

pictures of hollis woods



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OPM

First Picture

X

This picture has a dollop of peanut butter on one edge, a smear of grape jelly on the other, and an X across the whole thing. I cut it out of a magazine for homework when I was six years old. "Look for words that begin with W," my teacher, Mrs. Evans, had said.

She was the one who marked in the X, spoiling my picture. She pointed. "This is a picture of a family, Hollis. A mother, M, a father, F, a brother, B, a sister, S. They're standing in front of their house, H. I don't see one W word here."

I opened my mouth to say: How about W for wish, or W for want, or W for "Wouldn't it be lovely," like the song the music teacher had taught us?

But Mrs. Evans was at the next table by that time, shushing me over her shoulder.

"Whoo-ee!" said the kid with dirty nails who

sat next to me. "You don't know anything, Hollis Woods."

I reached for my crayon and dug an X into her picture of a snow-white washing machine. "Too bad you can't use it to get your hands clean," I said.

When I think of my W picture deep inside my backpack under all the other pictures I've drawn, I think of that poor washing machine kid who cried over her ruined picture, and the frowning Mrs. Evans, who told me to sit in the hall with a time-out T letter for the rest of that long afternoon. "You don't deserve to be with the rest of us today," she said.

I sat for a while looking at a picture of a pointy mountain. Someday I would climb a mountain like that. I'd build a little house and maybe I'd have a horse that would live right in the house with me, and a dog and a cat.

When I saw the principal coming down the hall, I picked myself up and walked out the door. The woman I was staying with—I called her the lemon lady because of the way her mouth caved in—made me stay in the yard all weekend for that. "You think you're so tough," she said. "I'll show you tough."

That foolish woman forgot that as long as I had


a pencil and paper, I'd get along. I drew her with her pursed-up lips, then tied her picture to the tree for target practice with gravel from the path.

But when I think of my W picture, mostly I think of the Regans' house in Branches. I think of the Old Man, and Izzy, and their son, Steven. All they needed to match my picture was a girl, G.

And that's what I thought the morning I ran away from them, touching the great holly bushes, feeling their sharpness, and the sticky evergreen branches that hung over the dirt road leading to town. I stopped to look up at the mountain, and then at the house half hidden in the trees, the gray porch tacked on the front, screens bellying out, the chimney leaning, the two windows upstairs that had been in my bedroom, and the river in front.

My river, the Delaware.

That day I thought I'd never see any of it again. N, never, and in my mind I drew an X over all of them, and over me, too.



CHAPTER 1

The house was falling apart. I could see that from the car window. But it didn't bother me. After a while the houses ran together, four now—no, five.

There was the green house where the door didn't quite close; the wind blew in and up the stairs, rattling the window panes. The white house: crumbs on the table, kids fighting over a bag of Wonder bread. The yellow house: sooty, a long-haired woman with braids, no rugs on the stairs, the loud sound of feet going up and down.

Ah, and the house in Branches. Steven's house. But that house was different. I'd never forget that one.

Don't think about it, Steven said in my head.

I did that a lot; I pretended Steven was right there next to me when I knew he was miles away in upstate New York. I wondered if he ever said to himself, "What is Hollis Woods doing right this minute?" And did he put my words in his head?

The driver turned off the motor. For a moment we looked out at the trees, the leaves with just a tinge of red this October afternoon. "We're here, Hollis," she said, a woman in sweats, a mustard stain on the front from the hot dogs we had eaten on the side of the road. Those hot dogs were a mean lump in the middle of my stomach, sloshing around with a Mountain Dew.

She'd tried to talk all the way, but I hadn't answered. I slumped in my seat, feet up on the glove compartment, wearing an A&S baseball hat with the brim yanked low over my forehead. If someone looks into your eyes, I read in a book one time, he'll see right into your soul.

I didn't want anyone to see into my soul.

I knew she was dying to tell me to get my sneakers off her dashboard, but she didn't. She was waiting to deliver her speech.

I could hear her getting ready for it with a puff of breath. "This can be a new start, Hollis. A new place." She licked her finger and scratched at the mustard

stain. "No one knows you. You can be different, you can be good, know what I mean?"

Maybe she gave that speech to every foster kid in every driveway as she dumped them off like the UPS guy dumping off packages on a busy day, but I didn't think so. I had looked into her eyes once, just the quickest look, and I had seen that she felt sorry for me, that she didn't know what to do with me. Too bad for you, mustard woman.

I hummed a little of "The Worms Crawl In, the Worms Crawl Out."

"She was an art teacher," the mustard woman said, pointing to the house. "Retired now. I've never met her, but everyone at the agency says she's wonderful with kids . . ." Her voice trailed off, but I knew she had meant to say "kids like you."

I walked my feet up the dashboard so my knees came close to my chin.

"No one's been here with her for a while, but Emmy said it would be a good place for you."

Emmy, the agency hotshot. She had probably said, "What have we got to lose?"

"A good place for an artist like you, Hollis," the mustard woman said. "Mr. Regan . . ."

I drew in my breath. The Old Man. I closed my eyes as if I were ready to doze off.

“He wanted you to have a chance to work at your drawings. He said it would be a crime if you didn’t.”

I tried to yawn, but then the front door opened, and a woman came out on the porch with a mangy orange cat one step behind her. I didn’t bother to give them more than a glance. What did I care what the woman looked like?

But next to me, the mustard woman took a deep breath. I cut my eyes in the direction of the house. I was good at that, seeing everything without turning my head, without looking up, without blinking.

I did blink then, of course I did. Anyone getting a first look at Josie Cahill would do the same. It wasn’t just that she was movie-star beautiful, or that she was wearing a blue dress made of filmy stuff that floated around her, and rings on eight of her fingers. It was this: She had a knife in one hand. She held it in front of her so it caught the glint of late-afternoon sunshine and became a silvery light itself.

“Lordy,” the mustard woman breathed.

I sat up straight, wondering if I should open the car door and run, or reach out to push the button down, locking myself in.

The knife woman came close enough for me to see that the movie-star face had dozens of tiny crisscross lines on its cheeks and across its forehead.

But then she smiled, and the lines around her mouth rearranged themselves. She leaned forward and put one hand on the car window. "Hollis," she said. "Are you here, then?"

I couldn't take my eyes off her. I could feel a pencil in my hand, moving across the paper, drawing her face, her eyes, the knife. I reached over the seat, grabbed my backpack, and was out the door, slamming it behind me.

On the other side of the car the mustard woman was out too.

"Tea?" the movie star asked the mustard woman as if she were reading her grocery list. "Coffee? Lemonade? Orange juice?"

The mustard woman shook her head. She was still thinking about the knife. "I just want to get Hollis settled," she said uneasily.

"I'm settled," I said.

We all stood there for another few minutes, the mustard woman trying to fill the space around us with talk. Then at last she opened the car door again and was gone.

