

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 6

My head was a round burl of wood, the sea grass, dried now, a swirl on top. Josie spent hours over it at the kitchen table, humming to herself, a tray of tiny knives spread out in front of her.

It was Monday, early in December, almost dark in the late afternoon. No Chinese dinner tonight. I was making a dish Izzy had taught me. "*Special deluxe*," she had said, and smiled at me. Chopped meat, ketchup, Worcestershire sauce, and cheese, spooned over hot rolls. Salad. Pound cake with confectioner's sugar sifted over the top.

It was going to be a special deluxe evening. Beatrice was leaving the next morning for New Mexico, where she'd paint the adobe houses and the desert. "I'll come back when the mood strikes," she had said, "or when my money runs out. We'll close up the movie until I get back."

All week I'd had a pain in my chest. I was waiting to see what the mustard woman would do. School was all right. I kept my head in the books, made As on two tests, and had no friends. But if the

mustard woman talked to Josie for more than five minutes she'd know about Josie. Strange, how much I wanted to stay. Maybe it was because Josie needed me. I'd never been needed before. Or wanted? asked a voice in my head. The Old Man had wanted me, I told myself. So had Izzy, so had Steven. Then why?

Don't think about that. Think about Josie.

"A little forgetful," Beatrice had said. "Maybe old age."

But not always forgetful. There was the afternoon Josie had watched me sketch small pictures on my pad. "I remember something." She tapped one red fingernail on her lower lip. "There's paper in the attic. I haven't seen it for years. I think it belonged to my father."

I climbed the stairs; then, bent like a pretzel, I scurried around the low attic, stepping over bags and bushel baskets, stopping to look at boxes of paper-thin Christmas ornaments and yellowed leather gloves, until I found what she'd told me about: huge pieces of paper, gray and dogeared. I ran my hands over them, thinking about the day the Old Man gave me the drawing box.

As I had maneuvered my way back to the steps, Josie had called up. "There's an easel, too."

Beatrice came now, hurrying up the walk. Her hair had been done up in a high pink swirl at the hair-dresser. Her nails matched, and so did her huge pink purse.

We were ready for her with the pound cake on Josie's best plate and the dishes on the table. We ate watching the pale December sun drop behind the trees in the backyard. When Josie went inside for something, Beatrice leaned over. "Take care of her," she whispered.

I thought of telling her about the mustard woman and the agency, but what if Josie came back?

Beatrice saw me frown. "Maybe I shouldn't go."

"Josie said you've wanted to do this all your life."

"But ..."

"Go," I said, wishing I could go too. I'd take the Shortline bus up through New York State. It would be early summer again, the first time I'd seen Steven and the Old Man, playing checkers in the diner. I'd start over. I'd do everything different.

Everything.

But instead, I'd do it all right. I'd stay with Josie and ...

"I'll take care of her," I whispered. Somehow, I said in my head.

Beatrice turned over one of my pictures. "I'll leave my phone number," she said. "I'll write it down." She patted my hand. "I won't be there for the first two or three weeks, I'll be traveling around. But just in case."

I watched her make careful, even numbers on the paper and turn it over as Josie came back into the kitchen, another one of my pictures in her hand.

I didn't take any chances, though. Through the rest of the dinner, I said the phone number over in my head. I wanted to be sure I'd remember it.