

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 9

Never mind that we didn't have much money. Never mind that I didn't even know exactly how to get to the house in Branches; I'd find it. Never mind that the house wasn't mine.

Please don't mind, I said to Izzy and the Old Man in my head.

I ticked off what to pack, what to do, counting on my fingers: Bring all the food in the cabinet over the sink, a map, winter clothes, piles of anything warm I could find in the house, then get gas at the first exit off the highway.

Josie was in the kitchen making cocoa. "It'll be dark soon," she said.

"That's all right," I told her. "We like the dark. It's like velvet."

"That it is," she said. "And we like the snow, too."

I bit my lip. Dark and snow. One problem after another.

"How about marshmallows in our cocoa?" Josie asked.

"Left-hand cabinet," I said.

To begin with, Josie and I had to get off Long Island, I knew that; we had to get to Route Seventeen and exit at Ninety, and after that we were home free. I had walked that last few miles dozens of times: the grocery store off the ramp, the road curving over the hill. We'd cross the bridge and the house would be there, nestled in the trees opposite the Old Man's mountain.

I could do it in my sleep.

I called back over my shoulder, reminding Josie where we were going: "It's a house in the woods, Josie," I said. "A house on the river, a safe house."

I swept half boxes of cereal off the counter into a carton, cans of chicken noodle soup, sugar, salt, anything I could find to eat, then, wasting precious time, went up to the attic for Josie's old Christmas ornaments.

I heard a car and froze on the top step. The sound of the motor grew louder and then gradually disappeared. My heart was beating fast.

Stop, I told myself. The mustard woman was far away, in her house somewhere, scarfing up her dinner, littering her sweat suit with crumbs.

But I knew we should leave as quickly as we could. I'd learned that when I'd run before. The first hours made all the difference, the hours before anyone knew you were gone.

I scurried into the attic, found the box of ornaments, and pulled it after me to the stairs.

When I finished, the car was piled so high it was hard to see out the windows. It was completely dark now, except for the white flakes hitting the window. In the kitchen Josie was bent over the table, a cup of cocoa in one hand, her knife in the other, and the smooth chunk of wood in front of her.

"Josie?" I reached out for my own cup of cocoa and sipped at it, feeling the warmth of it on my lip, the sweetness of the marshmallow in my mouth. I touched her shoulder. "We can't wait anymore."

Rubbing her eyes, she glanced toward her bedroom. I knew she wanted to take a nap. I did too; I was tired now, and thinking of the long trip ahead of us was almost too much.

"We'll have an adventure," I said. "You, and me, and Henry." I hesitated. "If we don't go, they might make me live somewhere else."

She stood up. "We'll go, then." She looked around

at the kitchen, touched the table, the back of the chair.

"Yes," she said. "We'll go."

"Can you drive?" I asked.

Please let the snow stop, I thought.

She smiled. "Of course."

I made one last trip to the car, carrying her knives, the small drill, pieces of wood, and then I was back, hoisting Henry onto my shoulder. "No biting, if you don't mind," I told him.

We went outside, Josie looking up at the sky, holding out her hands to catch the flakes while I opened the garage doors, and then we were off, skidding our way down the street.

Suddenly the snow did stop, and we saw a moon over our heads. "It looks dusty," Josie said. The houses stood out as clearly as if it were daytime; trees threw sharp shadows across the snowy lawns, and the dark streets curved like ribbons through that white world. I put my head back against the headrest, thinking we'd done it. The hardest part was over.

"Do you know about directions?" I asked.

She turned her head to one side. "It depends. I know the way to the end of Long Island, I know how to get upstate. . . ."

"Upstate, yes."

"Across the Triborough Bridge." She frowned, looking worried. "Isn't that right?"

"I think so." Henry was scratching around in back, trying to make room for himself.

"There's a map somewhere." Josie leaned across me, one hand off the wheel.

"I can find it," I said quickly, reaching for the glove compartment. A tiny pinprick of light appeared as I snapped it open. The small space inside was filled with all kinds of things: one of Josie's silk gloves, a couple of dimes, a squished box of tissues, and at the very bottom, the map of New York State.

I unfolded it, spreading it out against the door of the glove compartment. It was a mass of color and lines and tiny words that were hard to see in that dim light. I bent over it, squinting. *Palisades Parkway. Route 17.* It was all there, one line after another, leading me home to Branches.

I looked up as I heard the blare of a horn, and then a car swerved past us, its lights sweeping over the road. "Are you all right?" I asked Josie.

"Right as rain," she said.

I sat back and closed my eyes, thinking of Izzy, drawing them all in my mind, wondering if they'd think I was doing a terrible thing.

"*It belongs to you,*" the Old Man had said. Would he say that now? I wondered.

Why not? said Steven in my mind.

Izzy's face in front of mine. Would she say, "*Do it, Hollis*"? I thought she would.

I was doing it anyway.

Suddenly I sat up straight. How much gas did we have? It was almost a miracle to see the Mobil sign off to the right. I touched Josie's arm, pointing, and we pulled off the road, waiting for the attendant to fill the tank while I counted out my running money.

"Good idea," Josie said, and I had to smile at her. She'd have driven until the tank was empty, and might never have remembered.

I was hungry now, really hungry. The hot chocolate hadn't lasted long. And I hadn't had lunch. Maybe I could hurry inside for a bag of potato chips and a chocolate bar. I glanced out the rearview mirror to see a car pulling up in back of us at the pump. The man was impatient, tapping his horn for us to get out of the way. There'd be no time to buy anything, not even enough time to rummage through the back to find the bags of food.

I thought of the mustard woman. She'd come up the path tomorrow afternoon to get me, trying to smile, acting as if this would be a lovely afternoon tea at that woman's house—what was her name? Eleanor. When we didn't answer the bell, maybe she'd go around the back to see if we were in Josie's garden.

But soon enough she'd figure out that we weren't there. She'd stand on tiptoe to look in the window of the garage, and it would be empty. If we were lucky, she'd wait awhile. She might think we'd be back any minute. But the minutes would stretch out to an hour, and then she'd know. She'd really know. And then she'd call the police.

My hands were damp.

Calm down, I made Steven tell me in my mind. You knew all this before you started.

But Josie turned onto the parkway now, and it wouldn't be that long before we crossed the bridge and left Long Island, maybe twenty minutes, and the mustard woman would just be getting ready for bed.

Next to me, in the dim light, I couldn't see the lines around Josie's eyes, or the ones crisscrossing her forehead. I could pretend we were taking a moonlight ride in the Silver Bullet, pretend Josie was all right and we weren't running.

The last time I had run was two weeks after what had happened in Branches. It was September, still hot, with the sun beating down from early morning until dark. It was hard to move, hard to think; everything hurt in my head and my chest. I'd had enough of the stucco woman and I knew she'd had enough of me. All I could think about was being somewhere cold, a place where I could scoop up a chunk of snow and

crush it against my teeth, a place to make the heat and the pain go away.

I left at night, after the stucco woman had fallen asleep. It gave me hours to get out on the road, to find a bus. I was gone for days before they caught me.

Maybe we'd be luckier this time.

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 10

It was late when we reached the exit sign for Branches. The gas station light was out, and there was only a tiny light in the back of the grocery store. "We're almost there," I told Josie, "just the last four miles."

"Already?" She sounded delighted. She zoomed off the ramp, stopping on the shoulder, and in a moment she was asleep, her head against the steering wheel. Henry climbed off my lap, where he'd been for the past hour, and slid onto hers, his whiskers twitching as he closed his eyes.

I leaned over and turned the key to stop the motor. Suddenly I was wide awake and reaching for the door handle. I gave Henry a pat, then I got out of the car.

At first it was hard to see, but little by little silhouettes appeared against the sky: the curve of a tree trunk, the dark square of the grocery store ahead, and above us, the Old Man's mountain, raising its head to the sky. It was almost a shock to see it there.

Beatrice would have said it was a drawing coming to life. I pictured her in a place with huge cacti, saguaro, I thought they were called. I remembered she'd said she would call every Sunday. What would she think when the phone rang and rang?

I shook myself. What would happen if I tried to call her again?

She'd come home, her dream over.

