

## *The Time with Josie*

### CHAPTER 8

*F*or the next few afternoons, around five, the mustard woman called to chitchat. That's what she called it. She was doing all the chatting.

"How was school?"

"Burned down."

"What did you have for lunch?"

"Horse meat."

"How's Mrs. Cahill?"

"Who?"

"What are you drawing?"

"Nudies."

"Hollis," she said slowly one night. "Mrs. Cahill is old, and she has a tendency to forget."

*Josie dancing in the street, giving me the hat with the veil, making popcorn at the movie.*

I said more than I wanted to. "She doesn't forget everything, just some things." I stopped. The mustard woman would never change her mind. I raised my hand to the window. Drops of melting sleet were running down the glass. Under the kitchen table Henry was an orange ball, with only his pointy little chin turned up. Henry hated sleet.

"Tomorrow is Saturday," the mustard woman began. "I'll pick you up and take you to meet Eleanor." She paused.

I didn't answer.

"That's her name, Eleanor. She's going to have lunch for us."

I pulled the telephone cord as far as it would go.

"Then Sunday, if all goes well ..." She broke off. "You'd be in the same school. And you could visit Mrs. Cahill often."

I took the phone away from my ear and put it on the counter. I did it gently so there was no noise. I wondered how long she'd keep talking before she figured out I wasn't listening.

It was gray outside. Josie's wooden figures were blurred and bent in the wind that had just come up.

Josie couldn't stay alone. She might not remember when it was supper. She'd sit up all night watching movies.

Beatrice. I picked up the phone and pressed the numbers. It rang about twenty times. *Answer, Beatrice.* But then I remembered. For the first weeks she'd be traveling around, she had said. I pictured her in the desert, dry sun beating down, her sketchbook in her hand.

I couldn't leave Josie.

I couldn't stay.

It was a puzzle.

Something from years ago popped into my head. It wasn't winter, it was summer, and so humid everything I touched was sticky. All afternoon I'd thought about the pillow on the bed, and how cool it would be against my head. I was surprised when it was as hot as the rest of the room. I reached under the pillow to find something I had

hidden there, a doll with pale painted eyes. I whispered to her, asking if she was cooling off. And then someone came and pulled her away, tossing her on the night table. I waited until the woman walked out the door, and then I whispered a little more loudly so that the doll could hear me. "Don't worry," I'd said. "I'll save you in the morning."

Why had I thought of that now?

Save Josie.

That's why.

The sleet outside was turning to snow. It reminded me of Steven. "*You'd love the snow in Hancock,*" he'd said.

I thought of the summer house in Branches. "*I haven't been here in winter since I was a boy,*" the Old Man had said. "*But it was wonderful, so cold it hurt your teeth, the river frozen over, the animals coming up close to the house. Everything was silver with ice.*" He had spread his wide hands. "*Twisted icicles this long hanging from the roof. I used to knock them off and see how far I could throw them.*" He had laughed. "*My father had put in heat, so when you came inside, it was warm. I'd dry my hands on the radiator till they almost sizzled.*"

Winter.

No one there in the house in Branches. "*We stay in our house in Hancock now. Plenty of snow there, and nearer to school and the stores.*"

How could I do it?

How could I not?

Josie was napping on the lilac couch. I went in and stood next to her, watching that beautiful face.

She opened her eyes.

"How would you like to go away with me?" I asked.

"To see Beatrice?" she said.

I shook my head. "That's too far."

"Then where?" She sat up, smoothing her hair with papery thin fingers.

It was hard to get the words out. "We'll take the car."

"The Silver Bullet," she said, nodding.

"It will be an adventure," I said.

She smiled. "Henry, you, and I in the Silver Bullet. We'll fly to the ends of the earth."

I smiled back, trying to think. Food, warm clothes, gas for the Silver Bullet.

It was Friday night. The mustard woman would come for me at lunchtime tomorrow.

By then we had to be long gone.