

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 10

It was late when we reached the exit sign for Branches. The gas station light was out, and there was only a tiny light in the back of the grocery store. "We're almost there," I told Josie, "just the last four miles."

"Already?" She sounded delighted. She zoomed off the ramp, stopping on the shoulder, and in a moment she was asleep, her head against the steering wheel. Henry climbed off my lap, where he'd been for the past hour, and slid onto hers, his whiskers twitching as he closed his eyes.

I leaned over and turned the key to stop the motor. Suddenly I was wide awake and reaching for the door handle. I gave Henry a pat, then I got out of the car.

At first it was hard to see, but little by little silhouettes appeared against the sky: the curve of a tree trunk, the dark square of the grocery store ahead, and above us, the Old Man's mountain, raising its head to the sky. It was almost a shock to see it there.

Beatrice would have said it was a drawing coming to life. I pictured her in a place with huge cacti, saguaro, I thought they were

called. I remembered she'd said she would call every Sunday. What would she think when the phone rang and rang?

I shook myself. What would happen if I tried to call her again?

She'd come home, her dream over.

I wasn't going to do that. Back in the car, I nudged Josie awake. "Just drive this last bit," I said, "and then you can sleep."

We drove along the narrow road, no other lights now except for a few houses far up on the hills, and I kept talking to keep her awake. "We'll see the river. It's not as big as your ocean...."

"Your river." Josie's head bobbed.

"Keep watching," I told her. "We don't want to go off the road. The river would be cold for a swim."

I saw her smile. "Henry doesn't have his bathing suit."

And there was the bridge. I had stood on that bridge watching the pickerel, the catfish, the muskrat building his nest of sticks against its base.

The Old Man's bridge.

"We'll have a fire in the fireplace," I said, "and turn the heat up high." I could see the Old Man flipping the switch in the early mornings when dew was still on the grass and the house was still cold.

We thumped across the bridge over the river, and the house was in front of us, waiting. "Josie, this is the place." My voice was flat. I might have been telling her it was a snowy day or the sun might come out tomorrow, but inside, my heart was thumping.

We had just this winter, I knew that, and maybe the spring. By summer we'd have to find somewhere else.

That was months. That was forever.

I closed my eyes, remembering the last morning I had been here. I had gone out the screen door toward the car, brushing my fingers along the holly bushes, feeling the sharp edges of the leaves against my thumb.

I had walked as far as the town, a long way in the early-morning heat, and sat on the bench with my things on my lap, waiting for the Shortline bus, and looking down, I realized I'd left the drawing box. I think that was the worst moment, knowing I'd never see that box again. Geranium Red, Dove Gray, French Blue.

"We're home, Josie," I said.

"Hard to see," she said.

"Just get used to the darkness," I told her. "In a minute you'll see it all."

She took everything in then, and I with her: the house with the sloping roof, the evergreens leaning over it, the dark shadow that was the woodpile on the front porch. The rocking chairs were in the shed, I knew that, but I could picture them there, rocking gently.

Josie took a deep breath.

"I knew you'd like it," I said, watching Henry in the rearview mirror. He stood on the back of the headrest now, his claws in my shoulder, his nose twitching, his whiskers quivering, sizing up the place. "And you too, Henry."

"But is it all right?" Josie asked, frowning. "Are you sure we can do this?"

"We can." I brushed away thoughts of being caught, of what the Old Man might think of me if he ever found out. What did he think of me anyway? *Please don't mind this thing I'm doing*, I begged him in my head.

A red cardinal swooped down to perch on a holly branch that bent itself into the snow, snow marked by threadlike bird prints and deep hollows from the deer. The tracks hugged the edge of the clearing, close to the evergreens, and one path, probably from a rabbit, led to the river.

I wondered if Steven had ever seen the house in the winter. He would love it.

I chewed my knuckle. A lace curtain of snow blew across the porch. It was bitter cold with the engine turned off. I had to get

Josie into the house. Her shoes had heels, with open toes and diamond-shaped cutouts in the sides. Why hadn't I thought of her shoes?

Henry scratched his claws along the car window, wanting to get out. I gave his ear a tweak, opened the door, and watched him belly through the snow away from the car.

"I'm sorry, Josie," I said, still looking down at her feet. They'd be soaked. "You'll have to walk through this to get to the house."

"An adventure," Josie said, grabbing the handle.

