the rear window ledge, his head up, one notched ear forward, his whiskers twitching.

But I didn't have time to think about that. I slid into the car as Josie backed out of the garage and down the driveway in one great swoop and, never looking, barreled onto the street.

You wouldn't believe this, I told Steven in my head, and grabbed the edge of my seat with both hands.

Josie began to talk, glancing down at her movie-star hands, long and thin, her nails painted fire-engine red but chipping here and there. I wanted to tell her to slow down but bit my lip instead.

I thought I was going to be dead by the time we reached the first crossing. But by the second corner I realized there wasn't that much traffic, and the few cars on the road stayed well out of our way, so I began to relax and listen to what she was saying.

"Going to stay and have yourself done up in a tree?" she asked. "Stay longer and I'll teach you how to drive. Like the movies? We can do that, too."

My mouth went dry. *How to drive?* That's what Steven would say. *You could tell her a story about that, couldn't you?*

I brushed at the air, wanting to brush him out of my head. I was trying to think of what illness I'd give myself today, when the Silver Bullet turned another corner and stopped. Spread out in front of us was a canal with a few fishing boats, kerosene trails sliding out in back of them on the water, and beyond the boats, beyond the canal, was more water than I had ever seen.

It moved and rolled, it shimmered, it glowed iridescent silver. The Atlantic Ocean. I itched for a piece of drawing paper.

"This is my ocean," Josie said, as if it belonged to her personally, like one of her hats.

It was the way I felt about the Delaware River. A pain filled my chest as I thought about it. I wanted to sit in the Old Man's rowboat, to lean over and put my hands into that clear water, to watch the catfish riding along on the bottom, the schools of pickerel lazing in the warm sun.

"So what do you think?" Josie asked.

"Bigger than a river," I said. "Rougher." I spread out my hands, trying to think of the difference. "It's wonderful, but ..."

She waited.

"You can't get your arms around it."

"Ah," she said, stopping to think. "There are salt-water people, and freshwater people." She held up her hand. "Then there are some who don't even know enough to fall in love with the water." She looked at me with satisfaction. "But they're not us."

I nodded, thinking of how the river might look as it reflected the last of the fall leaves.

"We'll get out," Josie said, "and walk along the jetty." She was singing under her breath now, a bit of a song I had learned somewhere. "By the sea, by the sea." Henry followed us as we went toward the jetty, a path to the sea made of huge boulders tumbled one on top of the other. They were slippery, those rocks, with places your feet could get caught, and I wondered if I should help Josie climb up. But she didn't need help. She swung herself up next to me, her scarf blowing in the wind coming off the sea. "Just breathe," she said.

She didn't have to tell me. I had never smelled anything like that air: fish, and kerosene, and salt.

"I don't know what I'd do without the ocean," she said.

And then we skittered out to where I couldn't see anything but water in front of us. Josie pointed down with one foot. Between the rocks were pockets of water, and some of them had tiny fish swimming around in them, fish so small they were blurs of pewter. In one pool was a crab whose claws were no bigger than my pinky nails.

I knelt down on the edge of a boulder and put my fingers into the water, watching their reflection as the water moved, feeling the spray on my shirt. Was there snow on the mountain yet?

Don't think about the mountain.

I thought about Steven and the Old Man and Izzy and I put my hand on my chest because there was such an ache inside.

Josie was a statue standing above me, holding her hat against the wind, her eyes closed, a half smile on her face.

"I thought maybe I'd stay for a while," I said slowly. "As long as you want me to, that is."

Josie opened her eyes and beamed down at me.

"So if you'd like to work on my tree figure ..."

She raised her hand to her scarf. "I've already started."

And I knew Steven would be saying, *What are you doing, Hollis?*