"Want to call me Josie?" The movie star rubbed her forehead absently with the knife handle. "If you want to do the Cahill part you say it 'Kale,' you know, like that vegetable." She jerked her head toward the cat. "That's Henry. He's a little irritable sometimes."

I followed her up the path and around to the back of the house. Henry came too, reaching out to stab my leg with one irritable claw.

Josie looked back over her shoulder. "Hungry?"

I shook my head; the hot dogs were just settling in.

"Drop your things," she said, waving the knife. "We'll get them later."

In back of the house was a different world: a garden on the edge of the woods, woods so small I could see around them to houses on the next street.

"I've lived here"—Josie raised one eyebrow—"since they invented the spoon."

"Who did that, anyway?" I asked, trying her out.

Her other eyebrow shot up. "The knife and fork people, who else?"

I could feel a laugh coming as she waved her hand. "This is my place."

Carved tree branches were stuck in the dirt in front of the woods, some of them thicker than my arm, others almost pencil-thin. All of them had faces, and bits of grass or wreaths of flowers circled their wooden heads.

I touched this one and that, using two fingers, the ones I used to shadow in my own drawings. One of the figures had a filmy scarf around its neck and held a bird's nest in its bent arms. "You?" I asked.

She patted the scarf and turned to look at me, head tilted.

I pulled my hat down over my eyes and stared at her figures. She really was an artist.

"I'll make one of you," Josie Cahill said. "We'll have to find the right piece of wood. I think there's one in the back. The shape of the head is there already, the nose sharp, and the eyes . . ." She stopped. "But only if you stay. It will take weeks for me to do. Months, maybe."

I tried to think of what to say. I never stayed anywhere for long before I ran. One morning I'd wake up and I'd have had enough. I'd grab my backpack and go. I'd hang out in the city, see a couple of movies, or if the weather was nice, I'd head over to Jones Beach and sleep under the boardwalk. Sometimes it took them days to find me. But they never sent me back to the same place. The people in their houses had probably had enough of me, too.

Josie waited for me to answer.

I raised one shoulder. "I'm not sure."

"Henry and I will treat you like our best company for as long as you stay," she said.

Henry crouched at the top of the path, eyes slitted, tail switching at me. "I'm glad he's not a tiger," I said, feeling that laughter again.

Josie's eyes danced. "Maybe we'll go back and cut that piece of wood anyway."

A table leaned against the back of the house, an old

redwood table with tools: a drill, an ax, and knives sharp enough to split hairs.

I reached for the ax, then followed Josie Cahill into the woods.

And in my head I told Steven, *I may just stay for a while. What do you think of that?*

Second Picture

Steven

This wasn't one picture, it was six, eight, ten. I never could get Steven right. I could see him in my head, though, close my eyes and there he was.

That first day, I was sick to my stomach from the smell of the bus, the dizzying mountain roads. I had been on that bus for hours. It seemed like weeks. The tag pinned to my shirt, HOLLIS WOODS, LONG ISLAND, had rubbed a raw patch into my neck.

All I could think about was how thirsty I felt. I imagined ice cubes in my mouth, burning my tongue, ginger ale in a glass that was wet to the touch, root beer with two scoops of orange sherbet.

I was on my way to a place called Branches to spend the summer with a family named Regan.

"I'll be good if you don't make me go," I had almost told the woman I was living with in the

stucco house. "I won't make a sound, you'll see." Instead, I squeezed my lips in between my teeth so hard they were hidden inside my mouth, and shot lightning rays at her out of the corners of my eyes.

"Fresh air, a place in the country," the stucco woman said, "that's what you need."

She didn't mean it, though. I heard her on the phone. "Two months," she said, "two months to do what I please and not have to worry about that kid getting into everything."

"Everything," I said, putting my tongue against my top teeth in front of her face.

"Fresh." She cupped her hand over the phone. "Fresh as paint."

And back to the phone, whispering now: "No wonder she hasn't been adopted. She's a mountain of trouble, that Hollis Woods."

I marched up the stairs, hitting every rung with her lime green umbrella.

Anyway, I was the last one left on the bus. Up in front the driver talked with the woman from the agency. If I ducked down in back of the seat, would they forget about me? Would they turn around and go back to Long Island?

We lumbered up the main street of Hancock, passing a row of houses and a movie theater, and

came to a stop in front of a diner. "Straighten up, kid," the bus driver said, looking into the rear-view mirror. "We're here."

I gathered up my backpack and the plastic bag they had given me: a toothbrush, a bar of soap that smelled like an old sock, a pink washcloth, and a book for drooling two-year-olds, Kelly Goes to Camp. I tossed the book in the agency woman's lap as I passed, nose in the air, pretending I wasn't dying of thirst, pretending I wasn't bursting from having to go to the bathroom.

Outside the bus window a man leaned against the wall of the diner, his hat over his eyes, and a boy played handball against a brick wall. I climbed down into the blistering hot sun, checking out the boy. A skinny mess he was, much taller than I, his socks falling down. They looked as if they didn't even match.

As the bus started up, the exhaust smelling like a sewer, the boy slammed the ball against the wall, missing it on its way back. He nearly killed himself trying to dive in front of the bus for it, then jumped back at the last moment as the ball bounced across the street.

I put down my backpack and the agency freebie bag, darted across the street in back of the bus, and scooped up the ball with one hand. I trotted back to

them, tossing it over my head and catching it a couple of times just to show them what I could do.

The man pushed his hat back and grinned at me. He had a great face to draw: eyes the color of cinnamon toast, a prickly gray-black beard, deep laugh lines.

"I'm Steven Regan," the boy said, grinning. "How'd you get a name like that, Hollis Woods, crazy name? Do they call you Holly? We have a pile of holly bushes out in front. Touch the leaves and they draw blood. I'm going to call you Holly."

The man shook his head. "Steven."

"Try it," I cut in.

"How old are you anyway?" Steven asked, his eyes caramel behind his glasses. "You look like kind of a shrimp to me."

"Twelve," I said, bumping it up almost a year, "and tough."

"Baby. I'll be thirteen December twenty-sixth." He rushed on. "We're having lunch at the diner. My mother stayed in Branches."

"Izzy's making carrot cake," the man said.

I thought about saying I hated carrots—not true, I ate anything. Anything, the stucco house lady would say. Besides, they were standing there, Steven and his father, looking so pleased about having lunch in the diner and carrot cake for

dinner, I didn't have the heart, and I really had to go to the bathroom.

"Bet you're thirsty." Steven's eyes narrowed. "They've got checkers at every table. I'll play you, beat you."

He wanted to pay me back for the ball trick.

His father frowned. He knew it too.

But I was all right with it; I was fine with it.

I skittered into the diner, straight to the rest room, and then sat with them at their table drinking root beer floats, cold and sweet, with wet napkins underneath the glasses. After I had downed half of mine, Steven ticked off the things he wanted me to know. "I call the old man Pop," he said.

