



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 pencilthin. 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?*