

Glenraven – Chapter 2

written by Holly

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CHAPTER 2

Sophie Cortiss watched the rain sheeting down outside her picture window. The hills fell away at her feet, the dark green of pine trees not much brightened by the stands of oaks and dogwoods and squat, broad peaches just beginning to bend beneath the weight of their fruit. The brash pink blooms of her dianthus drooped in the downpour, not cheerful at all. The two new horses waited out the storm under the shed in the far pasture, a painful symbol of everything she had lost and everything she could never have again. The cats curled on the outside sills and stared in at her, mewling piteously and making it plain they thought they ought to be indoors. The gloom outside was, she thought, more than mere storm. Day's end approached, dragging hollowness in its wake.

The rain filled the crevices of her walk and pounded down on the perennials that huddled over layered mulch. She should have gotten out and divided those daylilies last fall; they had grown far too crowded. She had let the bed slip. In the past two years, she'd let a lot of things slip.

I need to do something.

Something. Something different.

Down the hall, she heard the phone ring. Mitch is home, she thought dully. Mitch can get it.

She heard him pick up on the third ring.

"Hello? Oh hi. Yeah, she's here." She wished, perversely, that he'd lied; he had told whoever was calling that she was out grooming the horses, or that she was shopping for groceries. Maybe she could sneak out the door so that he wouldn't be able to find her.

But when he yelled down the hall, "Sophie, it's for you!" she went out of her studio to answer it.

He smiled and gave her a quick squeeze, and with one hand over the receiver said, "It's Jayjay."

Sophie frowned. The thought of Jayjay Bennington being perky and bouncy and cheerful made Sophie want to go to bed and not get up for a week. The two of them had been best friends since seventh grade, but since Karen's death they had grown apart. Like the perennials, Sophie had let their friendship slip.

She took the phone with a sigh, and leaned against the wall. "Jayjay. What's up?"

"Soph." Jay's didn't sound like herself at all. Sophie heard nothing remotely resembling cheer; in fact, Jayjay sounded as funereal as Sophie had ever heard her. "Could you do me a favor?"

Sophie glanced at Mitch; he waited, propped against the kitchen door frame, eyebrows raised. "Sure. What?"

"Can you come pick me up? I'm in front of HairFantastic—the place on McDuffie down from the courthouse "

"I know where it is," Sophie said, frowning. Why the hell would Jay need a ride anyplace? "Everything okay?" she asked, not wanting to give anything away to Mitch, in case this turned out to be something Jay wouldn't want him to know.

"I don't, um, don't really want to discuss it right now. Okay?" Sophie was certain she'd picked up a quaver in Jay's voice. Was it possible she was crying?

"I'll be right there," Sophie told her, and hung up the phone. She looked up at Mitch, puzzled, with the frown still on her face. "Something's up with Jayjay," she told him.

"You didn't talk long."

"No. I think her car broke down. She asked me to give her a lift."

He smiled. "I doubt there's much I can do for her car, but I'll come with you—," he started to say, but Sophie had already headed for the door.

"I'll be back in a bit," she told him. She made sure she kept moving, so that he wouldn't keep trying to invite himself along. She heard him call something after her, and assumed that he'd told her he loved her. She didn't answer him; instead, she made something of a show out of rattling her keys and fumbling with the lock. She didn't want to lie to him. She didn't. And if she told him she loved him right at that minute, it might turn out to be the most flagrant of lies.

Jayjay was leaning against the wall under the canvas awning when Sophie pulled up. Jay ran for the car when it came to a stop and slid inside gratefully. Her eyes were red and puffy, her nose was slightly swollen, and she kept sniffing. So Jayjay had been crying. Sophie kept quiet while she pulled back onto the street.

"Thanks for coming to get me," Jay said. She stared out the passenger window when she spoke, and kept her voice level and emotionless. Sophie couldn't imagine what had torn Jay up; she'd been fine the last time they'd talked; it had been a week ago, or maybe two. Or three. She didn't think it had been much more than three weeks.

"No problem." Sophie slowed for an elderly woman in a clear rain bonnet and prim Aigner raincoat who was getting into her Cadillac and who had her door flung open well into the traffic

lane. Sophie swung around her and turned on the street that went to Jayjay's house.

"Not home," Jay said. Her usually clear voice grated, and Sophie heard what? Deep emotions. Frustration and Anger? Yes. Anger.

"Fine. I won't drive over to your house. You want to come to mine?"

Jay met Sophie's eyes for the first time. "Is Mitch there?"

"Yep."