"You can call me that," the father said.

I took a chance. "I'm going to call you Old Man."

He laughed. "Try it." I could tell he didn't mind, though.

"What's next is I'm a walker," Steven said. "Walk myself all over Branches. I'll walk you, too."

"Maybe," I said.

"I know motors," he said. "I drive a truck."

"Don't believe that." The Old Man snorted. "Not even thirteen years old."

"I almost drive, then," Steven said, giving me a wink. "Legal any day now."

The Old Man rolled his eyes at me.

"And the last thing, I know tracks." Steven spread his arms wide. "Animal tracks. All of them."

I was laughing. I knew he meant for me to laugh. He pushed the black checkers over to me. "Let's see what you can do here, Hollis Woods," he said. "Win and I'll teach you how to drive."

"In your dreams," the Old Man said.

We played a couple of checkers games, Steven taking wild chances, while we dripped ketchup from our hamburgers onto the table and the Old Man egged us on.

Anyway, the picture I was trying for was Steven playing checkers with me that first day. That was the picture I could never get perfect. Maybe it was because he let me win that first game; maybe it was because I let him win the next one. And maybe it was because for the first time I really saw what it might be like to have a brother.

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 2

I had been at Josie Cahill's house for three weeks. One morning when I awoke, I realized my thumb was blistered, but I didn't mind. We'd been cleaning up the grove of trees. I liked the feeling of hacking and slashing and getting things done. A pile of wood rested under Josie's back table now. "Not all of it is for whittling," she had told me. "As soon as it's really cold, we'll make enormous fires in the fireplace."

I knew she was wondering if I'd still be there when the cold came.

I wondered too.

I stretched, not ready to get up, and looked around the bedroom. It was wonderful, the first place the sun

hit every day, so that squares of light turned the room to lemon gold. I stayed under the rose-and-white quilt for a few moments, then pulled on my clothes to go down to the kitchen.

Josie was bent over the table, eyeglasses perched on the end of her nose, working on a piece of wood. From the hall I could see her reflection in the kitchen window. She knew I was there but she just cut another sliver off the wood and blew it away.

I slid onto a seat opposite her at the table. In front of me were a box of cereal, two bananas, and a Danish neatly cut in half. The Danish was a little stale and the bananas beginning to freckle. Other days chocolate chips were sprinkled into the cereal, but they must have been all gone.

Still, it was a terrific breakfast, with Rice Krispies crackling in the speckled bowl. Fall leaves swept across the garden, and Josie's plane went across the wood with a *swish-swish* sound.

I sat there with my mouth full, looking around at her kitchen. It was like the rest of the house, filled with surprises: The walls were creamy yellow, and ships sailed along blue ocean moldings. A painted pelican was perched over the stove.

The pelican looked as irritable as Henry.

I told myself I'd have a house like that one day: hatboxes and wigs drawn on one bathroom wall, and

high-heeled shoes, dozens of them, marching along in watercolor in a tiny bedroom at the end of the hall.

That yellow kitchen was huge. A couch sat under the window, piled high with embroidered pillows that said things like HENRY'S HOME, V FOR VICTORY, SAVE THE SARGASSO SEA.

I'd never even heard of the Sargasso Sea.

I had drawn the house with paper from my backpack and fat bits of charcoal I had found somewhere. It was lovely to sketch the house, and Josie with her scarf. She watched me sometimes as I drew Henry sitting on top of the old-fashioned radio, and the pelican with beady eyes.

Too bad you don't have your drawing box, I imagined Steven saying, *all those yellows and blues.*

I was all right, though.

"We'll take a drive in the Silver Bullet today," Josie said, sounding pleased with herself. She brushed a few shavings off the front of her dress onto the faded linoleum floor. "I have things to show you, Hollis."

No school on a Monday? I shrugged to myself. If she wanted to forget about it, that was fine with me. I spent most of the time in the back of the classroom sketching, or drawing faces in ink on the plastic desk and erasing them with one wet finger.

I had taken only two days off so far, reminding myself that the mustard woman would probably be

checking up on me. And the absence notes I wrote myself and signed in a spidery hand that looked like Josie's were masterpieces: *Hollis had a high fever over the weekend. Please send her home if she looks flushed. Or Hollis had a severe rash. We learned that she's allergic to tomatoes. Pity. She really enjoys them.*

I shoved the last of a banana into my mouth and watched as Josie plopped a straw hat with a rose onto her head and wrapped one of those filmy scarves twice around her neck; then I followed her out to the garage.

The car was ancient, a Buick from the eighties. The fenders were dented and a streak of white paint ran across the door, but inside, the seats were soft and furry, and hanging from the windshield was a small tree figure of a man with gray whiskers. No, not a man. It was Henry standing on his back legs.

"I put acorn boxing gloves on him but they kept falling off," Josie said. "You don't have to worry about Henry. Henry's ready to stick up for you whenever the chips are down."

I had to laugh, thinking about Henry in boxing gloves fighting for me. My main concern about Henry was how to keep out of his way. I stepped back as he jumped into the car and hopped across the backseat to sit on the rear window ledge, his head up, one notched ear forward, his whiskers twitching.

But I didn't have time to think about that. I slid into

the car as Josie backed out of the garage and down the driveway in one great swoop and, never looking, barreled onto the street.

You wouldn't believe this, I told Steven in my head, and grabbed the edge of my seat with both hands.

Josie began to talk, glancing down at her movie-star hands, long and thin, her nails painted fire-engine red but chipping here and there. I wanted to tell her to slow down but bit my lip instead.

I thought I was going to be dead by the time we reached the first crossing. But by the second corner I realized there wasn't that much traffic, and the few cars on the road stayed well out of our way, so I began to relax and listen to what she was saying.

"Going to stay and have yourself done up in a tree?" she asked. "Stay longer and I'll teach you how to drive. Like the movies? We can do that, too."

My mouth went dry. *How to drive?* That's what Steven would say. *You could tell her a story about that, couldn't you?*

I brushed at the air, wanting to brush him out of my head. I was trying to think of what illness I'd give myself today, when the Silver Bullet turned another corner and stopped. Spread out in front of us was a canal with a few fishing boats, kerosene trails sliding out in back of them on the water, and beyond the boats, beyond the canal, was more water than I had ever seen.

It moved and rolled, it shimmered, it glowed iridescent silver. The Atlantic Ocean. I itched for a piece of drawing paper.

"This is my ocean," Josie said, as if it belonged to her personally, like one of her hats.

It was the way I felt about the Delaware River. A pain filled my chest as I thought about it. I wanted to sit in the Old Man's rowboat, to lean over and put my hands into that clear water, to watch the catfish riding along on the bottom, the schools of pickerel lazing in the warm sun.

"So what do you think?" Josie asked.