I wasn't going to do that. Back in the car, I nudged Josie awake. "Just drive this last bit," I said, "and then you can sleep."

We drove along the narrow road, no other lights now except for a few houses far up on the hills, and I kept talking to keep her awake. "We'll see the river. It's not as big as your ocean. . . ."

"Your river." Josie's head bobbed.

"Keep watching," I told her. "We don't want to go off the road. The river would be cold for a swim."

I saw her smile. "Henry doesn't have his bathing suit."

And there was the bridge. I had stood on that bridge watching the pickerel, the catfish, the muskrat building his nest of sticks against its base.

The Old Man's bridge.

"We'll have a fire in the fireplace," I said, "and turn the heat up high." I could see the Old Man flipping the switch in the early mornings when dew was still on the grass and the house was still cold.

We thumped across the bridge over the river, and the house was in front of us, waiting. "Josie, this is the place." My voice was flat. I might have been telling her it was a snowy day or the sun might come out tomorrow, but inside, my heart was thumping.

We had just this winter, I knew that, and maybe the spring. By summer we'd have to find somewhere else.

That was months. That was forever.

I closed my eyes, remembering the last morning I had been here. I had gone out the screen door toward the car, brushing my fingers along the holly bushes, feeling the sharp edges of the leaves against my thumb.

I had walked as far as the town, a long way in the early-morning heat, and sat on the bench with my things on my lap, waiting for the Shortline bus, and looking down, I realized I'd left the drawing box. I think that was the worst moment, knowing I'd never see that box again. Geranium Red, Dove Gray, French Blue.

"We're home, Josie," I said.

“Hard to see,” she said.

“Just get used to the darkness,” I told her. “In a minute you’ll see it all.”

She took everything in then, and I with her: the house with the sloping roof, the evergreens leaning over it, the dark shadow that was the woodpile on the front porch. The rocking chairs were in the shed, I knew that, but I could picture them there, rocking gently.

Josie took a deep breath.

“I knew you’d like it,” I said, watching Henry in the rearview mirror. He stood on the back of the headrest now, his claws in my shoulder, his nose twitching, his whiskers quivering, sizing up the place. “And you too, Henry.”

“But is it all right?” Josie asked, frowning. “Are you sure we can do this?”

“We can.” I brushed away thoughts of being caught, of what the Old Man might think of me if he ever found out. What did he think of me anyway? *Please don’t mind this thing I’m doing*, I begged him in my head.

A red cardinal swooped down to perch on a holly branch that bent itself into the snow, snow marked by threadlike bird prints and deep hollows from the deer. The tracks hugged the edge of the clearing, close to

the evergreens, and one path, probably from a rabbit, led to the river.

I wondered if Steven had ever seen the house in the winter. He would love it.

I chewed my knuckle. A lace curtain of snow blew across the porch. It was bitter cold with the engine turned off. I had to get Josie into the house. Her shoes had heels, with open toes and diamond-shaped cutouts in the sides. Why hadn't I thought of her shoes?

Henry scratched his claws along the car window, wanting to get out. I gave his ear a tweak, opened the door, and watched him belly through the snow away from the car.

"I'm sorry, Josie," I said, still looking down at her feet. They'd be soaked. "You'll have to walk through this to get to the house."

"An adventure," Josie said, grabbing the handle.

I slipped her scarf up around her head, the orange a bright spot in the darkness, and buttoned the top button of her coat. "All right," I said.

Outside we skirted the trees, and she stopped to look up. "A million stars," she said, pointing. "There's the Dipper and Orion. Beatrice would love it." Then I held her by the waist as we went up the back steps.

Her face was a little disapproving as I kicked my sneaker off and, hopping, smashed in the small kitchen

window. And then we were inside, Henry skittering in around us.

I leaned back against the wall, reaching for the light, hoping they hadn't turned off the electricity. Suddenly the kitchen sprang to life. The refrigerator began to hum, and beyond it, I could see the huge living room with the long table at one end and dark blue rugs scattered across the wood floor. The Old Man was proud of that floor; he always talked about putting it in with Izzy, about matching the pieces of wood exactly, holding up his hands as if Steven and I could see them clutching a hammer and saw.

Josie shivered, her lips colorless, and my hands felt numb. I flipped the switch for heat and heard the furnace start up. At the fireplace chunks of wood and paper were piled in a bin. I knelt there, crumpling the yellowed newspapers to tuck in between some logs, and read last summer's news as I struck a match against the stones of the hearth: Someone had caught a huge trout near Byron's Falls; a sidewalk sale was planned for Main Street; there were canoes for rent in Shadyside.

I had been here last summer; all of that had been happening. I kept talking to Josie, telling her that this place had been mine only for a month or two, but now it was ours. And she sank down on the couch, nodding, watching the fire.

Is it still mine? I asked the Old Man. *Mine for just this winter?*

A thin flame curled up from somewhere underneath the logs and Josie clapped her hands. "Fire!"

The Old Man's wooden floor shone with a rosy gleam, and my eyes began to close as my fingers warmed, but I couldn't fall asleep yet.

I settled Josie on the couch and found an old towel to dry her feet. They were mottled from the cold. "Skinny as a bird," I told her as I rubbed them. She put her head back, asleep again.

In the kitchen I used the same towel to close the opening in the missing window pane. While we were here I'd figure out how to replace that. There was glass in the shed; I'd seen the Old Man measuring and cutting.

I climbed the stairs to the little green room that had been mine. Everything was just the same. The dresser mirror reflected my old sneakers, just visible under the edge of the bumpy white bedspread; the curtains, pink with roses, looped back; and the drawing box on the dresser.

The drawing box.

I ran my fingers over that half-opened box, the pencils spilling out: French Blue, Geranium Red. It was hard to swallow. I touched all of the pencils, the pad of paper, the sharpener.

Henry and I made four or five trips back to the car for things I had taken from Josie's house. Steam came from my mouth in small white puffs and from the chimney in larger ones. But the cold didn't bother Henry. He pranced through the snow, chasing twigs and a few crumpled leaves as if he were a kitten. He must have known what I was thinking. He sneaked a look back at me; then he sat up on a rock, perfectly still, like the old cat he was.

I'd draw that later, I thought, Henry happy in the dark, with the river just a thread curving through the snow.

It took a half hour to bring everything inside. I wrapped a blanket around Josie, and through the window I could see the car at the edge of the road. There'd be room for it in the shed, I thought, remembering the Old Man's car on one side, the truck on the other.

The truck. Totaled. Was it still there? I shook my head. "I'll be back," I said to the sleeping Josie. "I have to put the Silver Bullet in the shed."

You're going to drive it in? Steven asked in my head.

You taught me how, I said.

But . . .

I can do this.

The truck hugged one side of the shed. I walked around to the front of it and ran my fingers over the

cold metal, the sharp edges, the empty holes where the lights had been. I raised my hands to my ears without thinking so I wouldn't hear the sound of the truck as it hit the trees that summer evening.

Outside a few minutes later, I turned the key in the Silver Bullet's ignition; the gas gauge was hitting Empty. Just one more bit, I begged the car, that's all I need. I sat there hesitating before I put my foot on the gas, but then I coasted along over the snow, the motor coughing, and glided into the shed—not touching the sides, not even close—braked a split second before I hit the back wall, and turned off the motor.

Ah, Steven said.

It was quiet, with only the soft whoosh of wind and the muffled sound of icy snow as it blew against the roof. I had done it. All I wanted to do now was curl up under the covers in that small green room upstairs and sleep.

Ninth Picture

Izzy's Cake

I have this drawing folded carefully in my backpack. We're sitting at the table on the porch, the river in front of us, a summer rain drilling the roof above us, soaking us all that last Saturday, muddying the road, greening the grass, puckering the river.

In the picture Izzy is backing out of the screen door, balancing the cake plate in her hands. The cake was vanilla, and Izzy had gathered blue forget-me-nots to circle it.

I used the sharpest pencil (Strawberry Pink) to write the words on top of the cake: WELCOME TO THE FAMILY, HOLLY.

Izzy frowned. "I wanted to get your whole name in, but there wasn't enough room."

The Old Man's eyes sparkled. A moment before I framed the picture in my mind, he patted my shoulder. "Hollis Woods, with us forever."

