

Glenraven: Chapter 1

By Holly Lisle

Jayjay Bennington didn't want to think about her disaster any more. She tugged the brim of her rain hat further down the back of her neck, but repositioning it didn't help; water still dripped under her rain coat and ran along her spine. It was cold water, too; the summer storm that blanketed the whole of the Eastern Seaboard might have been tropical in origin, but the rain it dumped down Jayjay's back wasn't warm.

I need to get away. Go someplace where nobody knows me, where no one can find me. Someplace where I can hold my head up – and I need to get there fast, before the news gets around. A million miles wouldn't be too far; it's a pity there isn't anyplace on the planet a million miles from this rat-hole.

Jayjay sloshed along McDuffie Street, walking obsessively. She'd been walking for hours, ever since her eight a. m. discussion with Steven had turned into a screaming, chair-throwing, name-calling, door-slamming fiasco. She'd always figured that by the time she was thirty-five, her life would show some semblance of order, but that wasn't the case. Life had kicked her in the teeth again.

Keep going, she told herself. When life slams you to the ground, you get up and you keep going.

She had the sidewalk to herself; the awful weather kept saner, happier people in their cars or in the stores, but Jayjay didn't feel particularly sane at the moment.

Nobody said I had to keep going right here in Peters, though. I need to run. I need to run away from this town, and from Steven, and from all the people who know us who are going to think that somehow this is all my fault.

Tires hissed over wet pavement a street away; then the unseen car ripped through a deep puddle. Jay heard the splash and felt briefly grateful that the car hadn't been driving past her when it found that puddle. The bells from St. Dora rang the noon hour, and someone shouted greetings at a neighbor; the low-hanging clouds muffled the exact words, but the friendly tone carried well enough. Dammit! In the rain, all alone, the town still seemed friendly. Welcoming. Homey. It wouldn't be for long. After all, it was his town, not hers.

McDuffie Street led past the courthouse, past the newspaper office (The Peters Tribune—News Since 1824), past Cato's and Jenny Shee Alterations and Never-Say-Goodbye Secondhand Treasures and HairFantastic and Sandra's Diner. The light from the downtown storefronts threw puddles of artificial sunshine onto the cracked walks. The store interiors beckoned more warmly than they ever could on sunny days; they promised a dry, cozy haven from the dreary, unending rain.

Jayjay hadn't intended to go into any of the stores, but when she reached Amos W. Baldwin, Bookseller, she turned in and shoved open the glass-and-steel door. She stopped in the doorway, suddenly breathing hard.

I don't want to go here; I don't want anyone I know to see me.

She figured her eyes were probably still red from crying. Someone might ask her what was wrong, and she wouldn't be able to say anything. They would think the worst when she didn't say anything, of course; but the worst they could think wasn't as bad as the truth.

Something drew her in. She could have called it a feeling of hope, but she figured she'd used up her allotment of that a while back. But something called to her; not with anything so blatant as words. The something was a quickening of her pulse, a shiver in her belly, a sudden catching of her breath. Something. Something in there called her name, and she

listened.

Baldwell's was new. Nestled in between Sandra's and the Everything \$6, it sat bright and shiny and modern, its bright yellow interior and chrome-and-glass exterior out of place squeezed between the renovated brick buildings that made up the rest of the downtown.

A few customers looked up as she entered, then looked away. She didn't see anyone she knew; even better, however, she didn't see anyone who knew her. Her feet carried her past New Fiction, shelved to her right. She thought perhaps that was why she had come in—to find something to take her mind off disaster. But her feet kept going. Past Music. Past Science. To Travel.

Ahh. Travel. Perhaps her feet had known something her mind hadn't. She looked at the covers faced out, showing all the world that wasn't Peters, North Carolina, and her pulse raced faster. None of them are a million miles from here, she thought, but surely one of them will be far enough.

She gravitated to the neat row of gold-and-black Fodor's guides. Her hand cruised along the titles, not touching any of them. Waiting. Waiting for a sign.

Scotland.

No.

Australia. England.

No.

How about Ireland? Japan?

Not them, either.

Saudi Arabia. Norway.

No. All of those places seemed fine, but they didn't call to

her. They weren't the reason she came into Baldwell's. Something was, though.

Switzerland?