"Bigger than a river," I said. "Rougher." I spread out my hands, trying to think of the difference. "It's wonderful, but . . ."

She waited.

"You can't get your arms around it."

"Ah," she said, stopping to think. "There are salt-water people, and freshwater people." She held up her hand. "Then there are some who don't even know enough to fall in love with the water." She looked at me with satisfaction. "But they're not us."

I nodded, thinking of how the river might look as it reflected the last of the fall leaves.

"We'll get out," Josie said, "and walk along the jetty." She was singing under her breath now, a bit of a song I had learned somewhere. "By the sea, by the sea."

Henry followed us as we went toward the jetty, a path to the sea made of huge boulders tumbled one on top of the other. They were slippery, those rocks, with places your feet could get caught, and I wondered if I should help Josie climb up. But she didn't need help. She swung herself up next to me, her scarf blowing in the wind coming off the sea. "Just breathe," she said.

She didn't have to tell me. I had never smelled anything like that air: fish, and kerosene, and salt.

"I don't know what I'd do without the ocean," she said.

And then we skittered out to where I couldn't see anything but water in front of us. Josie pointed down with one foot. Between the rocks were pockets of water, and some of them had tiny fish swimming around in them, fish so small they were blurs of pewter. In one pool was a crab whose claws were no bigger than my pinky nails.

I knelt down on the edge of a boulder and put my fingers into the water, watching their reflection as the water moved, feeling the spray on my shirt. Was there snow on the mountain yet?

Don't think about the mountain.

I thought about Steven and the Old Man and Izzy and I put my hand on my chest because there was such an ache inside.

Josie was a statue standing above me, holding her hat against the wind, her eyes closed, a half smile on her face.

"I thought maybe I'd stay for a while," I said slowly. "As long as you want me to, that is."

Josie opened her eyes and beamed down at me.

"So if you'd like to work on my tree figure . . ."

She raised her hand to her scarf. "I've already started."

And I knew Steven would be saying, *What are you doing, Hollis?*

Third Picture

Fishing in the Delaware River

The river meandered along in front of the Regans' summer house, and on the opposite side was the Old Man's mountain.

What was it about that mountain? Coming from Long Island, I had never gotten within yelling distance of anything more than a hill. So why did this mountain look so familiar? I stretched my neck to look up and up at its rocky self mostly covered with evergreens.

"You'll fall over," Steven said.

I shrugged, reaching for my backpack. Inside were a bunch of colored pencils, stubby things I had collected wherever I could find them. It would take six of them, blues and greens and grays, to get the color of the river the way it was the first time I saw it.

"Do you know how to fish?" Steven asked.

"If I wanted to." I squinted at the river; didn't

know how to fish, didn't know how to swim. I was still trying to figure out how to stay away from that water when the Old Man brought the fishing rods out of the shed.

Izzy Regan, the mother, came out onto the porch, the screen door slamming behind her. She waved at us. "Hey, guys, catch me something to go with pole beans and corn on the cob."

"Yuck to the beans," Steven said.

"I like pole beans," I said. I'd heard of pole-cats, but never pole beans.

Izzy nodded at me. "It's great to have a girl around, Holly. We have to stick together against these guys."

Izzy was the tallest woman I'd ever seen. Her blond hair was wrapped around her head, and she seemed to be smiling just for me.

And then we were down on the bank, barefoot, standing in the shade of a few scrub pines. The Old Man put a rod threaded with a lure into my hand. "The best one," he said. "This is for luck."

He showed me how to cast so my arm went back and over my head and the line sang out. I watched the feathery lure glide on the water, and then did it again, and again.

I could see the bottom of the river. I could stand on that soft sand dotted with rocks, I thought, and

be safe. I put one foot into the cool water and then the other, feeling tiny fish nibbling at my ankles. Across the way was the mountain, tall and green.

"Pop's mountain," Steven said. "I'll show you tomorrow. There's a road going up . . ."

The Old Man tightened his mouth. "Be careful of that road. I'm afraid of it."

Steven twitched one shoulder. "I'm not afraid of anything."

Anything, I thought. The stucco house woman seemed a world away.

We stood there, the Old Man pointing to a catfish nosing its way along, then a frog sunning itself on a rock, and I closed my eyes. I knew the East Branch of the Delaware River was home.

Like a miracle I caught my first fish that afternoon. Hooked it and watched the silver curve as it broke the surface of the water. It was a huge fish, and Steven said, "Bet you a buck you can't hold on to it."

He was right there with the net, though, wanting me to get it, as I slipped on the rocks, feeling the water on my legs and then my back as I slid. I tried to get my balance with one hand, my feet going out from under me, not sure how deep the river was, wondering if my head would go under.

Steven's arm was on my elbow then, holding

me up, and the Old Man called, "You're all right, Hollis."

My feet anchored into the sand then. I edged myself back, pulling on the rod, and then the fish was mine.

Steven poured a pailful of cool water over my head so my hair was dripping, my clothes soaked. The Old Man was smiling, nodding, and Izzy came down to the bank to see what was going on.

Later I drew it all, and whenever I look at the picture I remember the taste of the fish that night, grilled on the coals, my feet bare under the porch table, and in front of us, the river. I remember Izzy touching my shoulder as she stood up to get something from the kitchen.

Why did I have to mess everything up?

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.

Fourth Picture

The Old Man's Mountain

I sat on the porch steps drawing the mountain while I waited for Steven. He was hanging over the motor of the Old Man's truck, fiddling with hoses or connections, muttering to himself. "If he'd let me drive this thing for half a minute, I'd know exactly what's wrong with it."

Half the arguments in that house had to do with Steven's wanting to drive the truck. "Right here on the property, that's all," he'd say. "No big deal." The other arguments had to do with his disappearing. It made the Old Man crazy. Up on the mountain road to follow a deer path, lying on the bottom of the rowboat to drift along searching for the kingfisher, gone somewhere and dragging me along with him.

One night at dinner the Old Man had dropped the box in my lap: tan leather, with dozens of pencils inside, points sharp and perfect, in every color

you could imagine, a thick pad of paper, erasers, a pencil sharpener. I had picked up one of the pencils: French Blue, a soft color that was almost purple. "I love this," I told him.

I had wanted to throw my arms around him, wanted to tell him I had never had a present like this before, no one had. I wanted to tell him but didn't tell him; I ducked my head, my bangs a fringe over my eyes. But he knew; I knew he knew.

The Old Man was an artist, but a different kind. He drew circles and lines and squares that turned into plans for houses and buildings. He said he wished he could do what I did.

Now Steven flew around the side of the truck like one of Izzy's hens, his eyeglasses taped to the side of his head, his hands filthy from the truck. "Move it, Hollis Woods," he said. "We don't have all day here, you know."

I put the mountain picture carefully inside the box. At the end of the summer I'd give it to the Old Man as a present.

Don't think about the end of the summer, I told myself.