Steven sat on the other side. I'd drawn pages of animal tracks for him, raccoon and deer, rabbit and possum . . . and birds, even a loon that had come up out of the water to sun itself on a rock.

"I'll probably keep them forever, Sister Loon," he said, full of himself. "Get it?" He pointed to the loon tracks on the side of the page, nudging me under the table like a six-year-old, rattling the glasses, the cake plates.

"Steven, please." The Old Man hadn't been happy with him all week. Nothing gigantic; little stuff. Steven had left the shed door open, so a raccoon had nested inside . . . probably the one whose toes were marching all over Steven's paper. Steven had left the house door open, so a bat had flown around the living room Wednesday night. He'd lost the Old Man's fishing knife, and one of the reels was probably sunk under the water somewhere downstream.

"Why don't you just try with him?" I had asked Steven the day before as we rowed around looking for it.

I could see the anger in his eyes. "You're good enough for both of us," he had said. "That's what Pop would say."

I leaned forward. "Is it me?" I asked. "My fault?"

He had laughed then. "Don't be silly."

Still, I wasn't sure. I opened my mouth to tell him about me, a mountain of trouble, but before I could, he tapped my arm. "Hey." His eyes were earnest behind his glasses. "You don't have to look like that." He broke off a piece of holly and handed it to me. "Peace, Hollis. It's just like you. Prickly, but not bad to look at."

I had tried to hide my smile.

Now Izzy put the cake in the center of the table. "Should we have candles?" she asked.

"Sure." Steven grinned at me. "The works."

"Why not?" I leaned back. I was full of myself too, thinking about calling the Old Man Pop, and Izzy Mom.

Izzy went inside to rummage through the table drawers for the candles, and Steven turned to me, saying we might walk up on the mountain after supper.

The Old Man looked at him sharply. "In the rain?"

"Don't worry." I knew I could make the Old Man smile. "We're tougher than the rain."

"I'm not talking about going all the way to the top," Steven said.

We ate the cake then, the icing melting on my tongue, and I was feeling guilty because I was

*really the one who wanted to go up on the
mountaintop.*

*The end of the old Hollis. Hey, world, here
comes the new one.*

And I wanted to go alone.

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 11

*T*he next afternoon I went from room to room, taking my time, looking at everything. Almost everything. I didn't go into Izzy and the Old Man's bedroom. That was their private place.

Photographs filled the guest room wall, and I spent a long time looking at each one. I waited to get to the end to see if the one of me was still there.

First there was a young Izzy in a two-piece bathing suit, then the Old Man sawing down a dead tree, sawdust coloring his beard. There were several of Steven: one without his front teeth, in a bunny costume, one sitting on the hood of the truck, and one with the fishnet in his hand, his head thrown back, laughing.

And the one of me was still there. I was sharpening

a pencil, with pale pink shavings falling in a pile on my drawing paper. I ran my finger over it: still there, in the row with the others, still belonging with them.

Steven's room was next, a mess of a room. Socks on the floor, a jumble of string, a couple of keys, and a photo on the dresser. A photo I couldn't even make out, blurs of greens and blues, and something in the center that might have been the boat.

Behind me Josie called, "I found boots. I'm going to wear them."

"It's too cold to go out," I called back. "You'll freeze." But the outside door slammed, and I went to the window. "Josie?" I put my hand on the glass; cold air drifted in around the panes.

Josie was wearing Izzy's wading boots, which went up to her thighs. She twirled in the snow, arms out, fingers spread. It made me dizzy to watch her. After a moment she tipped over, but it was an easy fall, making me think of snow angels. Her scarf blew across the smooth whiteness, a scrap of color.

She was up again, zigzagging, and I thought about going after her as she disappeared in back of the line of evergreens. I hurried a little, grabbing my jacket. The thermometer outside the kitchen window read five degrees, and next to the window, on the wall, the calendar was still at August.

August.

I went out the back door, calling to her. And then in that cold stillness I could hear her singing. “Over the river . . .”

I went after her, my feet heavy, twirling as I passed the circle she had made, singing back, “. . . and through the woods . . .”

She leaned against a small tree, staring at the thin strip of dark water that ran between the chunks of ice. “Isn’t it beautiful?” I said.

“I love to walk in the snow.” She was shivering again, looking up at me, suddenly bewildered. “But why aren’t we home? And what happened to Beatrice?”

I led her back into the house, into that warm room with the bright blue rugs and the huge couch. I found a robe of Izzy’s and wrapped it around her. We sat by the fireplace watching the shadows dance over the walls until it grew dark outside and we slept.

In the morning points of light danced over my eyes. I raised my hand to my face; sun was melting tiny swirls of ice on the window.

Somewhere outside was a faint buzzing sound. It wasn’t close—nothing to worry about—but what was it? Someone using a saw deep in the woods? A snowmobile? The sound gradually died away, and I stood up slowly, thinking about breakfast. There were choices, thanks to Izzy: cans of pineapple juice, blackberry jam,

vegetables shiny inside their glass jars, rows of Dinty Moore stew.

Izzy's treasures, not mine.

I'd pay her back someday, I told myself, pay back all of it.

Lighten up, Steven said in my head. I had to smile. That's really what he would have said.

I unclenched my hands and took another look outside. Footprints crisscrossed the snow. Our footprints. I thought about them uneasily, glancing up at the sky, wishing for more snow to hide them.

I put water on to boil and popped a piece of Josie's bread into the toaster. A mouse lived somewhere in the house. Poor mouse. He'd have to leave now that Henry was here. I wiped away the mouse's leavings with a brush, then sat at the table in front of the window, with Josie's wood pieces on one side and my food lined up in front of me.

After I ate I looked at the tree figure Josie was doing of me: a long piece of wood, spaces drilled in the sides where the arms would be, a face beginning to take shape, a mouth begun, a small, pointed nose, and a tiny cut on the forehead.

I put my hand up to my own forehead, feeling that indentation. And then Josie was there, yawning, her hair a whoosh around her head. She pattered over to the back window. "Sun today," she said, holding her

hands out as if to warm them against the glass. "And a branch that's blown onto the step. Holly, I think."

I took the last bit of toast crust and crunched it into my mouth.

"The sun on the ocean makes a path sometimes." Josie reached for a chocolate bar. "You think you can walk on it, walk clear across the ocean to . . ."

She stopped and I tried to help her. "To England? To France?"

"To where I belong." She sat at the table and began to work. As I put toast and hot tea in front of her, she glanced around.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm wondering about Beatrice," she said, and smiled. "And sandpaper. Your face needs smoothing."

There might be sandpaper in the shed. I'd get it. I didn't have to look at the truck again; I'd pretend it wasn't there. I opened the back door to a blast of cold air—"So cold your teeth hurt," the Old Man had said—and saw the holly branch, thick with bright red berries, that had blown across the steps.

Steven holding a sprig of holly out to me: "*Peace, Holly.*"

"I'll get my jacket," I told Josie. I shrugged into it, pulled on my gloves, and went outside for the sandpaper. The cold went through me, the smell of it sharp and clean.

The mustard woman was far away, probably looking for me. She wouldn't have a clue.

On the way back, I bent down and picked up the holly to bring into the house. I gave Josie the squares of sandpaper, then put the branch in one of Izzy's vases in front of the big window, thinking about Christmas. Maybe ten more days.

Josie and I would have our own. I'd cut boughs of pine, and we had packs of popcorn to make. It would be like Christmas in a book by Laura Ingalls Wilder.

I was happier than I had been anywhere, except . . .

. . . I didn't belong in that house in Branches, not anymore. I wondered what Christmas was like in the Old Man's winter house, what it would be like this year.

I snipped off that thought before I finished it. Wasn't it enough that I was here in Branches, with holly in the window?

If only I could stay forever.

Something else the Old Man had told me about: fishing in the winter. The fish went deep, but if you caught one, the eating was an experience.

An experience. The Old Man used words like that.

Fish for dinner, dotted with butter . . . No butter. Ah, fish smothered in tomato sauce, and string beans jarred last summer. A real meal, the way normal people ate. Better than normal.

"I know you like fish," I said to Josie.

"Goldfish. I had one in a bowl, I think." She glanced at Henry, who slept in the middle of one of the Old Man's blue rugs. "I don't trust Henry, though."

