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Chapter I

The black Lincoln bobbed a little as Maddy made the turn off the main highway and onto the asphalt driveway past a cluster of evergreens and began the gentle climb toward the lodge. Danae sat beside her mother, her right hand resting lightly on the fabric of her hip brace, and looked out her window at the familiar homestead. It had been so long since she'd been there, she thought to herself. And with all that had happened in the last eleven months, finally being home - somewhere that hadn't changed - gave her a feeling like everything else had been nothing more than a dream. She shifted a bit to see further out the window, and the pain in her body reminded her of her new reality.

As it often happened in the Missouri Ozarks, winter had hung on desperately through March, which made a brilliantly sunny April day like this seem heaven sent. The bright warmth was cut now and then by a brisk wind which swept even this deep into the hills and valleys. Buds and new grass were just awakening, and that smell was there - the smell of the damp forest and the river as it wafted in through the slightly open windows of the car. There was something about the water.

It was interesting how she'd never really noticed the smell of the river before - how full and rich and earthy it was, and how present it was, seeming almost to engulf her. Sunlight from the window washed across her face and reflected in her sunglasses, glistening in her pony-tailed blond hair and illuminating a slight red scar that ran from the outside corner of her right eye and disappeared into her hairline. For the moment she was relaxed and happy, and a slight smile crept at the corners of her mouth. Everything was beginning again, Danae thought. A second chance. Just like Dr. Strane had said. It had been much too long.

Post after post of the long split rail fence moved past the car as the solitary, speechless couple proceeded up the grade of the neatly paved driveway for a point still hidden from view. To the west, a bare area in the pasture grass gave way to the form of a tree stump, around which years of shade had prevented grass from making the stand which it had elsewhere. Danae remembered the old tree as one on which she spent hours as a child, playing solitary games of ring-around-the-rosie, and climbing high into its limbs to the point that the highway and the river could be seen in the times of the year when the thick leaves of the oaks revealed them. Just a few years ago, she had tied yellow ribbons on it along with the other trees that lined Maddy's property along the highway, anticipating the return of the soldiers from the Persian Gulf.

Her eyes lingered there, turning with the scene even as the car passed the spot and moved on up the drive. She turned her head back slightly to the front and looked off again, her eyes betraying hints of loss, as if she had run across a forgotten letter from a nearly forgotten friend.

"Mom," The word came somewhat sharply from Danae's mouth. It was the first word spoken in the car in what seemed like hours. "What happened to the big maple that used to stand over by the east fence? It always looked so healthy."

Her mother shot a quick glance in the direction where the old tree used to be, ratcheted back to her daughter, then trailed distantly off to the stump. She wondered if there would be any conversation at all.

"It drew too much ice back during the first storm the end of December," she said, trying consciously to divest her voice of the cold, analytical nature for which she was known. It wasn't an answer, Maddy thought to herself. It was a conversation. She pressed it further.

"It finally lost most all of its limbs because of the weight, and part of it dropped across the driveway. I had Eddy come over and cut the rest of it up and haul it away." She softened even more, remembering the tree and the hours her daughter had spent there, and the nostalgia she knew Danae was feeling. "It was such a strong old tree. God, it was beautiful in the fall. And it was so pretty when the ice was on it. You should have seen it." She looked back toward the road, and her eyes trailed away. "I hated to see it go," she said softly.

There was legitimate sincerity in Maddy's voice. Danae couldn't hear it – she'd been accustomed most of her twenty years to not hearing it – but Maddy had resolved herself to try to show it. It was part of the communication problem Strane had uncovered from their very first meeting after the incident. In the twenty years of Danae's life and during the entire formation of her personality disorder, the maternal friction had been a grating influence which undoubtedly played a role in her growing condition. From Maddy's perspective, the conflict was that of a logical, caring and prudent mother with an insolent and spoiled child. Since the incident, Maddy had avoided any type of conflict with Danae, fearing what might be the result if any pressure were exerted. Strane had warned against this, saying Danae's emerging consciousness would be like that of a newborn child, anxious to test the boundaries of acceptable behavior and to learn to live within them. It would take time, Strane had cautioned. Love at the base; the final common denominator, it must weld a new relationship where the old one had been flawed. Danae and Maddy had agreed to love, but so far they had agreed to little else.