Steven and I raced each other down the road, across the bridge, dead tie, and stopped, out of breath, at the mountain road. After a moment we started up.

Steven lurched along. At one turn in the road he was all speed; the next he'd stop short, bent over, nose almost touching the ground. "Look at this, Holly, it's a raccoon print," he'd say, or, "See the way this branch is cut off? Beaver, building a den where the stream comes off the mountain."

The Old Man was right about the road: It was slippery, muddy in the shade, one side ready to slide off the mountain straight into the river. But worth it. "We going all the way to the top?" I drew in my breath. Did I want to do that, stand on top of the mountain, a mountain of trouble myself?

Steven shook his head. "Pop would have a fit." He ran his hand over an imaginary beard. "The rocks fall, Steven, use your head," he said in the Old Man's voice.

Halfway up was a spot that widened. We looked down and saw the house, and Izzy picking tomatoes, and we whistled at her until she waved, even though she couldn't see us.

Then we sank down on a rock and Steven fished in his pocket for a squished Hershey bar. "Should I give you half?" he asked. "You're not as big as I am."

"Give me all," I told him, laughing. "I'm more deserving."

He held up both pieces, squinting. "The Old Man would say that."

I knew that. Somehow the Old Man thought I was a great kid. How had that happened? I swallowed, thinking of the lemon lady: "You want tough?" she had said. "I'll show you tough." And someone else, I didn't even remember who it was: "You've missed school half the term, how do you think you can get away with all this?"

But I was a new person with the Old Man, with Izzy, with Steven. It was as if the angry Hollis were seeping right out of my bones, leaving chocolate as soft as that sticky Hershey bar.

I looked at Steven, wondering if he minded that the Old Man thought I was great. But Steven was splitting the candy bar, and he gave me the bigger piece but did it quickly. I wasn't supposed to know. I took a breath.

I thought about the W picture in my backpack: the mother, the father, the brother, the sister.

And don't think of that, either, I told myself.

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 4

“Company’s coming,” Josie said.

I looked up from my pad. I was drawing a picture of a boat I had seen at Josie’s canal: white with thin blue lines of trim, the name in script on back, *Danbar-J*, and the captain hosing down the deck. I couldn’t remember what he actually looked like, so I sketched in his back, bent over, a watch cap on his head.

“Who’s coming?” I asked, but Josie had pattered away down the hall, with Henry following her.

“It’s Monday, right?” she called back.

“It is,” I said, squiggling the pencil for shadow.

“The movie is closed. My cousin Beatrice comes on Mondays.” She smiled. “I forgot. You don’t know that. Remember, Beatrice had a lingering cold?”

Ah, I thought. A lingering cold. Perfect for my next absence note. I looked around the kitchen. "Not much to eat in here."

She came back into the kitchen, a thin line of red on her lips. "Ah, but Beatrice brings dinner. Wait and see. It will be . . ." She patted her lips together.

"Delicious?"

She frowned. "Yes, but . . ."

"Ah," I said, trying to guess. "Stew? Pasta? Hero sandwiches?"

She shook her head. "Delicious."

I finished my drawing and propped it up on the counter to see what I thought about it. And then I heard the back door, Beatrice bustling in, her arms laden with bags, and the smell . . .

"Chinese food," I told Josie.

"Of course," she said. "That's what we always have."

I put the plates out, the knives and forks, and Josie ladled the food into bowls: cashew chicken, moo goo gai pan, bean curd, the smells making my mouth water.

Beatrice stood in back of me. I looked over my shoulder. She was leaning over, her head tilted, looking at my picture. "Did you draw this?"

I nodded.

She took off her glasses and chewed on one stem. "Surprising, isn't it?" she asked Josie.

"More than that," Josie said, beaming, moving Henry off her chair before she sat down.

As I reached for a shrimp roll, Beatrice slid into the seat opposite me and spooned rice onto my plate, the picture still in her hand.

"Don't eat," she said.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Not yet. Trot out some more of your pictures, please."

I went into Josie's peach living room with the lilac couch. We had tacked up a few of the pictures I'd done: Henry and the pelican, the rock jetties, Josie's thin tree figures in the back garden.

I pulled out the tacks and brought the drawings into the kitchen. There was no room for them on the table, so I pulled up an extra chair and piled them on that.

"Now you can eat," Beatrice said, reaching for the top one.

"Thank you." I scooped up the chicken, piling as many cashews as I could on the spoon.

She didn't eat, not until she had looked at all of them, holding each one up to the light. Josie kept nodding, reaching over with her fork to point at a line or a figure.

And then Beatrice sat back. "Imagine. I never saw anyone who was able to do this," she said, "and I was an art teacher for forty years."

"We taught that long?" Josie said.

"Forty-four for you." Beatrice brushed at her hair.

"But did I ever once . . ."

"No, neither did I." Josie smiled at me, reaching across to touch my wrist with one hand.

Beatrice took a forkful of food, eating absently, staring at me the whole time. "We worked with all those kids who didn't have any concept of perspective, or even if they had that, the composition was all wrong. If only you'd been in one of those classes, Hollis." She shook her head, then smiled at Josie. "Never mind, she's here's now."

I couldn't swallow what was in my mouth. It was there in a lump, almost as large as the lump in my throat. "Thank you," I managed to say.

They were both looking at me, at the tears in my eyes.

"Spicy, that chicken," Beatrice said.

I managed to nod, to chew, at last to swallow, thinking of the Old Man: "*Where'd you ever learn to do that?*" And Izzy. "*You have a gift, pure and simple.*"

After dinner Beatrice spread the pictures out on the table, reaching for my pad on the counter, one eyebrow raised to ask if she could have a piece of paper. With a twist of her pencil she showed me how to deepen the shadows on a drawing of the sea.

"Do it on my drawing," I said.

"Never," she told me. "It's your world, it belongs to you." She ran the pencil through her hair, separating the thick strands. "Drawing is what you see of the world, truly see."

"Yes, maybe," I said, not sure what she meant.

"And sometimes what you see is so deep in your head you're not even sure of what you're seeing. But when it's down there on paper, and you look at it, really look, you'll see the way things are."

I frowned. "Look at a picture one way and you'll see one thing," I said. "Look again and you might see something else. That's what the Old Man..." I shook my head. "A friend of mine said that once."

"Ah, yes," Beatrice said, sketching in an eye, bushy eyebrows, sharp lashes as she spoke. "But that's the world, isn't it? You have to keep looking to find the truth." She ran one pinky finger over the eyebrow; the pencil smeared just enough to curve it upward, almost like a question mark; the other pinky softened the lashes.

I watched her, fascinated. "And something else," she said. "You, the artist, can't hide from the world, because you're putting yourself down there too."

"I'm not hiding," I said, my eyes sliding away from her.