"To eat, I mean, for us."

She looked across at me, shocked. "I'd never eat a goldfish."

I could feel the laughter bubble up. "Pickerel," I said. "Bass. I'm not sure what's around this time of the year."

"Ah, yes." She picked up her knife to shave curly bits off the wooden feet.

The Old Man's fishing equipment was hanging on the far wall. Did I really want to go out into that icy world? Of course I did. In Steven's bedroom I gathered things to keep warm: his old green sweater for a scarf around my neck, an extra pair of socks. I found a towel in the hall closet to wrap around my head like a turban, and one of Izzy's large sweaters to put over the whole thing.

I was ready with the pole in my hand. Josie laughed at the sight of me as I passed her.

"The abominable snowman," I said, and then I was outside, trying to decide. I could fish from the bank or the Old Man's bridge. The bank was closer, so I walked along the tree line and down to a spot almost

in front of the house. I swung the pole, lure on the line, over the ice into the narrow stream of water. I didn't know how long I stood there fishing, but after a while I leaned back against a bare maple tree, watching movement on the other side of the river, just the quickest bit of color. A squirrel? A raccoon? But then I saw it was something larger, maybe a deer.

It took one more moment to realize that a person, maybe a fisherman, was standing there, back among the trees. And if I had seen him, he might be able to see me.

The pole slid out of my hands as I lurched backward toward the holly bushes. Another quick step and Steven's sweater pulled away on a branch. I looked back to see the pole on the snowy bank. It had sunk into the snow so that it couldn't be seen. There was just a narrow indentation in the snow; it might have been only a branch if anyone spotted it.

My mouth was dry. I looked across the river again. There was no movement on the other side: a scoop of snow slid off one of the branches; a blue jay teetered on another.

I turned and ran the last few steps toward the house and up onto the porch. I reached for the door, closed and locked it in back of me, leaned against it inside, taking deep breaths.

"What is it?" Josie asked.

I shook my head. "Maybe another fisherman. Don't worry." Christmas was coming. Maybe it was someone cutting down a tree, or poaching in the Old Man's woods.

All right. It was all right.

He hadn't seen me, and we were safe.

Josie put on her scarf and her coat and wandered outside, "To breathe for a moment," she told me.

I stayed near the window, watching. But there wasn't anyone there, no one there at all.

Tenth Picture

Hollis Woods

I know what people mean when they say they feel as if they're floating. That's the way I felt, as if my feet weren't attached to the ground, as if they were bouncing off the floor, touching lightly, and bouncing again. And inside me, it was as if bubbles were drifting, bumping gently into each other.

I was happy. No, that doesn't even describe it. I was . . . jubilant, ecstatic.

I drew it using all the pencils—yellows and oranges, pinks and blues. I drew purple shoes on my feet and wings on my shoulders. My eyes were closed, the way you see pictures of angels sometimes with their eyelashes down on their cheeks.

So does it make sense that I wasn't thinking? That all that floating and all those bubbles made me think I could do anything?

And so that last week, all I thought about was going to the top of the Old Man's mountain and

shouting down to the whole world. I even knew what I was going to say: Here I am, Hollis Woods, who didn't deserve to be in a family . . . tough Hollis Woods, running-away Hollis Woods. Look at me. I climbed the mountain. Now I belong.

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 12

Half awake one morning, I heard the sound of a train. I looked up at the window to see a solid square of white: a storm, with pin dots of flakes covering everything. What I had heard was the roar of the wind coming down the valley.

I padded out of bed and went downstairs to see what was happening outside the big window. The holly bushes on one side of the house were just a blur; the narrow sliver of river and its snowy bank had disappeared in a mist of gray.

A little cold, I hugged myself, watching that world. It was like a plastic globe in one of the houses I'd been in. When I shook it, snow fell, covering a bright green Christmas tree in its center.

"Don't touch that, Hollis. Put it down."

I rolled a huge piece of wood onto the banked fire, thinking I'd have to drag more in from the porch later.

Henry looked up at me, meowing, waiting to go out. I reached for the knob, pulling, and when the door opened, a gust of wind blew a swirl of snow inside. Henry stared at me angrily. "Not my fault," I told him, pushing the door closed again.

He went back to the couch, skinny tail twitching.

"Sorry, cat." I ran my hand over the top of his head as I went into the kitchen to rummage through the cabinets.

Ah, how far away the mustard woman was, locked in her house somewhere. How far away everyone was.

I thought of the Old Man, and Steven, and Izzy. They were just a few miles away, but those few miles were forever. Did Steven like the snow, or were they so used to storms like this that they never paid attention to them? I wondered if they ever thought about me the way I did about them. I wondered how Steven was now.

I could hear the Old Man's voice in my ears. I closed my eyes. Don't think of that, don't ever think of that terrible afternoon again.

I took out the box of cocoa with marshmallows and boiled a pot of water on the stove, thinking of what I'd do today. Draw in front of that big window, I told

myself. Figure out a way to shade in that soft line of trees, the gray ribbon of river. Charcoal would be wonderful for that; maybe I'd even be able to use a chunk of burned wood from the fireplace.

I'd done other pictures in the past few days and taped them up around the living room: a snowshoe rabbit with his tall ears, four deer nibbling at the bark of the evergreen, the bridge covered in clear ice. I'd done a few of Josie in the snow too, almost nothing but a few quick lines. She walked every day, down to the road, around the evergreens, coming back with her scarf blowing around her face.

What would happen if I left those pictures when we had to leave next spring? What would the Old Man say when he found them?

What would Izzy say? And Steven?

Spring. Could I call Beatrice then? She would have had months. What would happen to me?

Who cared? I'd think of something. But I'd never leave the pictures. I'd take them with me in my backpack.

Sitting at the table, waiting for the cocoa to cool, I thought about Christmas. I'd lost track of the days. I flipped Izzy's wall calendar ahead to December, trying to figure it out. How long had we been here? Eight days? Nine? I counted back.

The water was ready. I mixed the cocoa and took a tiny sip, feeling the heat of it, the steam on my upper lip. Today could be Christmas Eve.

I stood there planning. When the snow stopped, I'd get myself outside and take some of the evergreen branches; there were so many trees we could fill rooms with them. We'd trim the mantel with great heaps of green and tuck Josie's ornaments in among the needles. Maybe we'd find a few pinecones too. We'd have a special dinner tomorrow night. Fruit cocktail and canned tuna, a feast. And popcorn.

I wished I had a present for Josie. The only thing I could give her was a picture of herself. But the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. I'd do that today instead of drawing trees. I took another sip of cocoa. What about Josie with Beatrice at the movies in front of their popcorn machine? Both of them would be eating, mouths full, arm in arm, smiling.

"Sleigh bells ring," Josie sang, coming into the kitchen behind me.

"I was just thinking that." I reached for another cup and poured in water for cocoa.

She stopped to peer out the window. "I've watched it snow on the ocean," she said. "It melts as it hits the water." She touched the glass with all five fingers. "There is nothing like the ocean."

I tried to think of something to change the look in her eyes. "I was thinking we'd have a party," I told her, "with your ornaments and tree branches from outside."

She smiled, looking up at the ceiling. "We could listen to carols on the radio," she said. "That's what Beatrice and I do every year—that and talk about when we were young. Where is Beatrice?"

"Painting," I said. "It's warm where she is."

Josie shook her head. "We always make almond cookies; we eat half and sell the other half at the movie."

"It would be nice if we had a radio." I popped two of our last pieces of bread into the toaster. "And too bad we don't have a few eggs around."

"Or almond syrup," she said.

"Or butter," I said, and we both laughed.

"We'd have to ask Santa Claus," she said. "He'd bring it all to us on his . . ." She paused, thinking.

"Sleigh."

She shook her head. "That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes on a . . ." She looked up at the ceiling.

I laughed. "A motorbike?"

"One of those snow things." She nodded, laughing too. "But how could we not have a radio? Everyone has a radio."

I finished off my cocoa, one sweet marshmallow left in my mouth, trying to remember. Had there been a radio here? There was never television, I remembered that. But Josie was right, there must be a radio. I wandered around, searching, and finally found one on a shelf, behind boxes of old jigsaw puzzles, the old cord wrapped around it. All that time Henry was stalking me, a line between his eyes as if he were frowning. He really wanted to go out.

