

## *The Time with Josie*

### CHAPTER 5

“Over the river and through the woods ...,” Josie sang one morning at breakfast. It was a late breakfast. We had stayed up most of the night watching an old black-and-white movie.

“To Grandmother's house?” I asked, dropping a cornflake on the table in front of Henry's nose and jumping back as he raised one paw to warn me.

Josie waggled her hand, her head still bent. She was carving my tree figure from a piece of oak, stripping the bark until the underneath showed pale and smooth. The head was there, still unformed, the nose just a slight sharp mark.

Josie saw me looking at it. “A bit at a time,” she said. “The face last, when I'm sure I know you well enough.”

I didn't say anything. Instead, I ran one finger over Henry's back. His eyes were closed, he was purring, and I figured he didn't know it was me.

“Over the river ...,” Josie began again, rocking in her chair with a pleased look on her face.

Water, I thought. The ocean. We'd been there twice this week. Odd to see the ocean near the end of November. I'd always thought of it as something to see in the summertime. I put the tea mugs in the sink, sprayed water over them, and waited, leaning against the counter as Josie took a cut in the side of the wood and gently blew the shavings away.

She stood up then, ready to go, but instead, she stopped to peer out the window. "Someone's coming."

I glanced out and saw the gray car pulling into her driveway. The mustard woman had come to check up on me.

My own fault, I told myself. Hanging around here today instead of going to school. It was that lingering-cold note. I hadn't been able to resist it.

"It's the wrong time," I sang to Josie.

She smiled at me, singing too. "And the wrong place?"

I reached for her wool hat and scarf and the brown hat with the veil. "Let's go down to the water instead of entertaining," I told her.

We slipped out the back door, moving as quietly as we could; it was a game. We passed through Josie's tree-figure garden, went through the woods and diagonally across the street.

It was a long walk in the cold, and we hadn't stopped for jackets, so we were both shivering by the time we felt the difference in the air, smelled the sharp, sweetish smell of the ocean.

We climbed up onto the pier. The fishing boats were gone this late in the morning. I knew some of them by now, and I could see the two smaller ones somewhere out near the horizon. I kept thinking of that gray car and trying to decide what to do. I bent down and picked up a shell. Its edges were crushed but it had a beautiful color, almost like the sea itself with the sun shining on it.

"A piece of good luck," Josie said.

I slipped it into a pocket of my jeans and nodded. We needed luck.

Josie had moved away from me. I turned and saw her lying on the jetty, holding her hat on with one hand, the loose end of her scarf floating in the water. She wiggled herself down and down until I thought she'd go over; then at last she reached into the mass of foam that had settled around the stanchions of the pier.

A moment later she was up, strands of sea grass clutched in her hand. Several inches long, curled along the edges, they were the color of sand. Josie smiled at me and held them up to my hair. "I thought so," she said, "almost an exact match."

I nodded, realizing she had gathered them for my wood figure. It made me think of the drawing box the Old Man had given me. How often I had held up a pencil to match the color against something.

Was the drawing box still at the house in Branches?

I turned as I heard the sound of a car and of tires bumping along the wooden planks of the pier in back of me: the mustard woman.

She came to a stop about two inches away from us and rolled down the window. "Why aren't you in school?"

"School?" Josie asked, looking confused.

I didn't answer, of course I didn't. I had learned to keep my mouth closed long ago. In my mind I pulled myself into a small knot deep inside and tried to think about something else, anything else.

"Get in the car," the mustard woman said, "I'll drive you there right now."

One of the fishing boats had almost disappeared. All that was left of it was the needle-thin mast on top. Someday I'd like to be on that boat, I thought, to see what it would be like to look back at the land. I glanced at the railing that ran along the end of the pier. It was so low it would be hard to see from a ship.

"School," Josie said. "Of course." She put her hand on my shoulder. It was the hand holding the sea grass. I felt a soft scratch against my skin.

Josie's legs were bare, with dainty spider veins showing, and her silky shoes were soaked with snow and spray. I didn't want the

mustard woman to see them.

I opened the back door of the car and slid in, and we drove off, leaving Josie looking after us, her head tilted as she waved at me, the sea grass in her hand blowing in the wind.

"What's going on here?" the mustard woman said. "No school?"

I ran my tongue over my lips, trying to figure out the best lie I could. "I told her today was a holiday, teachers' conference."

The mustard woman shook her head. "And she believed that?" she said. "We'll have to see about this."

I reached into my pocket and held on to the shell. For the first time in my life, I thought, I'd really have to go to school. I'd have to if I wanted to stay at Josie's.