"Then I don't want to go to your house, either. Do you have a little time? Why don't we get some cocoa at Norris House?"

Sophie nodded, not saying anything. Jayjay didn't care for Norris House. Sophie considered this fact while she circled the block and headed down Tadweiller Street toward the restaurant Jay had mentioned. She had plenty of time to think; Jay showed no inclination to talk.

That didn't change until after the waitress had seated the two of them at a window table where they could look out onto the street and had left them with menus. Until they'd had a chance to order, Jay sat staring at the rivulets of rain that streaked down the glass, seemingly entranced. Then Jay snapped out of the gloom that held her and pasted a bright, intent, determined smile on her face. "I'm going to be out of town for a while. A couple of weeks, maybe a month. I was wondering if I could have my publisher send things to your address while I'm gone."

Sophie thought, What about Steven? What's he going to be doing? But she didn't ask; she could wait. Jay would eventually get around to telling her what had happened. "I don't think that will be a problem. What about the softball team?" Jay had been the first-string pitcher for the Peters

Library Lions for the last three years. Jayjay loved softball.

"Candy McIlheny will take my place. She's been politicking for the slot for ages anyway."

"She sucks."

"So many things do." Jay didn't smile when she said that.

Sophie took her cue from her friend's response, and changed the subject. "When are you leaving?"

"I'll be out of here as soon as I can. My passport is up to date. I'll have to look into a visa—"

"A passport and a visa." Sophie's curiosity grew. "Where are you headed?" She sipped her cocoa and watched her old friend thoughtfully.

"Well I wasn't really planning on telling anyone. I didn't want it to get around." Sophie arched an eyebrow, and Jayjay sighed. "Here." She reached into the huge pocket of her raincoat and pulled out a bag from Baldwell's and passed it over to Sophie.

Sophie glanced into the bag. One of those travel guides lay in it—it looked like it said Spain on the cover, but something about the light of the restaurant made her uncertain. Spain. Sophie reached into the bag for the book; when her hand touched it, a shiver ran down her spine and she almost convinced herself that the book was responsible, that she wasn't just chilled from getting wet on that rainy dreary day and then sitting in a drafty old house that had been converted into a restaurant.

She pulled out the guide and looked at it.

Glenraven.

Glenraven? She looked at the title. Fodor's Guide to

Glenraven. The title was perfectly clear, the letters black-on-gold in a large, bold typeface. How had she ever managed to think it said Spain?

Glenraven. She'd never heard of such a place. She leafed through the guide, glanced at the map that showed Glenraven's location—a tiny country wedged into the border between Italy and France—and looked up at Jay. "There isn't a country right there," she intended to say, but the words that came out of her mouth were, "Let me go with you. I could use a vacation, and Mitch has to go up to D.C. for some lawyers' convention anyway."

She sat, shocked, staring at Jay. She hadn't said those words; well, she hadn't thought them, anyway. They had come pouring out of her mouth without any help from her. Wait a minute, she thought. I don't want to go anyplace—and I especially don't want to go on a foreign vacation with Jay Bennington but she didn't take back her request.

"Go with me?" Jay looked surprised.

Of course I don't want to go. Don't be ridiculous, Sophie thought. But, "I need to do something different," she said, and with a sudden shiver, she remembered that she had been thinking that very thing when Jay had called. "I need a change." And even as the words came out of her mouth she was thinking, How can I face this? How can I possibly think I can do this. How?

Jayjay cocked her head to one side and rested her face on her fist. "You want to go? Really?" She started smiling, and even though Sophie kept thinking, No, for God's sake, I don't want to go, Jay's smile told her that now she had to. "God, Sophie, that's the first positive thing I think I've heard you say since " She faltered and flushed and stared down at her cocoa.

Since Karen died. Jay didn't have to finish the sentence. Sophie knew what it was. She stared out the window, watching

the rain, and she thought of walking out the back door that day two years earlier. Of finding Karen's sturdy little Morgan horse standing in the pasture, shaking and blowing, with sweat caked on his withers and his tack still on and his eyes rolling. She'd run through the field, shouting, knowing that Karen had been riding on the trails behind the pasture. Sophie could still feel the earth beneath her feet as she ran, could still smell the cedar chips on the trail and the sweet full scent of honeysuckle from the vines that grew wild throughout the woods.