I went to the door again and opened it a crack. The snow was worse now, much worse. The line of trees had disappeared, and even the shed seemed far away. I was almost afraid to let Henry out. Before I could shut the door again, though, he darted around me and was gone. I stood there, shivering, trying to see where he was, and then he was back, streaking through the door straight across the living room, into the kitchen, and onto Josie's lap.

I set up my drawing things in front of the window, beginning the rough lines that would turn into Josie. Josie was there on the other side of the room, at the table, fiddling with the radio knob until she found a station with Christmas music. The announcer's voice: "A lovely Christmas Eve morning."

I'd hit the date straight on the head.

The songs began, one after another: "Adeste Fide-
lis," "Silent Night," "Winter Wonderland," and one

I'd never heard before: "Gather 'Round the Christmas Tree."

I leaned over the paper in front of me so Josie wouldn't see what I was doing. I sketched in the space around Beatrice first, the counter, the popcorn machine, and then began to work on the faces. Every few minutes I'd peer out at the snow coming down. Across the river the mountain was blurred, just a dark shadow rising into the pewter sky.

And then I thought about Josie sitting there, my figure in her hand, staring out the window too as she listened to the music, her face tilted, her eyes sad.

Eleventh Picture

On the Mountain

I never really drew any of this. I tried not to think about it. It kept coming up inside my head, though, picture after picture of what happened that last day. Saturday. Izzy and the Old Man off on some antique hunt all the way up to Masonville. Steven begging me to go fishing. "We'll take the boat all the way down to the rapids," he said. "Bring our lunch."

"You go," I said, barely looking up from my drawing.

"Gonna spend this whole day with a bunch of pencils in your mouth? Fooling around with bits of paper?"

I grinned at him over my shoulder.

Go, Steven, I thought. Get out of here.

And then he went with a great clatter, pail and oars, pole and lures, a sandwich dripping tomatoes

out the side. "You'll probably be sorry in two minutes," he said.

He sounded sorry. "Do you mind?" I asked.

He grinned. "Not really. But I'll be gone all day, I warn you."

He climbed into the rowboat and I watched him, his back bent, leaning over the oars, until he was gone.

I put everything away carefully, my pad and pencils, cleaned up the tomato mess in the kitchen, put away the box of Mallomars, shut the refrigerator door, and all the time I was thinking, Three hours up, three hours back, a cinch.

I grabbed a sweater just in case—it was getting cold now—and at the last minute I changed my mind and took a few pieces of paper folded in my pocket, a few pencils: green, gray, brown, and black, and the French Blue one. Who knew what I could use it for, but it was my favorite.

And then I began to climb. It was hot work; I draped the sweater over a tree limb. After a while I could feel the pull in my ankles, the rub of my sneakers against my heels. I stopped at the halfway point to look down at the house, the snake of the river, and I could see Steven, a tiny figure in the rowboat.

I pulled out some paper, made a quick sketch,

and climbed some more. Mud. The Old Man was right: It was deceptive. I couldn't tell it was there until I stepped into it, once covering the whole of my sneaker. I pulled the shoe out and wiped it off with a few leaves.

I was out of breath by the time I almost reached the top, and hungry. Why hadn't I made my own tomato sandwich? There was water, though, a tiny thread of it trickling down from one of the rocks, and I leaned my face into it and drank, and put my wrists under it, and then took the last few steps and I was there.

It opened out, a wide piece of rock, and I danced out onto it, catching my breath. I'd brought dark pencils, but this was a light world. I could see toy houses, and the river, and even the town of Hancock in the distance. There was a tiny silver lake and a road with miniature cars. "It's Christmas!" I shouted.

I said all the things I wanted to. "I'm new," I said. "I'm different."

And in my head I told myself I'd never be mean again, I'd be friendly, I'd go to school and walk up to people. "A new leaf," I said.

I was twirling, dizzy, hungry, and the bubbles inside twirled with me, until I took one step too close to the edge in that muddy sneaker, and then I

was rolling, feeling the sharp edge of a branch tearing into my arm and a stone gashing into my forehead, and finally I was stopped by a huge boulder a few feet down. The wind had been knocked out of me. I lay gasping.

I pulled myself back up. Not so bad, not so terrible, I told myself, wiping the blood out of my eye, except that I knew I'd never be able to walk all the way down by myself.

I didn't begin to call Steven until much later, until the sun had crossed toward the west and I knew it was late afternoon, and I didn't want Izzy and the Old Man to know I had done such a stupid thing. And even as I called, I knew Steven couldn't hear me.

But he came, of course he came. Just before sunset I heard him, or rather I heard the pickup truck, gears grinding and then stopping, the door slamming, and then he was standing over me.

"I knew it," he said.

"How?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Break any bones?"

"Certainly not."

"I wasted my whole afternoon," he said. "Felt sorry that you were all alone, came back, and—"

"Wasted—"

"Right. I figured it out, though. You weren't anywhere."

"So why'd you bring the truck?" I asked.

"Think I had three hours before dark to walk all the way up here to get you?" He shook his head. "I thought you'd been killed."

"Just wounded," I said, laughing.

We sat on the edge of the rock, watching the sun go down.

Steven pointed. "Our winter place is somewhere over there. You'll see it soon." To the east far below was the summer house, the holly bushes a blur of green, the golden field, the thread of river. It took my breath away.

"I want to show you something," I told Steven. I reached into my pocket for the crumpled-up W picture I had taken out of my backpack before I'd left. "I've had it since I was six."

We sat on a ledge, our feet dangling, and he smoothed the picture on his knee, stared at it, then looked over at me.

"We had to find pictures with W words," I said.

"It's a wishing picture," he said slowly, "for a family."

I could feel my lips trembling. Oh, Mrs. Evans, I thought, why didn't you see that?

"It's too bad you didn't come when you were six." He smiled. "I knew you had to stay with us when you let me win that checkers game."

His hair was falling over his forehead and his glasses were crooked, almost hiding his eyes. I thought of the X-picture day and walking out of school. I thought of sitting in the park on a swing, my foot digging into the dirt underneath.

"I run away sometimes," I said. "I don't go to school."

He kicked his foot gently against the ledge, his socks down over his sneakers.

"Someone called me incorrigible."

Now that I'd begun, I didn't know how to stop. "Kids never wanted to play with me. I was mean. . . ."

Steven pulled his glasses off and set them down on the ledge next to him. He rubbed the deep red mark in the bridge of his nose.

I stopped, looking out as far as I could, miles of looking out. For a moment I was sorry I'd told him. But he turned and I could see his eyes clearly, and I wondered if he might be blinking back tears. I wasn't sure, though. He reached out and took my hand. "You ran in the right direction this time, didn't you?"

And that was it. He knew all about me, and he didn't mind.

"We have to go down now," he said, "before they come back and find out."

I nodded. I stood up, and I could feel the pain shoot through my ankle. I limped to the pickup truck. "I'm glad you came," I said. "I could never have walked all the way down."

"It was a dumb thing to do," he said, "coming up here. Pop would have a fit."

And so we went down. Steven was a sure and careful driver, but it was so steep, and the truck kept going, kept sliding, even with the brake pressed down as hard as he could manage. He pressed and pressed, but the truck gained speed, and just before the end when we would have been all right, when we would have been fine, the truck tipped, and I could see we were going to go over.

And Steven yelled at me. "Jump, Holly!"

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 13

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

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

Everything was still. The birds must have found nesting places for the night, and the deer were hiding somewhere deep in the woods. The last slim line of river had frozen; if I hadn't known it was there, I'd

have walked right across to the other side. I wondered if the ice would carry my weight yet.

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

Josie and Henry were framed in the window, waving to me. I reached down to scoop up a handful of white and tossed it at them. Then I trudged over to the shed for the Old Man's saw and found Steven's sweater hanging on the knob, encrusted with snow. I didn't even remember leaving it there. I folded it, put it on one of the shelves, reached for the saw, and spent the last bit of daylight hacking away at branches, making sure not to spoil the shapes of the trees.

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

You have Josie, Steven might have said.