Danae's thoughts drifted from her memories of the old tree as her eyes scanned her mother's profile. Maddy was still as perfect as she had ever been, Danae thought. Short, stylish hairdo, blond like her daughter's but now graying and aided by color. Smartly dressed, delicately natural painted nails and flawless makeup. Maddy Connor's look showed her edge. She carried herself well - the product of private schooling and the best etiquette Columbia's Stephens College could muster. Bearing, she had told her daughter, said more about a woman before she ever opened their mouth than she could say in the longest of conversations.

She would have been much more at home in a boardroom of some Fortune 500 company, or leading some major law firm, Danae had always thought, than her mother was in the hill country of the Ozarks. Danae knew her mother had grown to respect and admire the people here, but there was no denying that these people, whether because of the way Maddy looked or acted or the reputation she had developed over the years, never looked at her as one of their own. It was told by simple observation - the way people grew suddenly silent when Maddy entered a room, dropping their conversations to give her their immediate attention. Danae had heard Maddy's confession by telephone on numerous occasions to a friend who lived in Kansas City, and she'd overheard talk from people as she grew up who had no idea the weird, rangy-looking kid in the jeans was Maddy Connor's kid. People respected Maddy, but it was a cold, hard respect.

She had an edge. A very attractive woman though not particularly younger looking than her forty-seven years, Maddy was slender and tall, her frosted hairstyle short and conservative, and her polished fingernails immaculate. Always dressed in the latest and most conservative women's wear, Maddy was a favorite prospect for the women's dress shops in the Howell County seat of West Plains some twenty miles away, and she was rarely seen in anything other than an attractive and expensive pair of high heeled shoes. She was a metropolitan gem shown against the rough hewn oak of the Ozarks. She had never let her image interfere with business. Many times while showing a parcel of land to a prospect she'd taken along a pair of coveralls and boots and stepped behind the Explorer to change before tromping across a soggy field or forest area. She had no patience for anything that kept between her and the sale, whether it was a rainy appointment or a financing problem, and tried never to respect an obstacle. In her fourteen-year career, her reputation had developed as a shrewd but friendly business woman, successful through her own intelligence and hard work. She was never caught off balance when it came to a real estate closing, and had frustrated many a shifty male land dealer both locally and from the city who expected to intimidate this preppy looking female during the haggling that was so much a part of the real estate profession. Her argumentative style almost always won out, because she never defended a stance she wasn't absolutely sure she could back up with

facts and figures. Her style had given her a stiff reputation for business, and more than one male-dominated local land office had noted both her looks, and her balls.

Maddy would have preferred a more solitary life, but she knew a woman in business had to operate as well in the social circles of her community as she did in her professional arena. She was friendly with many, but friends with few. She was a member of the local country club, a bridge club, the chamber of commerce in two nearby towns, and a social sorority. She tried to be cognizant of it, but it was hard to hold back her pride at what she had accomplished - a widowed woman who'd built her own business in what was greatly, until recent years, a man's game. She imagined that she made other women uncomfortable, so she at times went out of her way to engage them, but she worried that a hint of the insincerity she felt showed through. Maddy didn't like to think of herself as a snob, but she feared that it slipped out from time to time. Among these women, with their husbands who were small town lawyers or doctors or bankers or some other holder of relative privilege, and with whom Maddy needed contact in order to be a success in her own right, she never felt trusting or completely at ease.

Of course she was the object of much gossip, the same as any attractive, successful, single woman would be in a small community. Since Robert's death fourteen years ago, she had dated only three men, none of whom ever came to fruit a relationship of over a few months. It didn't matter much to her. Her husband's death had ejected her into the harsh reality of single parenting, and in order to feed her daughter and herself she put her energy into building a career long before it became fashionable for women to do so. It didn't leave much time for romance, even if she had wanted one. When she felt herself getting lonely, she scouted listings.

Danae looked back from her mother as the Lincoln made the last bend in the driveway and came to bear on the now visible house. The home had always reminded her of the house on TV reruns of *The Big Valley*, with its high ceilings and the five white columns supporting the high porch roof. The house had originally been a commercial hunting venture called Crestview Lodge, launched in the 1940s by a group of Kansas City and St. Louis investors. Unfortunately for the entrepreneurs, the lodge was too far away from a large city to draw the type of wealthy clientele essential to support it, and at the time the roads into the area were too much like cow paths to make it worth their while for a weekend of hunting. Though the investors made the most of their political clout in those days to ensure the remote lodge's success as an entertainment spot, the venture finally failed, and a Kansas City bank ended up with the defunct lodge after several owners' best efforts.