Karen hadn't been moving when Sophie found her. Hadn't been breathing. Hadn't breathed for a while. The doctor felt she had probably died instantly, her neck broken at the very top vertebra from the fall. Sophie and Mitch had gone out later, walking through the woods, trying to understand. Karen hadn't been jumping. She might have been cantering, which was a little risky in the woods, but Sophie had been careful to maintain the trails, and Karen was a superb rider. A 4-H blue ribbon rider. Twelve years old. Their only child.

Gone.

Sophie sipped the lukewarm cocoa and kept her eyes on the sky outside. The rain kept falling. No rainbows appeared to tell her that finally the spell of her daughter's death had been broken, that finally she could get on with her life.

Life goes on, everyone said. Someday something will matter again. That was the popular wisdom, but in the past two years, Sophie had decided the popular wisdom meant nothing. Life didn't go on at all; it stopped and froze and your heart died in your chest but it didn't have the sense to quit beating.

And in spite of that, she had volunteered to go on a trip with Jay. Maybe it was what she needed.

She realized Jayjay was flipping through the book, talking and pointing out sights she hoped to see; Sophie hadn't paid any

attention, but apparently she'd answered. Par for the course. She'd been walking through life without really seeing anything or hearing anything or wanting anything; but no, that wasn't true, either. She'd wanted to die for the longest time. She'd really wanted it. And then she didn't even care about that anymore. It all ceased to matter. She kept on breathing, the whole time feeling that she was a stranger in her own body, and that someday the rightful owner would come home and start running things again.

"There are no cars in the whole country?" Jayjay suddenly murmured. That comment caught Sophie's attention. She looked at the paragraphs Jay indicated, and saw that in Glenraven horses could be rented, and within towns, horse-drawn carriages were sometimes available, but that for the most part the only way to get around was to walk.

Jayjay leaned across the table and grinned. "So let's bike in."

"Bike in " Sophie found she was back inside herself again, able to express her doubts and objections. She rolled her paper napkin between her fingers, feeling it shred into tiny paper pills. "You're kidding, aren't you? This place is in the Italian Alps. I mean, there are roads sort of " She trailed to an unconvincing halt.

A whispering voice inside her head said, Don't argue, don't disagree, don't ask questions. If you do, you'll change your mind, and you mustn't change your mind. Just come. And then the voice added something that she couldn't ignore and couldn't turn away from. It said, If you don't do this, you'll never know.

Know what? she wondered—but that was it. If she didn't go, she would never know.

After she dropped Jay off at her house, she realized they hadn't even discussed why Jayjay had abruptly decided to go on

a vacation. Sophie guessed she and Steven were having trouble, but that wasn't necessarily the case. The fact that she'd forgotten to ask bothered her.

"Hey, sweetheart." Mitch met her at the door with an encouraging smile. "Is Jayjay okay? You were gone quite a while; I was beginning to worry."

"Jay's fine." Sophie studied her husband's face, looking at it as if it belonged to a stranger. He had found a way back from the bleak, empty world of pain she inhabited. He had found a way to go on, had found smiles and the occasional laugh. He kept trying to help her make peace with what had happened, but his own acceptance had only driven Sophie further from him. He could accept it. After all, he had not felt Karen budding inside of him, hadn't felt those first miraculous wriggles. He hadn't carried her for nine months, hadn't cradled her in his arms in the dark of the nursery, rocking and cooing with Karen at one breast, listening to the soft suckling sounds of her feeding, feeling the perfect silk skin and the tiny fingers that gripped so fiercely to life.

He'd loved Karen; Sophie knew this. She had never doubted it. But some hidden part of her wouldn't let go of the belief that he hadn't loved her as much.

"When you head up to Washington for your convention," she said, "I'm going to take a little vacation with Jay."

A shadow of unhappiness crossed his face for an instant, to be replaced by a carefully neutral expression. "I thought you were going to come with me."

"It wouldn't be any fun for me. I let you talk me into it, but you know how thrilling it is to listen to a gaggle of lawyers discuss their latest cases and their best methods for increasing billable hours."

"I didn't plan to spend all of my time at the convention.

Sophie, you and I need to spend some time alone together. We don't need separate vacations, love. We need "

" Something," she finished for him. "But I need this."

He sighed and nodded. "Maybe you do. Maybe this is what you need." He moved closer, wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. She felt his face press against her hair. "I want you back, love. You've been gone from me for far too long."

She stiffened and pulled away, not wanting to hurt him but not wanting his touch; when he touched her, she felt even more confused and vulnerable. "I know." She could almost feel his pain at her rejection, but she couldn't find it within herself to apologize or to explain. He was there for her but she didn't have what it took to be there for him.

She didn't know if she ever would again.

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