

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."