No.

Argentina.

No.

Glenraven.

Yes, something inside her said, and she reached out for the book.

Glenraven?

Jayjay frowned and picked up the Fodor's Glenraven. The cover hummed beneath her fingers, the shock of that first touch electric but wonderful. She opened the book and caressed the glossy pages; the heavy feel of the paper was sensual and compelling. And as she flipped past one of the illustrations, she fancied for a moment that she smelled wildflowers and freshly mown hay. She closed the guide again, a shivery thrill running down her spine.

"A Complete Guide to the Best Mountain Walks, Castle Tours and Feasts," the guide promised. The photo showed a delicate, airy castle built on the banks of a shimmering blue lake with craggy mountains soaring behind it. In the foreground, a smiling, black-haired, blue-eyed woman in colorful regional costume led a laden donkey along a cobbled path, and behind her the meadow that rolled down to the lake bloomed with sweeps of wildflowers in gold and scarlet and cornflower blue.

Jayjay stared at the cover. She had done some traveling. She'd seen a few castles. But she had never seen a castle that looked like that. And Glenraven? She knew there were a lot of new countries in Europe since the Soviet Union and the Warsaw

Pact fell apart. She simply couldn't remember hearing anything about that one.

She opened the guide and flipped past the Foreword, past the Highlights and the Fodor's Choice section, and stopped at the map. Glenraven was tucked into the Alps, a tiny little pocket country squeezed into the border between France and Italy like a wormian bone in the suture of a skull, about parallel with Milan and, according to the map, no bigger than Liechtenstein.

She'd never heard of it, but she didn't care. It was far away. It was off the beaten path. It looked like a good place to run away from the world for a while. And, dammit, it made her heart beat faster, and that was worth something.

Jayjay turned two more pages to the Introduction.

"For the first time in over four-hundred years," it began, "Glenraven, the best kept secret in Europe, opens its borders to a few chosen travelers from the outside world. The last outsider to see Glenraven dropped in before Christopher Columbus set out to discover a shorter route to India, and the one before him visited a hundred years earlier than that. In the centuries that have followed the complete closing of the borders, Glenraven has let wars and politics, the Industrial Revolution and the electronic age slip past without so much as edging in at its borders. It is a land hidden from time; pastoral, feudal, a tiny country where communities share their lives, where integrity and honesty and hard work are not old-fashioned values "

Yes. Yes. This was what she needed. She left her thumb holding her page and stared off into nothingness. "Four-hundred years."

She opened the book again, skimming the introduction. Phrases like "more working castles than in any other country in the world," and "glorious primitive festivals," and "last virgin forests in Europe" interested her; if she were going to hide,

she might as well have fun. She tried to imagine the places behind the place names Tenads and Cotha Dirry and Bottelloch and Ruddy Smeachwykke. She studied the pencil sketches of neat stone walls and prim thatch-roofed houses and twisting paths through ancient forests and she got goosebumps. "Travel through Glenraven will be a once-in-a-lifetime adventure," the guide promised. "This tiny country is unique; until time-travel becomes possible, untouched, unspoiled Glenraven is the last gate into Europe's mystical forgotten past."

"Mystical, forgotten past," Jayjay murmured. Somewhere between Ruddy Smeachwykke and 'mystical, forgotten past,' she decided she was going to make this happen. She was going to pack her bags, buy a ticket, and flee for this land outside of the realm of the known.

"But," she read, "your chances of touring this wondrous little country are limited. Protective of the marvels it alone preserves in this modern world, and only too aware of how progress destroys as much it creates, Glenraven will close its borders following the Solstice festival at the end of this year. And once the borders shut, no one but the Glenraveners can say whether four years or four-hundred will pass until they open again."

Not a problem. I can be on a plane inside of a week, I bet. Jayjay closed the book. She held it in her hands, feeling her heart pound, feeling her fingers tingle. She could almost imagine that the tingling came from the book. She could almost believe something larger than chance had brought her to the bookstore in the rain.

Almost.