She laughed. "Good thing, because your soul is right there in front of you." She pointed to the sketch

I'd drawn of Josie in her scarf. "You see, it's what you think of her." She turned to Josie. "Maybe I can take that trip now, leave you in Hollis's hands. She loves you already."

I could see that Josie didn't know what Beatrice meant. "A trip?"

"To the Southwest."

Josie nodded then. "Yes. Adobe houses, desert, flat rocks everywhere."

"I'll paint them all," Beatrice said.

I looked from one to the other. Beatrice had picked up the pencil again, sketching herself, drawing a suitcase in her hand. And then she looked at me once more. "You're going to be something, you and that language you speak on paper." She drew her other hand waving. "I love what you have to say, Hollis Woods."

I sat there, hardly breathing.

"You have that," she said. "It's more than most people ever have. Count yourself lucky."

Fifth Picture

The Old Man

I thought I was alone, sitting on the bottom step in front of the house, drawing the Old Man, working with a flesh-peach pencil. Quick sketches, one after the other: hat down over his eyes in the first, standing in front of the river in the next, sleeping in the hammock in the third. His beard and the way he leaned forward, listening. I was trying to capture what he looked like so I'd have it to take back with me. To remember.

The screen door opened in back of me with that soft swishing noise, and the Old Man came out to look over my shoulder. "Oh, Hollis," he said. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

I shook my head.

"Hollis?"

I looked toward the river, green today, a willow hanging over the edge.

He put his hand on my shoulder. "It's a gift," he said, "to draw things the way they are."

I sat very still. No one had ever said anything like that to me before.

"And something else," he said. "You shine through in your drawings."

I looked up at him, really looked at him, not a quick glance that darted away so he couldn't see my eyes. "My name . . .," I began as he folded himself down on the step next to me. "Hollis Woods is a real place." I shrugged a little. "Holliswood," I said. "One word, I think."

When the Old Man spoke, I jumped. "It's where they found you, as a baby?"

"An hour old," I said in an I-don't-care voice. "No blanket. On a corner. Somewhere." Didn't a baby deserve a blanket? "And just the scrap of paper: CALL HER HOLLIS WOODS."

One day I had gone to see that place. I ran away from one of my houses—tan, green, brick? I circled Queens, on the subway, off the subway, onto the Q2 bus and off the Q2 bus, until I found the spot.

It was winter, bleak, but the houses were pretty. I never did find the woods, though. I tried to picture it in the spring when I had been born, with birds chirping and the sun shining.

Now I saw Steven come into view in the row-

*boat. "I play hookey," I told the Old Man.
"Everyone says I'm tough, they say I'm trouble."*

*The Old Man made a sound in the back of
his throat.*

"Steven is a great kid," I said.

*The Old Man looked surprised. I waited to
hear if he would say anything, but Steven banged
the rowboat hard into the rocks along the bank.*

*The Old Man made another sound. "Watch
that, Steven."*

*"The kingfisher is on the branch downstream,"
Steven called. So we went down to the boat and
climbed in to go have a look.*

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 5

“*O*ver 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 wagged 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.

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 dog-eared. 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 hairdresser. 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.

Sixth Picture

Driving the Truck

I never showed this picture to anyone: the golden field, me with my head back laughing, my hands at the wheel of the truck. It took four or five pencils to do this: I started with Summer Green, Iron Gray, and Beach Sand. That was something, that Saturday night.

Izzy and the Old Man were going to the movie in town. "It's a romance," the Old Man said, waggling his eyebrows at me. "A waste of a good evening."

"You'll love it, John," Izzy said. "There are snacks in the refrigerator and in the cabinet. Snacks all over the place. You won't starve." She leaned out the door. "And there's a tin of that hard candy on my dresser."

Steven crossed his eyes. "They're so sour they curl your tongue."

"Not mine." I'd been eating them all summer; I couldn't get enough of them.

"That's because—" he began. I knew he was going to joke about my being sour.

But the Old Man came out the door. "I just saw the mess you left in the shed," he told Steven. "Straighten that place up. It's bad enough your room looks the way it does."

"What's this neatness kick?"

"Did you notice how neat Holly's things are?"

Without thinking, I put my hand up. "Don't . . . , " I began, but it came out almost as a breath. Neither one of them heard, or maybe they just weren't paying attention.

Steven unfolded himself from his chair so slowly, it seemed as if he weren't moving.

"Hang in there, Hollis Woods," Steven said as the Old Man stamped around the side of the house and started the car. "We're going to be out of here in five minutes."

"Where?" Already he was running around the side of the house to the shed.

I sat there listening as he threw things around for a few minutes, and then he was back. "I'm going to teach you to drive. Good thing they took the car instead of the truck." He dangled the keys in front of my nose. "Anyone who can keep her things disinfected can drive a truck."

"I don't think—" I began.

"Scared?"

"Never."

"All right, don't waste my valuable time arguing."

In back of the evergreens and the row of holly bushes was a flat field. The Old Man kept it mowed against snakes, rattlers that struck blind in the summer. "Don't worry," Steven said, sliding into the truck. "No one's been bitten for about a hundred years. Pop worries about everything."

Steven drove as if he'd been doing it all his life. He grinned across at me in the suicide seat. "Since I was about eight," he said, knowing what I was thinking. "I'm going to take the truck up the mountain one day."

He showed me the gears and the pedals, and then we switched seats. And so I drove in that field in the summer-evening light, Steven shouting directions as I lurched through the ruts, bucking, stalling, starting up again with gear-grinding noises.

"Aha, Hollis Woods," he yelled. "There's hope for you. I knew it!"

I pressed my foot down on the gas pedal a little harder. "Yahoo!" I yelled. "It's me, driving a pickup truck!"

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 7

One raw Tuesday morning I awoke and pulled the shade aside; the trees were charcoal smudges against an iron gray sky. Josie wouldn't be up for another hour or two. I hadn't done my homework the night before, hadn't even thought of it. I'd fallen asleep watching television with Henry next to me on the couch and Josie working at the kitchen table.

I still faced rows of math problems. Three pages, maybe four. And there was a social studies composition on Henry Hudson.

I tried to decide whether I could work on it now. It was early. I popped bread into the toaster and opened a can of Salmon Delight for Henry, who sniffed at it and walked away.

"I can never figure you out," I said, and buttered a square of toast for him instead. Then I pulled my books off the shelf and sat at the table with one of Josie's knitted shawls around me.

In back of me I had the radio on. Two weeks until Christmas. It had snowed upstate, six inches.

Ah, snow for Steven. Were they up yet, the three of them? Were they having breakfast in their winter house in Hancock? What would it be like if I were there, doing my homework, eating Izzy's apple pancakes?

The radio announcer said it was a foggy day on Long Island at three minutes before eight o'clock.

I finished the first page of math problems; I could never do the rest in a half hour. Never mind Henry Hudson sailing up the river.

