

## 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.*