



*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