

## *The Time with Josie*

### CHAPTER 14

“*M*y cousin Beatrice would love this,” Josie said, looking around the room. “If only ...”

I'd never seen anything so beautiful, so Christmasy either. Pine branches were everywhere. We 'd found candles, maybe a dozen, and lighted all of them. The ornaments sparkled in the light. And then I thought of what Josie had begun to say. “If only what?” I asked.

She shrugged a little. “Beatrice and I spent every Christmas together. She remembers things for me when I forget, things about when we were young.” Her forehead wrinkled. “Fishing off the jetties.”

I felt a lump in my throat. “She'll be home someday,” I said, but I wondered when that would be.

“Next year?” Josie said.

I looked out the window. I didn't like to think about next year. Where would we be then?

“Just a minute,” I told her. “Close your eyes.”

I went down the hall for the picture I'd drawn and laid it on the table to flicker in the candlelight. "Josie herself," I said, "with Beatrice."

She drew in her breath, leaning over it, running one finger along the edge. "We're young." She smiled up at me. "And look at that popcorn machine." Head tilted, she spotted Henry batting a piece of popcorn across the floor. "You have to keep looking to see everything," she said.

She stood up then and pattered away from me into the kitchen. She came back with a round tin in her hand. "This is from Santa Claus."

I touched the tin. "Where did you find this?"

Izzy's hard candies: Izzy standing on the porch one sunny afternoon, holding a tin out to me. "*Lemon drops, and orange. They'll make you sweet, make you loving.*" She had leaned forward to touch my shoulder.

"*You always have a lump in one cheek,*" Steven told me days later as I worked my way through the candy. "*It's going to freeze like that.*"

Oh, Izzy. Oh, Steven.

I opened the tin and held it out to Josie. "You get first pick." Another thing I had to pay back. I couldn't just take Izzy's candies.

"*Take them,*" I suddenly remembered Izzy saying with a sweep of her arm. "*Take anything, Hollis. I've always wanted a daughter.*"

"I have a real present for you," Josie said around the candy in her mouth.

I looked after her, wondering, as she went into Izzy and the Old Man's bedroom and came back with something in her arms. "She's finished at last."

It was my tree figure, with her sea-grass hair cascading down her back, almost half the size of Josie. She looked older than I was, but as I touched her face, the small nose, the large eyes, the tiny scar on the forehead, the arms out, I could see it was me.

But not really me.



I looked closer, studying those eyes that were so sad it hurt to look at them, ran my fingers over those outstretched arms.

"Giving arms," Josie said, nodding, bone thin, like one of the little birds that perched on the evergreen trees. I reached out to her, feeling those small shoulders, and hugged her to me. Tears burned my eyes. "She's beautiful," I said.

"Do you think she looks like you?"

I held her out. "She's not as tough," I said, trying for a smile. "She doesn't look like a mountain of trouble."

Josie shook her head. "Maybe you're tough when you need to be tough. But trouble? What would I ever have done without you?"

Josie put her hand under my chin and tilted it so that I had to look at her. "I wish you could see yourself the way I see you."

"But I'm not—" I began, but she broke in.

"Not good? Not kind? Not there when you're needed? Not anxious to be loved? You know that's not so."

I did cry then, but just for a moment. If I had let myself go I would have had a hard time stopping. And then I saw that Josie was crying too.

"I know you want to go home," I said, a jumble of thoughts in my mind. I wanted to say that we could be a family here, but she wanted to be in her own house, wanted to make Christmas cookies with Beatrice and spend Tuesdays and Thursdays at the movies making popcorn.

We sat on the couch, Henry on Josie's lap, watching the candles glow in the late-afternoon light. The fire in the fireplace sent warm shadows over the wood floor and the walls, and next to me Josie was closing her eyes. Her head went back to rest against the couch, and she was asleep.

I sat there too, half dozing, remembering that Steven's birthday was the next day. It hurt to think about it. I stood up slowly, quietly, and went into his room. I picked up the blurry picture from his dresser, half of the photo dark, the rest all blues and greens, with

the faint figure in the center. It was the river, of course; I saw it then, with the holly bushes on the bank and just the faintest view of the Old Man's mountain reaching up in back. There was the rowboat, and I was in it.

How could I not have seen that the other day?

*"Hey, stop rowing," he said. "I'm going to take your picture."*

I looked up at him, feeling the sun on my face, feeling the happiness down to my toes, as he stood at the river's edge and snapped the picture.

*"You've got a smiley face," he said. "We could put you on a stamp and sell it all over Branches."*

*"Too bad you didn't take your thumb off the lens," I told him.*

*"Too bad you dropped the oar," he said. "It's floating away."*

I put the picture back carefully, then went downstairs for sweaters and pulled my jacket off the hook. Something fell out as I did. It was the shell I had picked up the first time I had seen Josie's ocean. I held it up to my face before I put it back into my pocket.

I needed to be outside. I needed to be cold, so cold I couldn't think of anything but the ice and the snow.

*Anything, that's what the stucco woman would say.*