I love Josie, I said back.

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

What I want. What I want.

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

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

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

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

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

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

My mouth watered. A Christmas Eve dinner.

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

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

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

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

"Presents," Josie said, a secret smile lighting her face.

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

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

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

Next morning, the sun was blinding. And the shed

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

I didn't want to think about that. But there was something else. Was it Josie's present for me? An egg was what I really wanted this morning. What I could do with an egg! I'd bake a cake or cookies. I'd whip it up for an eggnog. I'd fry it like a little sun in a pan.

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

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

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

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

only kind we could get during the Second World War.”

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

“Presents now?” Josie asked.

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

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

I tried to see what had bothered them. I looked toward the evergreens myself, looked back as far as I could. There was no light anywhere, nothing to make me think about a fisherman being out there somewhere.

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

It was then I remembered: Steven’s sweater, a flash of green in the snow as I backed away from the fisherman that day. I hadn’t left it on the doorknob in

the shed. I opened my mouth to ask Josie if she had picked it up when she'd been outside. But Josie would never remember. Maybe I didn't want to know the answer anyway, thinking of the fisherman finding us and what might happen then.

Twelfth Picture

A Mountain of Trouble

I couldn't get warm, even though I wore a robe and Izzy's sweater on top of that. Every time I drifted off to sleep that August night, I'd start, thinking someone was there. I'd look around the dark room, but it was empty. I'd close my eyes again, and then I'd think I was falling, my head jerking, arms up, legs braced, a scream in my throat, and that feeling in my chest as we went over the side.

But I really didn't sleep. I kept going over it: the sound first, a screeching metal, tearing, as if the truck were dying, the wheel swerving, a tree slowing us down, its branches cracking, breaking, leaves covering the windshield, a rock ripping at the underside, the truck bouncing now, not so muddy, gravel and roots and Steven's hands off the wheel, the sound of glass shattering, a tire spinning . . .

And then everything was still.

We were almost all the way down the Old Man's mountain, and next to me Steven with his head on the wheel. I reached for him, my heart pounding, shook his shoulder. "Don't do this, Steven," I said. "Don't be dead."

I pushed him back, his head against the seat now, his face white in the dusky inside of the truck. Not a mark on him that I could see, but he was hurt, I was sure, really hurt. He wasn't dead, though. There was a thin pulsing on the side of his neck, his eyes moving under the broken glasses. I took them off gently and heard him say something. Loon Sister, maybe. I could hear the sound of the S. Maybe it was Sorry.

"Steven, I have to get help." I watched him for another moment, then scrambled out of the truck, feeling the pull of my ankle, telling myself I had to do it, had to go as quickly as I could. I began the climb back up, wondering how long it would take to get down the mountain road, cross the bridge, and reach the house. And then I thought, No telephone.

What then?

I was almost there when I saw the sweep of headlights going across the bridge. Izzy and the Old Man coming home?

When they saw me, Izzy leaned out the window, calling, "I bought dishes, Hollis. You're going to love them." And then she stopped. "Child, you're bleeding."

"The truck!" I said.

"What has he done?" the Old Man said. "What has he done now? You can hardly walk!"

It seemed to take forever before lights flickered on the mountain and cars began to park diagonally down below. Turret lights turned and glowed, and an ambulance came all the way from Walton, its siren screaming. They brought Steven down at last, but all I could see was one foot, the sneaker, the socks falling over his ankles.

A policeman shook his head, talking to Izzy and the Old Man as I stood to one side, out of everyone's way. "If it wasn't your mountain, if it wasn't private property, your boy would be in trouble. As it is—"

"As it is," Izzy's voice cut in, "we have to hope he'll be all right."

And I had looked over my shoulder at the Old Man's face, his clenched jaw.

In the emergency room a doctor took five stitches to close my forehead and wrapped an Ace bandage around my ankle. Steven was somewhere inside too, and I didn't even know what was happening to him.

We went home later that night, much later, Izzy and I, Izzy to stay just long enough to put me to bed, to cover me and tell me it would be all right, to touch my cheek and my chin. "Just sleep, Hollis," she said. "Everything will seem better in the morning." And then she went back to the hospital to wait.

I thought about the stucco woman. She wouldn't have been surprised at the trouble I had caused. She would have seen it coming. Would Steven have driven the truck to the top of the mountain if I hadn't been there? And the arguing between Steven and the Old Man—what had Izzy said? "Worse this summer."

I'd messed up the whole family.

Before it was light I packed my things in the backpack. They didn't all fit, so I left a small pile of odds and ends, and the bathing suit that was drying on the line. I tore off a sheet of paper from my drawing pad and wrote the note: It was my fault, all of it. I wanted to see the mountain. I'm going back to Long Island. Please don't come after me. I don't want to be a family after all.

I looked back as I left, to take a picture of it all in my mind, thinking how strange it was to use my running money to run back to the stucco lady. It

was even stranger that she let me walk in there so easily, clucking over my bandage, taking me to the doctor a week later to have the stitches out.

Emmy, agency hotshot, came to see me to tell me Steven was going to be all right. "His ribs are broken," she said, "and the bones in his arms are fractured." While her mouth was still open, ready to say something else, I told her "I never want to go back, I never want to see any of them again."

She tried to find out why, but when I just kept looking out the window, banging my feet on the chair rung, she sighed and let me stay with the stucco woman.

I didn't do that, either. I lasted there through most of September, and then I ran.

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 Christ-masy 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 row-boat, 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.

Thirteenth Picture

The Conference Room

For all I know this picture might still be in the agency conference room. It's a drawing of a small office with beige paneling on the walls. The paneling is fake wood. There's a table in the center, someone's initials, TR, gouged out of the wood. The picture isn't finished, but Emmy and the mustard woman didn't know that. They thought the girl sitting at the table was me. Of course it wasn't me. This girl was laughing. She was just make-believe.

I wasn't laughing when I sat there. I was sitting as straight as I could, but I could feel my knees shaking.

"Mr. Regan wants to talk to you," Emmy said.

I shook my head, never looking at her, sketching on the paper.

She leaned forward. "He's come all the way down here, Holly."

"Hollis."

"Just see what he has to say."

I shook my head again, but Emmy patted my hand and was out the door.

And then he was there, standing in front of me, and I still didn't look up. "I'm sorry," I said in a voice so low I wasn't sure he heard me.

"It was Steven's fault," he said.

"No," I said.

"He took the truck—" I could see him wave his hand. "Hollis, it doesn't matter. We just want you home."

I thought about standing up. I felt like putting my arms around him, then going out to the car with him. I thought of what it would be like to drive up to their front door.

"I didn't tell Izzy and Steven I was coming," he said. "If I had, they would have come too. I had to make sure you wanted to be with us first."

Izzy would be standing at the door, and Steven next to her. We'd be hugging each other, all of us. There'd be pancakes and hard candy.

But that was just for a moment.

"It wasn't Steven's fault," I said. "I went up the mountain first."

"It doesn't make any difference."

He was blaming Steven. If I went home with

him they'd always blame Steven. "He thinks you're perfect," Steven had said. Before I could change my mind, I shook my head. "I think I'll stay down here."

He tried to talk me out of it. I wasn't even hearing what he said. I stopped drawing; my hands were clenched under the table, and I never once looked up at him. After a while he left.

Emmy came back in with tears in her eyes.

"You want tough?" I asked. "I'll show you tough."

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 15

Outside it was almost dark. A sliver of moon curved over the Old Man's mountain, and a single star was just visible. "*A planet, Hollis,*" Steven might say. "*Get your astronomy in order.*"

If I cried again, the tears would freeze fast to my cheeks.

The snow was so dry I could hear the creaking of my footsteps as I went past the holly bushes. No one could guess they were there, mounded up like soft white pillows, and the river in front of me had disappeared.

I stood still to look at it all. I wondered how I could draw that to show the world underneath: sharp, shiny leaves hidden in the snow, the river running fast and cold under the ice.

In my mind was a picture of Beatrice brushing her hair off her forehead. "*Drawing is a language,*" she had said. "*You have to learn to speak it.*"

In the distance was the faint sound of a saw: Someone must be cutting wood for a fire. I closed my eyes. Steven and the Old Man turning their heads. *Roger's saw*, they'd say. *He must be in the apple orchard, or Hopper's finally gotten to that dead elm.*

No, it wasn't a saw. It was the sound of a snowmobile, probably on the other side of the mountain.