Madeline and Robert purchased the lodge shortly after the family transferred to the area with the Missouri State Highway Department. Robert, at the time a civil engineer with the department, had borrowed deeply from his and Madeline's parents to make the purchase, even at the substantial bargain he managed on the property from the all-too willing bank officials. After some twenty years of abandonment, the house was of course going to require much work to be made livable. But for a young, ambitious couple with a good income and two young children, the work didn't seem too much a price to pay for the dream of a family and a home. They set to work restoring the old lodge even before the paperwork on the purchase was finished.

The lodge sat at the top of a knoll, of which there are many in the geographical formation that makes up the hill country of South Missouri. This particular knoll, more prominent than its neighbors, overlooked a spectacular southwestern view of the celebrated Ozarks, the snaking figure of the White River hiding itself occasionally, dipping in and out between the knobs of tree-covered high ground as its shallow, gravel-bottomed form reflected sunlight in sparks of silver against the otherwise green background of vegetation. The lodge was built with this view in mind, facing to the southwest with balconies on the second and third levels and large picture windows on all three stories. It was a beautiful view in any season, but especially in the fall, when the hills and valleys exploded into a montage of colors as the oaks and maples turned in the face of the oncoming winter.

From the beginning, the lodge had been too big for a single family to occupy. Robert and Madeline first sat down with a layout of their new twenty-room home and selected which parts they would keep to inhabit.

They settled on retaining the first story central area of the lodge, where the kitchen, parlor, and dining areas were located, as well as four bedrooms in the first story east wing. This living area and the entire outside of the lodge they extensively restored over a period of a few years. The rest of the rooms were closed off and plumbing rerouted so the cold winters didn't damage water pipes. The roof of the lodge was good and the inside rooms were dry, though age and neglect would eventually take their toll. Robert toyed with the idea of bringing the lodge back to operation one day as a recreational concern, but Maddy was quick to bring him back to reality, noting there were two kids to send to college first. The decision was made to make a four-car garage out of the first floor west wing bedrooms, which would open to the front of the lodge and onto the gravel circle drive, which Madeline would later have paved after Robert's death. The remaining rooms in the house remained sealed, including all six bedrooms in both second floor wings and the four rooms on level three. There was also a ballroom located in the center of the second floor, it sealed as well as the small cupola atop the third floor that crowned the lodge. The basement was kept open because it now served as a good washroom, and because the remodeled structure still used one of the two old giant furnaces which heated the structure. Every hallway in the house was connected by a dumbwaiter and a laundry chute leading to the basement where Madeline had installed a washer and dryer. The basement had originally been used as a combination kitchen, washroom and wine cellar, hence the dumbwaiter to the dining area and on up. The lodge even contained an old elevator, located in the far back corner of the main parlor. It was quite small with antique iron gates and a hand lever inside for manual operation. The elevator was still sound, though its creaks and groans of operation made one realize how far elevator designs had come. Since the family rarely ventured into the upper stories of the house, the electricity to the elevator was kept switched off at the main switch box, and was turned on only when repairmen needed to move tools or materials to the upper floors for occasional maintenance. The second and third floors were completely vacant except for a few rooms used as storage for the usual accumulation of junk, and though they were dusty Madeline insisted that they be kept in fairly well-maintained condition, as she did the elevator. There was always the possibility she might sell the place, she kept saying in later years, and it needed to be in the best possible condition.

There was little chance of that, and Danae knew it. Her mother had poured her heart into the place after Robert's death, and it was her source of strength and pride. Well it should have been; it was a masterpiece of resource and beauty, reminiscent of a time when luxury was luxury, ceilings were high, and there were no worries about heating bills. On the outside at least, Connor Lodge looked much the way it was intended when it was built in 1948.

As the form of the lodge appeared at the top of the hill, Danae immediately saw the three vehicles in the driveway. She felt a creeping dread, knowing the scene would require a public appearance, and knowing she would rather avoid one. In her mind she knew her mother had probably planned this, most likely to avoid any clumsy moments alone with her daughter on homecoming day.

