

QUICKREADS

This area hasn't changed at all, Melinda thought, as she slowed her car for a turn. It looks just as it did when I left seven years ago.

She turned off the highway and onto a narrow road that wound up the mountain. At first Melinda could see houses tucked away behind the trees. But the higher up the mountain she drove, the fewer houses she saw. Then there were no houses, and the road narrowed even more. Before long it was just a rutted dirt path.

At last Melinda spotted her grandmother's farmhouse just ahead. For a moment her breath caught in her throat. She wondered if the old woman would welcome her, or-

Melinda parked under a big oak tree. She climbed out of the car and stretched. *I'm tired and hungry*, she thought. *I sure hope Ruby doesn't send me back down the hill*.

Suddenly the front door opened and Ruby stepped onto the porch. She gazed at her granddaughter as if she couldn't believe her eyes. "Melinda?"

"Ruby!" Melinda ran across the yard and up the wooden steps.

They grabbed each other in a big hug. Then Ruby held Melinda back at arms' length. "Let me look at you," she said. "Oh, Melinda, you're all grown up—and you're so beautiful!"

Melinda smiled. "I've missed you so much, Ruby," she said.

"And I've missed you, too," Ruby whispered, her eyes spilling tears. "Every day for the last seven years."

Melinda's smile disappeared. "You have? But you were the one who made me go! I was only 16 when you packed me off to live with Aunt Kay and Uncle Jim. I hardly knew them then—and I didn't want to leave. Why did you send me away?"

Ruby grasped Melinda's arm. "I did it for you," she said, nervously pulling Melinda toward the front door. "I thought you'd have better opportunities if you lived in the city. And just what are you doing back here now, child?"

Melinda sighed. "I was in an automobile accident a couple of weeks ago. I'm okay, but the doctor told me to take some time off from work. I decided to come for a visit."

Ruby looked upset. "Oh, Melinda, honey, that was a bad idea," she groaned. "You can't stay here."

"Why not?" Melinda demanded. "What did I do to make you—"

"Oh, no, Melinda!" Ruby exclaimed. "It wasn't anything *you* did, child. It's —it's just the danger! As long as you stay here, you're not safe."

Melinda didn't know what to say. Her grandmother's words shocked her. She'd noticed how nervously Ruby had glanced around the yard. And she wondered why Ruby had grabbed her arm and so quickly hustled her into the house.

"I'll fix you something to eat," Ruby said quickly. "Then you have to get back down the mountain, honey. You can stay at that new motel on the highway. Tomorrow—"

"Hold on," Melinda said stubbornly. "I'm not going anywhere. What's this danger you're talking about?"

Ruby took a deep breath. "I'm not saying another word about it. There are some things you don't need to know. Just do what I tell you and—"

"No!" Melinda said firmly as she crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not 16 anymore, Ruby. I'm an adult and I want you to tell me why—"Her voice trailed away as she thought about something. "Does this 'danger' have anything to do with the reason my mother went away?"

Ruby groaned and her eyes filled with tears again. "I didn't think you remembered anything about that."

Melinda frowned. "I don't really remember. I was so young when she left. How old was I?"

"Just a baby," Ruby said.

Melinda followed the old woman into the kitchen. "Are you hungry, child?" Ruby asked.

Melinda nodded, but she wasn't going to let Ruby change the subject that easily. "So if there's danger here, why do *you* stay?"

Ruby glanced at her granddaughter in surprise. "Why, this is my home, Melinda. I can't leave. Besides, there's no danger to *me*—not anymore."

Melinda was puzzled. She wanted to dig deeper into the mystery, but Ruby wouldn't let her. "You go on and wash up now, honey," Ruby said. "Then we'll have our dinner." They talked over dinner. Ruby asked a lot of questions about her granddaughter's job in the city. But each time Melinda tried to ask her anything about the danger, the old woman changed the subject.

Their talk brought back memories of Melinda's childhood. "Ruby, did you give away that stuffed teddy bear I used to have?" Melinda asked.

Ruby laughed. "Oh, no. I knew he was your favorite. I figured that I'd send him to you someday."

Ruby led Melinda upstairs to her old bedroom. Everything there had been kept exactly as Melinda had left it so long ago.

Ruby opened a battered wooden chest at the foot of the bed. Melinda's favorite toys were still packed inside, along with special childhood clothes and a few books.

Melinda dropped to the rag rug on the floor and began to pull things out of the chest. Before long she realized it was getting dark. She glanced up at Ruby, who was sitting on the bed. The old woman was watching her with eyes filled with love.

"Ruby, please let me stay with you," Melinda said. "I swear I'll be good. I'll do whatever you tell me."

Ruby sighed. Then she nodded. "I don't have the heart to send you away again," Ruby said, her voice breaking. "I've missed you so much, Melinda. But you have to promise me that you won't go into the forest. Not even during the day."

Melinda frowned. "Okay, I promise. Although I don't know why—"

"It doesn't matter why," Ruby said crossly.
"Just *don't*!" She stood up and headed for the door. "I'm going downstairs to clean up the kitchen now. Don't stay up too late, honey."

As soon as Ruby left the room, Melinda began searching through the trunk again. She found her first doll, several broken crayons, and a handful of old photos that were taken at a childhood birthday party.

I remember that party, Melinda thought. That's me and there's Ruby. And there's—She frowned, trying to remember the name of the other little girl in the photo. Then it came back to her: Ariana.

I'd forgotten all about Ariana, Melinda thought to herself. I wonder whatever happened to her?

Melinda hurried downstairs. She found Ruby drying the dishes.

"Ruby, do you remember Ariana?" Melinda asked. "She was the little—"

The dish slipped from Ruby's hands and smashed on the kitchen floor.

"Oh, look out!" Melinda exclaimed. "Don't cut yourself. I'll get the broom."

Then she caught sight of Ruby's face. It had turned as white as the dishtowel she was holding!

"Sit down now, Ruby," Melinda whispered.
"What's wrong?"

"N-nothing," the old woman stammered.
"I guess I'm just kind of clumsy tonight."

Melinda cleaned up the broken china and finished drying the dishes. Ruby sat at the table and watched. Melinda could tell that her grandmother was still badly shaken.

"I'm sorry about the dish," Melinda said.
"Was it one of your favorites?"

"Oh, no," Ruby said with a shaky laugh.
"It was just a cheap old thing I got at a secondhand store."

"About Ariana—" Melinda started to say. She watched as again the color quickly disappeared from Ruby's face.

"I don't know what happened to her," Ruby said sharply. "And I don't care. I hope I never see her—" She stopped, embarrassed at her outburst. "I-I mean—" Her voice trailed away. "I don't know what I mean," Ruby said at last. "I'm just tired, and I'm not making sense. It's time for me to go to bed, Melinda. You should, too."

"I will," Melinda said slowly. "You go on ahead, Ruby. I'll be up soon."