A clump of snow fell off the roof of the house. I looked back at it, at the house where I wanted to belong. Huge icicles hung from the eaves, and suddenly I was so cold I couldn't stay outside anymore. Upstairs in my bedroom I sat at the edge of the bed shivering, waiting until I was warm; then I went to my backpack and pulled out my pictures to spread across the bumpy white bedspread.

I saw how much blue I had used in those summer drawings: blue for the river, blue for the Old Man's rugs, blue for Izzy's locket; and green: a smudge of tree, a leaf, the edge of the mountain. Both colors I loved.

The pictures I had drawn of Josie lay in the middle of the bed. Josie on the pier, reaching for sea grass; Josie outside in her tree garden, shades of peach and lilac; Josie happy, Josie where she belonged.

Josie didn't belong here. She belonged in her house

with Beatrice, and Henry, and the irritable pelican on her wall.

She belonged near the ocean.

I sat there for a long time, my head against the headboard, knowing what I had to do. I rubbed my hands, still icy cold. It was four miles to the telephone outside the grocery store, a long walk, but I could do it. I'd call Beatrice . . . ask her, beg her.

We'd go home, Josie and I, Josie to Beatrice, me to another place. I looked at a half-finished picture of Izzy at the cemetery with a vase of daisies in her hand. What had she said that day? "*I wanted children for every corner of the house.*" And what else? There was something more she had said, something about Steven and the Old Man. "*It's worse this summer.*"

I'd have to stop thinking about Izzy, put all of them out of my mind. Before I left I'd get rid of all the pictures of them, burn the drawings in the fireplace. I'd forget about Izzy and the Old Man, forget about Steven.

I stared down at the drawing of Izzy backing out of the door with my WELCOME TO THE FAMILY cake and saw something I hadn't remembered: the Old Man's hand on Steven's shoulder.

Me, catching my first fish. Steven in front of me with the net, the Old Man smiling. But he is looking at Steven, not at me. Looking and smiling.

And another: Steven hanging into the engine of a

car, just the back of him visible, with mismatched socks, and the Old Man with his hands on his hips, but his eyes are soft.

Beatrice was in my head again. What had she said to me one time? *"Sometimes we learn from our own drawings; things are there that we thought we didn't know."*

My lips were suddenly dry.

I stood up, walked around to the other side of the bed. There they were in the boat. Steven laughing at something the Old Man had said.

How had I drawn all that and not seen it?

Of course the Old Man loved Steven. He was going to love him whether I was there or not. Had I given them up for nothing, the whole family?

What do you know about a family? Steven said in my mind. *You've never had one.*

I remembered what Izzy had said then: *"They have to find their own way."*

I picked up another picture: me with candy in my mouth. Then there was something else floating just on the edge of my mind. Something to do with the radio? Why the radio?

Wait, I told myself. What had Josie said about wanting Santa to bring a radio?

And then I had it. The two of us joking. *"Santa on a sleigh,"* I had said.

"That was a hundred years ago. Now he comes on a . . ."

. . . a snowmobile? To bring the candy? Steven?
The pancakes, and the applesauce?

I slid off the bed, the picture drifting out of my hand, my knuckles up to my mouth.

The sweater hanging on the shed doorknob.

Holly on the back step. *"Peace, Hollis."*

I felt as if I could hardly breathe.

And then I was flying down the stairs, my feet barely touching the steps, skittering on the Old Man's shiny floor, coming to a stop in front of Josie asleep on the couch.

I sat down next to her, one hand on Henry's rough fur. "Wake up, Josie," I said. "I want to ask you about Santa Claus."

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 16

Josie slept through my questions, her head nestled on the couch cushions, and Henry with her, purring faintly with his eyes closed. She slept as I shook her, slept as I begged her, "Please, Josie, I can't wait to know," slept as I offered her soup from a can, Izzy's candy, a cup of tea.

Then at last I gave up. I looked at the black square that was the window. The moon had disappeared behind the Old Man's mountain, and the star was gone.

I went into the kitchen to make something to eat: the rest of the tuna with canned pineapple thrown on top, and a few frosted flakes for crunch. I ate it at the kitchen counter, wolfing it down, made hot chocolate, and when it had cooled a little, put it under Josie's

nose. "Smells good, doesn't it? Just open your eyes, take a sip, and talk to me."

She smiled in her sleep as I kissed her forehead, and then I went upstairs to bed, lying awake for a long time, feeling the tick of my heart in my throat.

Maybe the holly had just blown onto the back step. Maybe Josie had found the candy in the house. Maybe. Maybe.

But then as I fell asleep, I could almost hear his voice in my head. *Merry Christmas, Hollis Woods.*

I was awake at the first light the next morning. It was a beautiful day, with sunshine melting the ice on the window. I went downstairs and Josie was still asleep on the couch, but Henry was awake, stretching his skinny legs. I let him out and stood in the doorway, hugging myself, squinting at that glittering world, listening for the sawing sound of a snowmobile.

And then Josie opened her eyes.

I began slowly. "Christmas was yesterday," I said.

She smiled at me.

"Santa Claus is coming . . .," I sang.

". . . to town," she finished.

"He came to us," I said.

"In all this snow," she said.

"But what did he look like?"

She ran her hand over her face, thinking. "He looked cold," she said.

"And he gave you the candy."

"One time," she said, "when Beatrice and I were little, he brought mittens. Red for Beatrice, blue for me. We each swapped one. All winter, we wore one blue and one red."

I went over to her and touched her hair. "I'm going to call Beatrice," I said.

"Are we going home?" she asked.

"Maybe," I said. "I think so. Can you wait here? It's a long walk to the phone. I'll be gone most of the morning."

I heard a few fragments of song as she wandered into the kitchen. "If it takes forever, I will wait . . ."

I made breakfast for both of us, a heap of frosted flakes; then I layered on sweaters, three pairs of Steven's socks, my jacket, and turned to Josie for one last try. "Where did you get the candy?" I asked.

"It's in a tin box," she said. "Orange and lemon. Makes your mouth wiggle."

"I'll be back." I opened the door, hearing the drip of melting icicles from the roof, and stepped back as Henry darted inside.

Outside I thought at first of taking the road. What difference would it make if I were caught?

But it would make a difference. I wanted to call Beatrice first. I wanted to hear that she'd come to live with Josie.

And suppose she doesn't? Steven asked.

I shook my head. *She will. I think she will.*

I brushed him away, trudging along through the trees, listening to the call of the crows, the screech of the blue jays. And all the time I was listening for that buzzing sound of the snowmobile, telling myself I had made the whole thing up, telling myself it wasn't Steven.

And what if it was Steven? I asked myself. What would I say to him?

It must have been almost twenty minutes later when I heard the faint sound of the motor. It could have been anyone, but still I ran toward the road, trying to pick up my feet in that deep snow.

I saw him, a helmet on his head, thick gloves on his hands, bent over the handles of the snowmobile, and I stepped out onto the road just in time for him to see me and glide to a stop.

I stood there, biting my lip, feeling that river of tears coming at last, waiting for that brief second as he pushed up the visor. "Hollis Woods," he said. "Where are you going?"

"Steven Regan," I said, my mouth trembling. "Happy birthday."

And then we were laughing, both of us, laughing instead of crying.

"Thank you for the candy," I said at last, looking at

his face, thinner, bonier. Something about his eyes seemed older.

"Horrible stuff, that candy," he said.

"And the holly branch."

He tilted his head a little. "Hollis Woods," he said again.

"How did you know I was here?"

He raised one shoulder. "There was a letter from the agency looking for you."

I nodded, thinking about the mustard woman sending lost girl letters to every house I'd ever been in.

"I told Pop." Steven swiped at his glasses. "'Hollis loves that house,' I said. But did he listen? Of course not."

I swallowed. "You and the Old Man are still arguing."

"'If she loved that house so much she'd be with us right now,' Pop said. But I knew. I've been here every day except during the big storm."

I was shivering in the cold, the wind blowing around us, my feet beginning to feel numb.