Eddy Masters' red Chevy pickup was parked to the west by the tool shed. Danae figured him for the closest thing to the man of the house her mother had since Robert died, in sort of a practical sense. He was sixty-two now, a retired army sergeant turned part-time carpenter and handy man. He wasn't a large man - around five feet seven inches - with a distinctive paunch that he habitually slapped when he laughed. His belly flowed up to a chubby face and higher to a nearly bald head, ringed on the sides by wisps of red, graying hair. He had been hit in the right shoulder by fragments from a practice mortar round at Ft. Sill, Okla., years ago, and it inhibited his ability to raise his right arm. His wife died about seven years ago, but he had never expressed an interest in Madeline. Danae had always feared one day Eddy might decide he was interested, and she imagined that her mother could never reciprocate. Eddy wasn't Maddy's type, and Danae imagined that her mother was as aware of that as anyone. Still, he had been a good friend over the years. He was a good man.

Parked next to Eddy's truck was Maxine Kerby's Ford LTD. Madeline's housekeeper for the last ten years, Maxine was an excellent cook as well, and because her husband was a long haul trucker, Madeline

often let her stay overnight at the lodge in one of the guest rooms. She generally worked from eight to three, but for today's special homecoming she had waited until almost four o'clock. Though Danae loved Maxine, she had a way of being around too much and fussing over her. She could only imagine how Maxine would act now.

There was another old truck in the driveway. As the Lincoln pulled closer to the house, Danae could make out Hobbs Plumbing and Electric, hand painted in now fading white letters on an even more faded green driver's side door. She knew Ben Hobbs, the plumber from Willow Springs, a small town some twenty miles northeast, whom Eddy often called in to help him on certain jobs. She remembered her mother mentioning a problem with one of the water faucets in the basement washroom in one of her attempts at conversation on the ride home, and Ben must have been here to fix it. She didn't know him except from his occasional trip to the lodge with Eddy to fix something, but he always seemed to be a little gruff, and she had heard her mother voice suspicions to Eddy about Ben's drinking on the job. Apparently he was a decent plumber. Eddy appeared to trust him, and everybody trusted Eddy.

Maddy pulled the Lincoln to a stop as close to the front door as she could without getting on the grass, and quickly hopped out to get Danae's walker out of the trunk. Hearing the car pull up, Eddy and Maxine hurried out to the car as Danae opened her own door and struggled to stand, bracing herself on the open car door, anxious to show them she wasn't as bad as they'd probably guessed. She made a quick adjustment to the brace that encircled her hip and stretched to her knee in a medieval-looking composition of metal and medical spandex. She looked up toward the porch, and felt herself smiling.

"Hiya Sweets, you're alookin' good," Eddy yelled from the porch as he waddled over to her. His hug was warm and strong and felt good to her. "Hi Eddy," Danae said, her voice muffled in his neck as she held on to him. "It's so good to see ya, Sweets. Did you keep your mother between the stripes on the way home?" He chuckled a little and shot a glance to Madeline, whose rings clinked against the cold aluminum of the walker. She cut her eyes back to Eddy in a half smile. Maddy set the walker down near and helped her daughter to the first of the three steps of the porch. "It all looks the same," Danae said to Eddy. "Does everything still work? How about the elevator, is it turned on?"

"Huh-uhh," Madeline had the tone. "No elevator, sweetheart."

"Well, hello there girlie!," Maxine chirped as she cleared the threshold of the front door, apron still around her plump waist and wiping her hands on a dish towel. Just as she reached the porch the phone rang from back inside the house.

"Oh, dang. The phone. I'll get it. Chicken and noodles is ready when y'all are ready to eat." Her words trailed off as her legs seemed to carry her against her will back into the house. She had one pace, always at a canter, but never seemed to get far enough ahead of herself to slow down. "Easy now, Sweets," Eddy said as they reached the porch, his hand loosely gripping her thin upper arm.

"I've got it." Danae half resented the help, with Eddy on one side of her and her mother on the other. Her chest and shoulders rolled slowly upward as she forced the movement of her hips and legs. The assistance from Eddy and Maddy kept her from having to balance completely on her own, and in her condition there was no way she could have negotiated the steps alone. The ache in the joint of her hip expanded down her leg as her movement increased. She caught her breath a little from the pain, but was determined not to let on about it. With her foot now on the first step and her injured frame now spread over the incline, she tried to place her weight down on the leveraged appendage, but the pain was too much. Her face twisted and reddened slightly, and a slight, high-pitched cry escaped her.

"Here, now, easy Sweets," Eddy tightened his grip, his voice was low and firm. "Easy now." Danae backed off the pressure and hesitated for a few seconds, nodding her head and trying to show little of the embarrassment that beset her.

