

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!"