I slipped her scarf up around her head, the orange a bright spot in the darkness, and buttoned the top button of her coat. "All right," I said.

Outside we skirted the trees, and she stopped to look up. "A million stars," she said, pointing. "There's the Dipper and Orion. Beatrice would love it." Then I held her by the waist as we went up the back steps.

Her face was a little disapproving as I kicked my sneaker off and, hopping, smashed in the small kitchen window. And then we were inside, Henry skittering in around us.

I leaned back against the wall, reaching for the light, hoping they hadn't turned off the electricity. Suddenly the kitchen sprang to life. The refrigerator began to hum, and beyond it, I could see the huge living room with the long table at one end and dark blue rugs scattered across the wood floor. The Old Man was proud of that floor; he always talked about putting it in with Izzy, about matching the pieces of wood exactly, holding up his hands as if Steven and I could see them clutching a hammer and saw.

Josie shivered, her lips colorless, and my hands felt numb. I flipped the switch for heat and heard the furnace start up. At the fireplace chunks of wood and paper were piled in a bin. I knelt there, crumpling the yellowed newspapers to tuck in between some logs, and read last summer's news as I struck a match against the stones of the hearth: Someone had caught a huge trout near Byron's

Falls; a sidewalk sale was planned for Main Street; there were canoes for rent in Shadyside.

I had been here last summer; all of that had been happening. I kept talking to Josie, telling her that this place had been mine only for a month or two, but now it was ours. And she sank down on the couch, nodding, watching the fire.

Is it still mine? I asked the Old Man. *Mine for just this winter?*

A thin flame curled up from somewhere underneath the logs and Josie clapped her hands. "Fire!"

The Old Man's wooden floor shone with a rosy gleam, and my eyes began to close as my fingers warmed, but I couldn't fall asleep yet.

I settled Josie on the couch and found an old towel to dry her feet. They were mottled from the cold. "Skinny as a bird," I told her as I rubbed them. She put her head back, asleep again.

In the kitchen I used the same towel to close the opening in the missing window pane. While we were here I'd figure out how to replace that. There was glass in the shed; I'd seen the Old Man measuring and cutting.

I climbed the stairs to the little green room that had been mine. Everything was just the same. The dresser mirror reflected my old sneakers, just visible under the edge of the bumpy white bedspread; the curtains, pink with roses, looped back; and the drawing box on the dresser.

The drawing box.

I ran my fingers over that half-opened box, the pencils spilling out: French Blue, Geranium Red. It was hard to swallow. I touched all of the pencils, the pad of paper, the sharpener.

Henry and I made four or five trips back to the car for things I had taken from Josie's house. Steam came from my mouth in small white puffs and from the chimney in larger ones. But the cold didn't bother Henry. He pranced through the snow, chasing twigs and a few crumpled leaves as if he were a kitten. He must have known

what I was thinking. He sneaked a look back at me; then he sat up on a rock, perfectly still, like the old cat he was.

I'd draw that later, I thought, Henry happy in the dark, with the river just a thread curving through the snow.

It took a half hour to bring everything inside. I wrapped a blanket around Josie, and through the window I could see the car at the edge of the road. There'd be room for it in the shed, I thought, remembering the Old Man's car on one side, the truck on the other.

The truck. Totaled. Was it still there? I shook my head. "I'll be back," I said to the sleeping Josie. "I have to put the Silver Bullet in the shed."

You're going to drive it in? Steven asked in my head.

You taught me how, I said.

But ...

I can do this.

The truck hugged one side of the shed. I walked around to the front of it and ran my fingers over the cold metal, the sharp edges, the empty holes where the lights had been. I raised my hands to my ears without thinking so I wouldn't hear the sound of the truck as it hit the trees that summer evening.

Outside a few minutes later, I turned the key in the Silver Bullet's ignition; the gas gauge was hitting Empty. Just one more bit, I begged the car, that's all I need. I sat there hesitating before I put my foot on the gas, but then I coasted along over the snow, the motor coughing, and glided into the shed—not touching the sides, not even close—braked a split second before I hit the back wall, and turned off the motor.

Ah, Steven said.

It was quiet, with only the soft whoosh of wind and the muffled sound of icy snow as it blew against the roof. I had done it. All I wanted to do now was curl up under the covers in that small green room upstairs and sleep.