"We've been hoping you'd come home all these months," he said. "Why not, Holly?"

And then I was crying, big sloppy tears. I leaned against the handlebars, making terrible sounds in my throat, and I just couldn't seem to stop.

Steven stood there, his hands dangling in those

huge gloves, and then he reached out, put his arms around me, pulling me toward him.

"The Old Man went down to Long Island when he heard you were missing," he said. "He's going crazy looking for you. He keeps going back and forth."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"I wanted to do that for you, at least that. Give you time." He paused. "You're famous. Your picture's in the newspapers. A pretty awful-looking picture, if you ask me."

As he rattled on, I kept sniffing and wiping my eyes, and then I'd start to cry again.

"I knew you'd be safe." He took one arm off my shoulder to wave it around. "As long as I kept an eye on you and your friend."

"You have a nerve," I said.

"You'd have starved to death without the food I brought." He frowned and began again. "I still don't know why . . ."

"I thought . . .," I began, and bit my lip. I'd never tell him what I had thought about the Old Man not loving him. "You were always arguing, and I thought it had to do with . . ." I waved my hands.

"With you?" he said. "Oh, Holly. It doesn't have to do with anyone. I told you that. It's just the way we are."

I stared down the road, not a car in sight, the trees heavy with snow, bent and leaning.

"I'm a slob and he's neat. I forget, he remembers. We drive each other crazy. But it's all right."

I ran my hands over my cheeks, tried to dry them. As simple as that, just the way they were.

"I told you," he said, his head tilted, his eyes smiling. "You don't know about families yet." He leaned back against the snowmobile. "He knew the accident was my fault."

I sighed. "It was my fault."

"Everything has to be your fault all the time?"

I shrugged a little.

"After the accident, Pop said they'd told him you never stayed in one place very long. But he said we were different, and that it must be something else. And that's what it was? You thought—"

"I messed up the family."

"Wait till he hears this," Steven said. "Just wait."

I watched the snow drifting off the trees. *Old Man, I love you.* Steven rubbed my shoulders; he must have seen that I was shivering. "I put the fishing pole away for you in the shed, and looped the sweater over the knob."

"The fishing pole?" My hand went to my mouth. "I forgot about the fishing pole. All this time."

"Ha, Hollis Woods, there's hope for you, I told you

that. I'm going to spend next summer fixing up the old truck. What do you say? Want to help? Want to come home?"

I didn't say anything. I didn't have to. I climbed up on the back of the snowmobile. "Take me to the telephone booth down at the grocery," I said.

He gunned the motor and the snow spewed out behind us as we flew up the highway to call Beatrice.

The Time with Josie

CHAPTER 17

Steven stood next to me in that freezing phone booth, his eyeglasses steamy and small puffs of smoke coming out of his mouth. He talked the whole time. "I told Izzy not to worry, that you'd be home by Christmas." He wagged his eyebrows. "Of course I knew where you were."

"Wait," I said, dialing the number I'd memorized all those weeks ago. "I can't hear."

"And the day after Christmas is pretty close." He grinned at me.

Then Beatrice's sweet voice was in my ear, soft and a little breathless.

"It's me," I said. "Hollis Woods."

For a moment she didn't answer. When she began to speak, it seemed as if she couldn't stop. "I've been calling for days, Hollis," she said. "Where are you? Is Josie all right? Do you know where Josie is? Please know. I've been so worried." She paused, really out of breath now.

I closed my eyes: Beatrice worried, Josie unhappy, the Old Man looking for me. What had I done?

"She's with me," I said.

Steven's voice was still in my head even though he was standing right next to me. *If you hadn't made that mess, you might never have come home.*

"Josie wants to come home. She remembers home, but she forgets so much else," I told Beatrice. "The agency isn't going to let her stay there alone. And they want me to go somewhere else."

"I'm coming home, Hollis. I'm coming home right now. Don't worry. I'll move right in with Josie." Her voice sounded excited. "I'm already sick of painting the desert. I need some snow in my life. I need to see Josie and Henry."

Steven clapped his hands together for warmth. "By the way, we started on your room anyway," he said. "I told the Old Man we'd paint it green, green for holly."

"Beatrice, she'll be so glad to see you," I said, looking at Steven, listening to them both at once.

"But the Old Man wanted your room blue," Steven said. "'Hollis loves blue,' he kept telling us. What does he know? French Blue, he calls it."

I grinned. The Old Man knew a lot. But maybe I wouldn't tell Steven that either.

I talked for another minute, telling Beatrice we'd go home soon, telling her we were all right, we were fine, and then I hung up the phone.

Steven yanked off his gloves with his teeth, reached for more change, and laid it out on the shelf. "I bet you don't even know our phone number," he said as he began to dial.

I could hear Izzy's larger-than-life voice. "Is that you, Steven?"

He handed the phone to me, then let himself out of the phone booth to stand outside, stamping his feet.

"It's me, Izzy," I said. "Do you think I could come home?"

Fourteenth Picture

Christina

The Old Man framed this picture and hung it over the bed in my French Blue room in our winter house in Hancock. The mirror on the opposite wall reflects the picture so it's the first thing I see when I open my eyes in the morning . . . that and my tree figure from Josie.

The tree figure wears the crystal beads Izzy gave me. "They're too small for you now, Hollis," Izzy said as she looped them carefully over the sea-grass head. "They're from my sixth birthday. But I always wanted my oldest daughter to have them."

I tried to match the picture to the W one in my backpack, but I couldn't do it exactly. First, there's a flag in the background of this one because it's Memorial Day, the day we open the house in Branches for the summer each year. It's early in the morning and we're standing on the

porch steps with the sun sending beams of light across the river in front of us.

But there are five of us in the picture instead of four. The Old Man, looking a little grim: He's just discovered that Steven left his bedroom window open so the snow drifted in all winter, ruining the wall and buckling parts of the wood floor.

Steven tries to look serious, but you can see the laughter in his eyes. "Holly will paint it up," he said, needling the Old Man. "She'll paint it green. That's her favorite color."

They still argue, sometimes so loudly I put my hands over my ears. When they see me they smile. "It's all her fault," Steven says, and the Old Man leans over to pat my shoulder.

In the picture, Izzy stands in the center, a little taller than the Old Man. She's wearing a loose shirt in that blue I love. "Are you happy?" she asked me as I sketched us all later that day. "Be happy, Hollis, because I am. I've never been happier."

I didn't answer. Instead, I drew smiles on both our faces. I'm the fourth one in the picture, by the way, smiling just a bit. I know I'm thinking of Josie, thinking of running here with her a year and a half ago. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't have this picture, wouldn't have any of it. I'd still be running.

Every month we go to Long Island to see her in her kitchen with Henry, and the pelican, and the tree figures she still carves, while Beatrice patters around fixing tea for all of us.

Josie doesn't remember exactly who I am anymore. She loves me, though, I know that, and always reaches up to touch my cheek. Sometimes I wear her brown hat with the veil, and then I see the recognition in her eyes. "Hollis," she says. "You saved my life." Maybe she doesn't know why, but still she says it, and I always tell her it was the other way around.

And Henry? Ancient, but still feisty. "That cat's as tough as you are," Steven says to me.

Henry looks at me, and it's almost as if he winks before he closes both eyes above a wide yawn. We speak the same language, that cat and I.

I have a new last name now. It's Regan. I love the sound of it. I haven't forgotten Hollis Woods, who wanted and wished, fresh as paint, a mountain of trouble, so I sign my drawings using the three names. They all belong to me. Emmy and the mustard woman both like the idea of that. They show up regularly to say hello, nodding and smiling as if they were the ones who changed my whole life. I don't say anything. I know they're relieved to have me off their hands and settled. And I have to

say I can't blame them for that. I have to say, too, that I even smile back at them once in a while.

But the picture, and why it doesn't match the first one, the W picture: It's because I'm holding my sister, Christina, six weeks old, in my arms.

She looks quiet in the picture, contented, sucking on her thumb. But she's not always like that. And when she cries, we run to her from wherever we are. We stand over her bassinet smiling at her, cooing. And Izzy always puts her arms around me. "You brought us luck," she says.

So there are five of us now: a mother, a father, a brother, and two sisters.

A family.