Maybe I could take one more day off. Just one. I grabbed my jacket and pad and went out the back door, holding it open for Henry to come too. The canal would be wonderful this morning, with a mist rising off the water. And all the while I jogged toward the jetty, I knew it was a mistake. But still I kept going.

When I got to the pier, I sat, hands clenched in my pocket against the cold, my legs dangling, watching the fisherman on the *DanBar-J* gear up to go out for blues. He knew me now, and waved. Last week he'd even dropped a flounder on the bench for me. I had

panfried it with a little butter, and Josie had put two dusty pink candles on the table, almost like a party.

Henry had loved his share. He hadn't scratched at me once when I put his plate down in front of him on the radio. "Ah," I had said, pleased with him. "You'd do anything for a handout."

Now I watched the fingers of fog drift over the water while Henry sat nearby, washing one mangy leg. It was the kind of day I loved. I couldn't see the end of the pier, and no one could see me from there. I could hear the fisherman from the *DanBar-J*, though. "Want a job?" he called.

He wasn't thinking about school either.

A job? Why not? There'd be money for cat food, a couple of cans of ravioli. I hadn't had ravioli since the stucco house.

I nodded and found myself hosing down the deck of the *DanBar-J*. As I scrubbed at the dried-on pieces of fish with a wire brush, I spent the money in my mind.

He handed me three crumpled-up bills. I smoothed them out, and then as I gave him a half wave, he reached into his pocket and gave me another dollar.

I couldn't wait to get back to Josie. She'd pat her scarf around her neck and fuss with her hat. We'd sail up and down the aisles of DeMattia's Food Store, picking and choosing: ravioli, and a pink can of shred-

ded tuna for Henry. Maybe some marmalade, too, to have with the English muffins we had left.

I had forgotten all about homework, and school, and even the mustard woman. Henry and I headed home as the fog lifted and the sun appeared behind the trees. It was going to be a beautiful day, a day for a picnic on the rock jetty.

I pulled open the back door and stopped. Above the newscaster's voice on the radio—"Nine-thirty and still snowing in upstate New York"—was the sound of voices in the living room.

Henry heard them too. He scampered back outside to sit on the bench, an irritable look on his skinny face.

I thought about scampering with him. I knew who it must be. But how could I leave Josie alone with her? Instead, I shrugged out of my jacket, put my pad on the table, and lifted my chin as I went toward the front of the house.

The mustard woman sat on the lilac couch, and Josie sat in the chair opposite. They both had cups of coffee in their hands.

Good move, Josie, I thought. Her coffee was great, dark and rich, as the advertisements went.

I nodded at the mustard woman and sank down in the third chair, facing the window, looking out as if something wonderful were going on right there in the front yard.

They talked about old movies and the wonderful colors in the living room; they talked about coffee waking them up, and all the time my heart was pounding. Without looking at the mustard woman's face, I knew she was straining at the conversation, that this wasn't what she wanted to say.

She was wearing sweats. . . . Did she ever wear anything else? I could see a round creamy spot on her chest. She'd spilled her coffee. What was the matter with that woman, anyway?

But Josie looked fine, Josie looked wonderful, with that slash of red across her mouth, a silky green dress that looked like the sea. I knew she was groping, though. She had no idea who the woman sitting across from her was.

At last the mustard woman put down her cup. "Hol-lis," she said, "I know I'm keeping you from school."

I waved my hand. No problem, lady.

She looked at Josie then. "I think, Mrs. Cahill, that we need to talk about another place for Hollis."

Josie sat up straight. I could see her thin hands on the coffee cup trembling a little; her mouth, too. "Hollis is leaving?"

They both looked at me.

"I've found a family for her," the mustard woman said. "A mother and father with a three-year-old boy and a dog." She kept leaning forward, trying to

make me look at her. "I think I remember you like dogs, Hollis."

"Sharks," I said, "and barracudas, not dogs."

"A family would be nice," Josie said.

Too late, I thought.

"But not today," the mustard woman said. "It will be a few days. I'll want Hollis to meet them first. They're not so far from here. You and Mrs. Cahill will be able to visit sometimes, Hollis."

She stood up then. "I'll keep in touch," she said. "Would you like me to drive you to school now?"

I shook my head. "I can walk."

She turned to go.

"By the way," I said. "You have a sticker on the back of that shirt. *X-L.*"

She tried to look over her shoulder.

"Extra large," I said, feeling mean.

Seventh Picture

Izzy

Two of Izzy's candies filled my mouth as I went around the side of the house. I didn't mean to listen or to be sneaky. Ordinarily I did that a lot. I'd stand still in the hall to hear what the stucco woman had to say to her telephone friend. I'd flip pages on the teacher's desk to see what disaster of a mark I'd gotten in social studies or social attitude. I'd pass by classmates in the schoolyard to find out what they had to say about that kid Hollis Woods.

But this time I was on my way to find Izzy, to give her a picture I'd drawn: Izzy flipping a pancake that would land on my plate. Izzy's pancakes were wonderful: covered with apples cut into small sweet chunks, the pancakes themselves so light I must have eaten a half dozen. In the picture Izzy is laughing, the turner in one hand, just

under the cross-stitched motto on the wall: LOVE THE COOK.

I'd changed the motto, though. I'd written: I DO LOVE THE COOK. I'd drawn the I DO in the palest pink so that you'd have to study it, study it hard, or you wouldn't notice.

One afternoon Izzy and I had walked up to the old cemetery on the hill where her parents were buried. We picked white daisies and Queen Anne's lace and put them in the jar in front of a small stone next to her parents' grave. Izzy ran her hand over the inscription on the bottom: JOSEPH REGAN, SIX DAYS. "I always wanted more children," she said. "For me, for John, for Steven." She patted the stone. "I wanted a baby for each corner of my house. It just never happened after this."

Down the hill I could hear the Old Man bellow at Steven. "Do they always fight?" I asked. "Or . . ."—I hesitated, trying to sound as if I didn't care, as if it weren't important—"do you think it's because I'm here?"

Izzy grinned at me. "It does seem worse this summer," she said. "But they have to find their own way."

I'd thought about that for days, "worse this summer," but now, as I rounded the house, I

stepped back against the wall, warm from the sun, smelling faintly of paint, and closed my eyes.

"How can we let her go?" Izzzy was saying.

"We can't," the Old Man said.

My heart began to pound so hard I thought it would come through my chest.

A mother, I thought. M.

"She belongs here," Izzzy said. "Steven feels it too."

B, belong. G, girl. S, sister. W for want, W for wish, W for Wouldn't it be lovely? My head was spinning.

"I've been thinking about it," Izzzy said. "The winter house in town is too small. We'd have to put a room on for her."

I don't need a room. A couch. A sleeping bag.

"Without the room, I don't think the agency would let us keep her. She has to have space for herself."

For a moment they were quiet.

I leaned my head back, my hand to my mouth.

