

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 9

Never mind that we didn't have much money. Never mind that I didn't even know exactly how to get to the house in Branches; I'd find it. Never mind that the house wasn't mine.

Please don't mind, I said to Izzy and the Old Man in my head.

I ticked off what to pack, what to do, counting on my fingers: Bring all the food in the cabinet over the sink, a map, winter clothes, piles of anything warm I could find in the house, then get gas at the first exit off the highway.

Josie was in the kitchen making cocoa. "It'll be dark soon," she said.

"That's all right," I told her. "We like the dark. It's like velvet."

"That it is," she said. "And we like the snow, too."

I bit my lip. Dark and snow. One problem after another.

"How about marshmallows in our cocoa?" Josie asked.

"Left-hand cabinet," I said.

To begin with, Josie and I had to get off Long Island, I knew that; we had to get to Route Seventeen and exit at Ninety, and after that we were home free. I had walked that last few miles dozens of times: the grocery store off the ramp, the road curving over the hill. We'd cross the bridge and the house would be there, nestled in the trees opposite the Old Man's mountain.

I could do it in my sleep.

I called back over my shoulder, reminding Josie where we were going: "It's a house in the woods, Josie," I said. "A house on the river, a safe house."

I swept half boxes of cereal off the counter into a carton, cans of chicken noodle soup, sugar, salt, anything I could find to eat, then, wasting precious time, went up to the attic for Josie's old Christmas ornaments.

I heard a car and froze on the top step. The sound of the motor grew louder and then gradually disappeared. My heart was beating fast.

Stop, I told myself. The mustard woman was far away, in her house somewhere, scarfing up her dinner, littering her sweat suit with crumbs.

But I knew we should leave as quickly as we could. I'd learned that when I'd run before. The first hours made all the difference, the hours before anyone knew you were gone.

I scurried into the attic, found the box of ornaments, and pulled it after me to the stairs.

When I finished, the car was piled so high it was hard to see out the windows. It was completely dark now, except for the white flakes hitting the window. In the kitchen Josie was bent over the table, a cup of cocoa in one hand, her knife in the other, and the smooth chunk of wood in front of her.

"Josie?" I reached out for my own cup of cocoa and sipped at it, feeling the warmth of it on my lip, the sweetness of the

marshmallow in my mouth. I touched her shoulder. "We can't wait anymore."

Rubbing her eyes, she glanced toward her bedroom. I knew she wanted to take a nap. I did too; I was tired now, and thinking of the long trip ahead of us was almost too much.

"We'll have an adventure," I said. "You, and me, and Henry." I hesitated. "If we don't go, they might make me live somewhere else."

She stood up. "We'll go, then." She looked around at the kitchen, touched the table, the back of the chair. "Yes," she said. "We'll go."

"Can you drive?" I asked.

Please let the snow stop, I thought.

She smiled. "Of course."

I made one last trip to the car, carrying her knives, the small drill, pieces of wood, and then I was back, hoisting Henry onto my shoulder. "No biting, if you don't mind," I told him.

We went outside, Josie looking up at the sky, holding out her hands to catch the flakes while I opened the garage doors, and then we were off, skidding our way down the street.

Suddenly the snow did stop, and we saw a moon over our heads. "It looks dusty," Josie said. The houses stood out as clearly as if it were daytime; trees threw sharp shadows across the snowy lawns, and the dark streets curved like ribbons through that white world. I put my head back against the headrest, thinking we'd done it. The hardest part was over.

"Do you know about directions?" I asked.

She turned her head to one side. "It depends. I know the way to the end of Long Island, I know how to get upstate...."

"Upstate, yes."

"Across the Triborough Bridge." She frowned, looking worried. "Isn't that right?"

"I think so." Henry was scratching around in back, trying to make room for himself.

"There's a map somewhere." Josie leaned across me, one hand off the wheel.

"I can find it," I said quickly, reaching for the glove compartment. A tiny pinprick of light appeared as I snapped it open. The small space inside was filled with all kinds of things: one of Josie's silk gloves, a couple of dimes, a squished box of tissues, and at the very bottom, the map of New York State.

I unfolded it, spreading it out against the door of the glove compartment. It was a mass of color and lines and tiny words that were hard to see in that dim light. I bent over it, squinting. *Palisades Parkway. Route 17.* It was all there, one line after another, leading me home to Branches.

I looked up as I heard the blare of a horn, and then a car swerved past us, its lights sweeping over the road. "Are you all right?" I asked Josie.

"Right as rain," she said.

I sat back and closed my eyes, thinking of Izzy, drawing them all in my mind, wondering if they'd think I was doing a terrible thing.

"*It belongs to you,*" the Old Man had said. Would he say that now? I wondered.

Why not? said Steven in my mind.

Izzy's face in front of mine. Would she say, "*Do it, Hollis*"? I thought she would.

I was doing it anyway.

Suddenly I sat up straight. How much gas did we have? It was almost a miracle to see the Mobil sign off to the right. I touched Josie's arm, pointing, and we pulled off the road, waiting for the attendant to fill the tank while I counted out my running money.

"Good idea," Josie said, and I had to smile at her. She'd have driven until the tank was empty, and might never have remembered.

I was hungry now, really hungry. The hot chocolate hadn't lasted long. And I hadn't had lunch. Maybe I could hurry inside for a bag of potato chips and a chocolate bar. I glanced out the rearview mirror to see a car pulling up in back of us at the pump. The man was impatient, tapping his horn for us to get out of the way. There'd be no time to buy anything, not even enough time to rummage through the back to find the bags of food.

I thought of the mustard woman. She'd come up the path tomorrow afternoon to get me, trying to smile, acting as if this would be a lovely afternoon tea at that woman's house—what was her name? Eleanor. When we didn't answer the bell, maybe she'd go around the back to see if we were in Josie's garden. But soon enough she'd figure out that we weren't there. She'd stand on tiptoe to look in the window of the garage, and it would be empty. If we were lucky, she'd wait awhile. She might think we'd be back any minute. But the minutes would stretch out to an hour, and then she'd know. She'd really know. And then she'd call the police.

My hands were damp.

Calm down, I made Steven tell me in my mind. *You knew all this before you started.*

But Josie turned onto the parkway now, and it wouldn't be that long before we crossed the bridge and left Long Island, maybe twenty minutes, and the mustard woman would just be getting ready for bed.

Next to me, in the dim light, I couldn't see the lines around Josie's eyes, or the ones crisscrossing her forehead. I could pretend we were taking a moonlight ride in the Silver Bullet, pretend Josie was all right and we weren't running.

The last time I had run was two weeks after what had happened in Branches. It was September, still hot, with the sun beating down from early morning until dark. It was hard to move, hard to think; everything hurt in my head and my chest. I'd had enough of the stucco woman and I knew she'd had enough of me. All I could think about was being somewhere cold, a place where I could scoop up a

chunk of snow and crush it against my teeth, a place to make the heat and the pain go away.

I left at night, after the stucco woman had fallen asleep. It gave me hours to get out on the road, to find a bus. I was gone for days before they caught me.

Maybe we'd be luckier this time.