But her practical side asserted itself. The Fodor's guide was lovely; the idea of getting away for a while felt all very well and good. However, the expenses were going to be dicey. The money for the trip could come out of her savings account,

or maybe she could pitch a travel book to Bryan at Candlewick Press and do the trip as research. Her publisher was waiting for her to proof the galleys of **A Season After Pain**, the nonfiction book she'd sold on cancer survivors, but she figured she could have that in the mail within a week. Following that, she'd set aside a block of time to work on a novel—she really wanted to try her hand at fiction—but the fiction title was speculative. She didn't have a track record or a fiction publisher, and her agent kept pushing her to do a follow-up to **The Soul of the Small Town**, which had sold better than it had any business selling.

The Soul of a Tiny Country, she thought, wondering if she could pull together enough tie-ins to pick up the readers who'd bought the first one.

Of course, then I'd owe Bryan a book. And I'd have to tell him where I'm going, and why. And I don't know that I want him to know that.

The savings account held enough to get her through a year of novel-writing if she didn't get extravagant or sick. Part of it could cover her for a trip. Maybe she would get something useful for the book while she was in Glenraven.

She took the **Fodor's Guide** to the cashwrap.

The owner of the store, Amos Baldwin, leaned on the cashwrap and smiled at her. He was tall and dark-eyed and she guessed he was in his early thirties. Maybe late twenties, though she had a hard time telling. His face was young, but with his starched shirt buttoned all the way up to his throat and his greased-down hair down flat against his scalp, he made himself look older. She noticed briefly that he might have been good looking if he'd bothered to join the times. He pointed to an endcap in the nonfiction section, where Season covered the display. "Your last one is moving pretty well for me. A few of my customers told me it helped. That counts for something."

She smiled, hoping he wouldn't be able to tell from her eyes how much she wanted to be left alone. "I'm glad it's making a difference." She pushed the guide across the counter and changed the subject. "I found what I was looking for."

He stared down at the book, and for the briefest of instants, Jayjay could have sworn that Amos paled. Then a frown flickered across his face. He reached out as if to pick the book up, but his hand stopped before he touched it. He gave her an intense, searching look.

"This one is damaged. Why don't you let me get you another one?"

"There isn't another one."

"We have several other guides to Spain"

She cut him off. "That isn't a guide to Spain. It says 'Glenraven' right there on the cover."

Then he did turn pale. He glanced from the book to her, back to the book, back to her. She would have sworn he looked bewildered, but she couldn't imagine why. He started to shake his head from side to side as if negating either the transaction or his own perceptions.

"Just ring it up for me, please."

"Why do you want it?"

She stiffened. She didn't want to offend him—he treated her well and displayed her books prominently, probably more prominently than they deserved—but who was he to ask her why she wanted a book? She didn't intend to tell him that she planned to leave town for a while. "Excuse me, Amos, but that is my business."

And mine, she thought she heard him say, though his mouth didn't move. He seemed to grow taller, and for an instant he

flushed and scowled. She stared at him, suddenly confronted by a formidable stranger. "Have you read through this guide at all? Glenraven is dangerous," he said, stabbing the cover of the book with his index finger. "It's primitive. It's no place for you."

She refused to allow his bizarre behavior to intimidate her. "Ring it up for me," she said. She waited a moment, and then in a voice that made the word into a command, she added, "Please."

He looked at her so intently she could feel his stare. He raised an eyebrow and pursed his lips, and manually entered the price of the book into his register. "My apologies," he said stiffly, and held out his hand for her money. "Perhaps I was being overly solicitous of your well-being. I'm sure you know what's best for you."

"I'm sure I do," she said. He put the book and her receipt into an imprinted plastic bag, then handed the bag to her. She turned to leave, then looked back at him. Keeping her voice level, forcing herself not to let her anger blast through, she said, "You're fairly new here, and I don't know what your customers were like where you came from, but I'll tell you this. Around here, you'll lose them if you try to tell them which of your books they shouldn't buy."

She stomped out of the bookstore, still angry.

The character of the rain had changed. It gusted and blew and sheeted. She found herself wishing heartily that she'd driven. She could be home, drinking a nice hot cup of tea, putting a fire in the fireplace, settling down with her galleys and a pen—

But of course Steven might be home. And Lee with him. And she was in no mood to fight again.

She leaned up against the damp brick wall of HairFantastic and

wished the rain away, but without success. She closed her eyes and tried to figure out what she could do next.

Where to buy

- Amazon
- Barnes & Noble

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