"How about this?" Izzzy said. "You could call Lenny Mitchell to work with you. There's space in the back for a great room for Hollis."

"A big window for her," the Old Man said. "We could do it in weeks."

"Sooner than weeks," Izzzy said. "Early fall."

"Yes. Even Steven would help."

"I'll call—"

"You'll call the agency."

"How long will it take them?"

"She'll have to go back first," Izzy said, the words tumbling over each other.

"But just for a short time."

I leaned my head against the wall. I'd never been so happy.

"A daughter," Izzy said.

"Yes," the Old Man said. "We'll have a daughter."

From where I stood I could see the mountain towering over me. The stucco woman's voice was in my head: "She's a mountain of trouble, that Hollis Woods."

Before the end of the summer, I decided, I was going to climb that mountain, get to the top, raise my arms, and shout to the whole world, "I have a family. I belong."

In back of me there was a noise. "Ya-hoo!"

Steven. I jumped a foot.

The voices stopped, but no one knew I had heard.

Early fall and I'd be a daughter.

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 8

*f*or the next few afternoons, around five, the mustard woman called to chitchat. That's what she called it. She was doing all the chatting.

"How was school?"

"Burned down."

"What did you have for lunch?"

"Horse meat."

"How's Mrs. Cahill?"

"Who?"

"What are you drawing?"

"Nudies."

"Hollis," she said slowly one night. "Mrs. Cahill is old, and she has a tendency to forget."

Josie dancing in the street, giving me the hat with the veil, making popcorn at the movie.

I said more than I wanted to. "She doesn't forget everything, just some things." I stopped. The mustard woman would never change her mind. I raised my hand to the window. Drops of melting sleet were running down the glass. Under the kitchen table Henry was an orange ball, with only his pointy little chin turned up. Henry hated sleet.

"Tomorrow is Saturday," the mustard woman began. "I'll pick you up and take you to meet Eleanor." She paused.

I didn't answer.

"That's her name, Eleanor. She's going to have lunch for us."

I pulled the telephone cord as far as it would go.

"Then Sunday, if all goes well . . ." She broke off. "You'd be in the same school. And you could visit Mrs. Cahill often."

I took the phone away from my ear and put it on the counter. I did it gently so there was no noise. I wondered how long she'd keep talking before she figured out I wasn't listening.

It was gray outside. Josie's wooden figures were blurred and bent in the wind that had just come up.

Josie couldn't stay alone. She might not remember

when it was supper. She'd sit up all night watching movies.

Beatrice. I picked up the phone and pressed the numbers. It rang about twenty times. *Answer, Beatrice.* But then I remembered. For the first weeks she'd be traveling around, she had said. I pictured her in the desert, dry sun beating down, her sketchbook in her hand.

I couldn't leave Josie.

I couldn't stay.

It was a puzzle.

Something from years ago popped into my head. It wasn't winter, it was summer, and so humid everything I touched was sticky. All afternoon I'd thought about the pillow on the bed, and how cool it would be against my head. I was surprised when it was as hot as the rest of the room. I reached under the pillow to find something I had hidden there, a doll with pale painted eyes. I whispered to her, asking if she was cooling off. And then someone came and pulled her away, tossing her on the night table. I waited until the woman walked out the door, and then I whispered a little more loudly so that the doll could hear me. "Don't worry," I'd said. "I'll save you in the morning."

Why had I thought of that now?

Save Josie.

That's why.

The sleet outside was turning to snow. It reminded me of Steven. *"You'd love the snow in Hancock,"* he'd said.

I thought of the summer house in Branches. *"I haven't been here in winter since I was a boy,"* the Old Man had said. *"But it was wonderful, so cold it hurt your teeth, the river frozen over, the animals coming up close to the house. Everything was silver with ice."* He had spread his wide hands. *"Twisted icicles this long hanging from the roof. I used to knock them off and see how far I could throw them."* He had laughed. *"My father had put in heat, so when you came inside, it was warm. I'd dry my hands on the radiator till they almost sizzled."*

Winter.

No one there in the house in Branches. *"We stay in our house in Hancock now. Plenty of snow there, and nearer to school and the stores."*

How could I do it?

How could I not?

Josie was napping on the lilac couch. I went in and stood next to her, watching that beautiful face.

She opened her eyes.

"How would you like to go away with me?"
I asked.

"To see Beatrice?" she said.

I shook my head. *"That's too far."*

"Then where?" She sat up, smoothing her hair with papery thin fingers.

It was hard to get the words out. "We'll take the car."

"The Silver Bullet," she said, nodding.

"It will be an adventure," I said.

She smiled. "Henry, you, and I in the Silver Bullet. We'll fly to the ends of the earth."

I smiled back, trying to think. Food, warm clothes, gas for the Silver Bullet.

It was Friday night. The mustard woman would come for me at lunchtime tomorrow.

By then we had to be long gone.

Eighth Picture

End of Summer

We were frenzied that last week in August. That was Izzy's word: frenzied. And I drew it all:

Steven and I racing along the dirt road to buy beef jerky at the grocery store four miles away.

Sitting on a rock, pulling the jerky against our teeth as we counted the cars that went by on the highway.

Rowing up the river rapids and bouncing back in the rowboat with bruises all over our legs and arms.

Climbing partway up the Old Man's mountain after the rain, slipping and sliding in the mud on the edge of the road.

And we never stopped laughing.

Anything so we wouldn't think about my leaving.

Anyting.

They told me what they'd planned, the four of

us sitting on the porch. I never needed a picture of that night. It was in my head, every bit of it, in there forever. But I drew it anyway: Izzy with one of my hands in both of hers, the Old Man reaching out to hug me until I had no breath left, and Steven blinking behind his glasses, trying not to let me see how close to tears he was. But I knew.

I drew another picture of what happened next. Before I could think, I leaned over to kiss Steven's cheek, stained with grease from working on the truck, captured there in that drawing forever. Both of us laughed, embarrassed, and Izzy said, "Lovely. I'm going to try that too." And she leaned over to kiss his other cheek.

We were still laughing as Izzy spread out her long arms. "It's settled, then," she said. "You belong with us. This house . . ."

"And the river," I said.

". . . is yours," the Old Man said. "All of it."

"And Izzy's hard candy," Steven said, rocking back on his chair, looking happier than he had all summer.

Please let it be all right, I begged, looking at Steven's face, remembering all the arguments he and the Old Man had had: a lost lure yesterday, a rake left in the rain, the truck. Was it because I was there? Was the Old Man comparing him with me?

Me? *Wasn't that strange? Was trying to fit me into a family like jamming in a puzzle piece that didn't match? Would it ruin all the other pieces?*

I looked up at the mountain. The trees had just a hint of fall color. The mountain looked soft, almost friendly. I thought about standing on the very top.

Izzy leaned over. "Hey, you two, don't look sad. We still have one last weekend. Remember?"

The last weekend.

Last.