

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 3

Every night we ate soup from a can, Josie, Henry, and I. We sat at the table under a stained-glass lamp that tossed rainbows onto the kitchen ceiling. On the wall was a quick picture of Henry I had drawn. He was wearing boxing gloves and batting at the light cord.

Josie whittled away on a slice of wood as we dunked bits of donuts or slice-and-bake chocolate chip cookies into the tomato soup. On Josie's check days we ate big.

"We shouldn't do this," I told her as we trundled home a cartload of donuts, a case of cat food, and our check-day treat: a gallon of cherry vanilla ice cream and enough Snickers bars to keep us chewing for a week of television nights. "We should spread it out."

Josie didn't answer. She hummed a scrap of an old song I had never heard before. That's the way she talked sometimes. She'd start with bits of this and that, it could even be poetry. You had to untangle her words in your head like balls of knotted string. And sometimes she'd break off in the middle of a sentence, small frown lines on her forehead.

I knew something the mustard woman didn't know, something even Emmy, star of the agency, hadn't guessed. Josie forgot things, forgot words, forgot what she was doing. Not all the time, but still too often. Josie knew it too. She'd look at me helplessly, hands in the air, and then I'd rush to finish her sentence for her or to turn down the flame under a pot of soup that was ready to boil over.

"My cousin Beatrice is waiting," she sang one night, and handed me my jacket. She gave her straw hat a twirl as she passed the hook it hung on in the hall. "Much too cold for this."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"To the movies."

"What will we use for money?"

Josie didn't answer. She pulled a brown hat out of the closet and stood at the mirror, arranging the veil in front of her eyes. In the dim light of the hall, she looked young; her skin seemed to glow.

She saw me staring at her, and for the barest second before I looked away, I could see that her eyes gleamed. "Wait a minute." She reached out and gently took my arm so I stood in front of the mirror.

I didn't much like to look at myself; there was that scar just healed from the accident on the Old Man's mountain. If I didn't see the scar, I didn't have to think about that night and the terrible sound of the truck slamming into the rocks as we slid toward the edge.

Josie took the brown hat off her head and put it on mine. She fluffed out the veil so it covered my face down to my nose and then she stood back.

I drew in my breath at the reflection. No scar, no freckles, and my sandy hair, which usually poked out in all directions, looked soft, almost curly. I looked different, almost ... *Pretty* wasn't even the word.

"Ah," Josie said. "You know it too. This is the way you're going to look very soon. This is the way you'll look for the rest of your life."

You have a beautiful face.”

I swallowed. I didn't want to take the hat off. I wanted to leave it on forever.

“Wear it.” She patted my shoulder, then opened the closet door to take out another hat for herself, a green wool one with flecks of gold and an iridescent clip on one side. She smiled at me. “It's yours to have forever, even when you leave me.”

“I won't leave,” I said.

She started to say something, but instead fiddled with the lock on the front door and dropped the key into her pocketbook. As we went past the garage, she shook her head regretfully. The gas gauge was almost on Empty—I had seen that the other day—and we had about forty cents to last us until the middle of the month.

I sighed. I had money Josie didn't know about. I always had money; I called it my running money. It couldn't be used for gas or food, just running. I had made that bargain with myself a long time ago.

We rushed along in the misty rain for a couple of blocks; then Josie stepped into the middle of the street, her head up, her hands out. “Look.”

I put my head back to see a fine sleet dropping from the dark sky, streaks of white light.

How would I draw that? I wondered. Black paper, if I could get my hands on some, maybe with white tempera, or maybe the palest gray with a sable brush.

Behind us a horn blared, a loud, frightening sound. Josie grabbed my hand and we darted out of the street. Strange to feel someone's hand holding mine. The last time was Izzy's. “*I always wanted a daughter,*” she had said, hands out. “*Babies, children. Piles of them.*”

Josie and I made right turns at the next three corners. Then in front of us was the Island Theater, with small lights, blurred in the mist, that ran around the marquee.

An old woman sat at the ticket counter. Not as old as Josie, but still her hair was a bundle of braided cotton candy on top of her head, and when she smiled her teeth were butter yellow. Her thumb pointed at me. "What's her name, Josie?"

"Hollis." Josie waved her hand at the woman. "This is Beatrice Gilcrest, my cousin and best lifetime friend, not counting Henry."

"Gorgeous," Beatrice told Josie, and it took me a moment to realize she meant me. She leaned forward. "I would have seen you sooner, much sooner, but I've had a miserable cold." She winked at me. "I didn't want to spread my germs around."

We smiled at each other; then without paying Josie and I tiptoed past her and went inside.

I peered at the dark theater that stretched out in front of us. Almost no one else was there. It was a school night, and everyone was home, I guessed, still having supper, still doing homework. It gave me a strange feeling. I thought about Steven at the dinner table with Izzy and the Old Man, or bent over a sheet of paper working on algebra.

"We have to work to pay our way," Josie said, leading me to the candy counter. She turned on the lights, poured a pile of corn and a cup of what looked like parsley into the popcorn machine, then sat back on a high stool behind the counter. "Special recipe, this popcorn." She nodded. "Beatrice and I dreamed it up last winter."

Josie pointed up. "Beatrice lives upstairs. Her apartment takes up the whole top. It's like a bowling alley." She shook her head. "Can you imagine?"

I nodded, reaching for a kernel of popcorn. It tasted better than it looked.

A few minutes later, six or seven people came in. Josie poured popcorn into wrinkled paper bags for them, her mouth full, and then music blared and the movie came on.

Afterward we walked home, watching the mist swirl around the bare branches above us. "That was a tearjerker," Josie said.

I nodded, thinking about it: the story of a boy and a dog and Christmas in a small town in New Jersey.

"Henry would feel terrible if we brought a dog into the house," Josie said, gliding around the icy puddles next to me.

"I know." I was getting used to Henry. He spent almost every night on my bed now, and as long as I didn't stretch out my feet he didn't attack.

"But we can have Christmas," Josie said. "I have ornaments in the attic, and an artificial tree. You've never seen the attic. What treasures." She stopped, her face up to bathe in the sleet so it coated her eyelashes. "There's one ornament, a Santa Claus, Beatrice and I put it on the tree first every year." She twirled around, arms up, dipping her graceful hands.

I had that strange feeling again. Everyone was home doing homework for school tomorrow, and I was watching an old lady dance in the street.

I comforted myself with the thought of sitting in Josie's living room after supper every night, sweet chocolate melting on our tongues, wood shavings around our feet.

It's enough, I told Steven in my head, *more than enough*. I tried not to think of my *W* picture with the mother, the father, the brother, and the sister.