



The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 13

Late that afternoon the snow tapered off and stopped. I took a last look at the picture, pleased with it: Beatrice, listening to something Josie is saying, both of them with bags of popcorn in their hands. I sneaked it into my room so that Josie wouldn't see it.

I put on all the clothes I could find, and Izzy's boots, and went outside to sink into the soft snow almost to my knees. The cold was shocking. It stung the inside of my nose and numbed my cheeks.

Everything was still. The birds must have found nesting places for the night, and the deer were hiding somewhere deep in the woods. The last slim line of river had frozen; if I hadn't known it was there, I'd have walked right across to the other side. I wondered if the ice would carry my weight yet.

I realized I wouldn't be able to pick evergreen or holly branches from the ground. Anything the wind had brought down was under the snow. I'd have to saw off what I could.

Josie and Henry were framed in the window, waving to me. I reached down to scoop up a handful of white and tossed it at them.

Then I trudged over to the shed for the Old Man's saw and found Steven's sweater hanging on the knob, encrusted with snow. I didn't even remember leaving it there. I folded it, put it on one of the shelves, reached for the saw, and spent the last bit of daylight hacking away at branches, making sure not to spoil the shapes of the trees.

The wind wasn't as strong under the shelter of those trees, and it reminded me of something the Old Man had told me. Hunters who were lost would pull the tree branches together with rope, bending them to form a shelter. I loved the thought of that, the trees forming a cozy nest. And then I shivered, thinking of being alone.

You have Josie, Steven might have said.

I love Josie, I said back.

From inside, music spilled from the radio. "All I want for Christmas ..."

What I want. What I want.

Josie was turning on the lamps now; the house was like a Christmas card with the light shining on the snow. I stood there watching, wondering how far the light might be seen.

I reached up for the last branch, snow spraying my face. No one could see the light anyway, I told myself; it faced the river, away from the road, and no one would be on the Old Man's mountain toward evening after a storm like this.

"You're a snowman," Josie said as I trudged onto the porch, staggering under the bulky branches.

I pulled off Izzy's waders and rubbed my feet until the feeling came back. Josie danced around me. "I have something for your dinner," she said, delighted with herself. "I was saving it for a surprise."

She led me into the kitchen and opened the cabinet over the refrigerator. I thought I knew where everything was, but in back of Izzy's old bowls and mixers was a row of treasures: a box of dried milk ... *milk!* ... pancake mix, and a jar of applesauce.

"Yes," Josie said with satisfaction. "We'll have apple pancakes for dinner with cold milk."

My mouth watered. A Christmas Eve dinner.

I'll pay you back, Izzy, every cent, if it takes me the rest of my life.

So Josie cooked for the first time, talking to me over her shoulder about Beatrice. "Ornaments sparkle on the tree, and Beatrice lights the candles."

Every time Josie talked about Beatrice she seemed to come alive, I thought; Beatrice and her house. I knew she was homesick. "We'll have Christmas here too," I told her. "I'll set everything up after we eat."

But after I'd finished the pancakes covered with dollops of sweet applesauce, my eyes drooped; I was warm and sleepy. "Let's do it all in the morning," I said.

"Presents," Josie said, a secret smile lighting her face. I curled up in bed, looking out the window at a pale moon and trees thick with snow, thinking I'd never seen anything so beautiful. I could see movement at the edge of the trees and sat up to see what it was. And then suddenly, a fox, silvery gray with his tail streaming out in back of him, darted across that open space, crossed the ice, and was gone.

I saw a fox, Steven. I've never seen a fox before.

I lay back, trying to figure out what Josie might have for me. Maybe she'd found another package of food. I fell asleep wondering what it was, what I'd like it to be: something sweet, something chocolate, or salty. Potato chips.

Next morning, the sun was blinding. And the shed glittered like the witch's house in Hansel and Gretel. I lay there, something on the edge of my mind. What was it? Something about the shed? Or was I wondering what the Old Man would think if he knew I was spending Christmas in his house?

I didn't want to think about that. But there was something else. Was it Josie's present for me? An egg was what I really wanted this

morning. What I could do with an egg! I'd bake a cake or cookies. I'd whip it up for an eggnog. I'd fry it like a little sun in a pan.

I threw on my clothes. The house still smelled of the pancakes from last night. I went into the kitchen.

At that moment the back door opened and Josie came in, her scarf pulled over her forehead, her nose red.

I wanted to tell her she shouldn't be out there, that it was too cold, the snow too deep. But I'd sound like the stucco woman. I turned back to the stove. "Cocoa with milk," I said.

We hurried through breakfast, and afterward I went out on the porch to shake the snow off the branches before I brought them inside. I covered the mantelpiece, the sharp pine smelling like Christmas, as Josie unwrapped the box of ornaments. "Here's my old Santa Claus." I could hear the tears in her voice as she hung him in the center. "And this one." She held up a thick pink plastic globe. "Ugly, isn't it? It's the only kind we could get during the Second World War."

She went on, telling me the history of each one, until the mantel was finished and the center of the table held a bowl of holly. "We'll even hang a few of those glittery ornaments over the window to catch the light," I said aloud, and to myself, *Please be happy, Josie.*

"Presents now?" Josie asked.

"Maybe," I said absently. I had caught movement outside as I hung the last clear prism.

We watched as seven or eight deer wandered in front of the house, making their way toward the evergreens. Suddenly something disturbed them. Heads back, noses up, they stood stock-still for an instant, then scattered, two to bound across the river ice as the fox had last night, the others in the opposite direction, toward the bridge.

I tried to see what had bothered them. I looked toward the evergreens myself, looked back as far as I could. There was no light

anywhere, nothing to make me think about a fisherman being out there somewhere.

I had a quick thought of the night on the mountain with the flashlights like glowworms above me.

It was then I remembered: Steven's sweater, a flash of green in the snow as I backed away from the fisherman that day. I hadn't left it on the doorknob in the shed. I opened my mouth to ask Josie if she had picked it up when she'd been outside. But Josie would never remember. Maybe I didn't want to know the answer anyway, thinking of the fisherman finding us and what might happen then.