"Sweetheart, let's just go slow, now," Maddy held her other arm clumsily, trying to remember some of the leverage the physical therapists at the hospital had shown her in helping Danae get around. Eddy knelt under Danae's arm and wrapped her arm around his neck, clasping her hand with his on the outboard side,

and reaching around her waist with his other to firmly lift under her rib cage. He gently pushed his hip into hers, supporting most of her weight across his body, and together they took the steps slowly, gathering themselves after each acquisition. Maddy, left behind in the effort, watched from below.

"Maddy, it's for you," Maxine reappeared in the threshold of the home. "Someone from the Century 21 office in Springfield."

"Okay, I'll be right there in just a second," Madeline said. She hesitated a moment, then quick-stepped up the stairs to the porch and into the house. It was typical, Danae thought. Her first ten minutes back home after more than a year, and her mother was already hustling another deal. Things hadn't changed.

Watching Maddy disappear through the door and into the study, Danae realized Eddy had been rattling on about the house and what he'd done to the place since she was last home. She had been so wrapped in her thoughts she hadn't been paying attention to him.

"Well, how 'bout it?," she interrupted him. Is the juice hooked up to the elevator? Let's go up for a look-see"

A "look-see" was what she and the people around the house called a look from the cupola above the third floor. It was kind of tricky to get to. The elevator went to the third floor hallway, and a set of steep steps from the third floor balcony led to the cupola. Eddy's face twisted up.

"Now, you heard your mother," he began to restate her mother's concern about the walker and Danae's injury. But Danae started to plead, a tactic against which she knew he had no defense.

"All right, Jesus!," Eddy swore under his breath. Just then Maxine bolted from the kitchen via the study, and Danae felt the barrage of affection she'd been expecting. Smelling of old clothes and noodle dough and feeling soft and warm, Maxine hugged her long and hard. Danae barely attached her mind to the conversation Maxine was carrying on when the woman exclaimed almost to the point of startling the small group around her.

"Omigosh! The noodles!" They're not supposed to boil too long! A good home cooked meal, that's what you need. You stayin', Eddy? You never feel like you're home until you get a good meal." Her voice faded as she passed into the study. Dinner sounded good, Danae thought. It had been several hours since they stopped in Clinton for some fries and a milkshake. She was more hungry than she'd realized.

"Saved by the noodles," Eddy chuckled.

"C'mon Eddy, this brace isn't as bad as it looks, and once I get limbered up a little I can move pretty good."

Eddy knew she was stretching the truth. Maddy said a few days before that Danae's stiffness had just recently improved enough for her to move about without the walker for short periods of time. She was right about the brace, though. The doctors had said she needed the support around her pelvis and hip to keep her from making sudden movements before the hip joint was flexed a few times. She'd worn it on the six-hour drive from Kansas City, as well as each night at bedtime. Since the incident, when she wasn't drugged into a near coma, she tended to kick in her sleep, which could redamage the healing in the joint that had already taken place, and which had gained health much slower than the two breaks in the leg.

After the fall this girl had taken, Eddy thought to himself, she was lucky to be alive, much less walking without some discomfort. Numerous broken bones in her shoulders, damaged vertebrae, a skull fracture and broken ribs were enough, but she fell victim to a secondary infection while in the hospital. She'd fought it through, but the two steel pins that held her hip together and the damage around the injury had lingered. The doctors said a lot depended on her ability to recuperate at home, but she would probably always have some trouble walking.

"Yes, Sweets, the juice is on. Me and Ben used it today to haul some firewood up from the old coal room," Eddy conceded. He knew he as whipped.

"How are you Miss Connor," Ben Hobbs cleared the threshold of the basement stairway stuffing a red oil rag into the back pocket of his brown khakis pants. He was a skinny man with sharp features and a scrubby beard of a few days, with a dirty, worn red cap poised on his head.

"Getting better, thanks. How are you?," answered Danae. Forcing the pleasantries made her a little

uncomfortable. He had moved closer, and Danae found herself trying to notice his breath.

"Why, I'll bet you'll be out of that thing and into trouble in no time," Hobbs said, motioning to Danae's brace and grinning, revealing large, discolored teeth. Danae smiled. Thanks a lot, she thought. She'd had enough trouble for one lifetime, thank you very much.

"Say Ed, let's head down to the Plow Horse for a brew before we head home. Tonight's the old lady's bowling night, so it's either frozen pizza or a Plow Horse greasy booger for me." Hobb's meant burger, but at the Plow Horse you never really knew for sure.

"Nah," Eddy shifted his feet on the driveway. "I need to be getting back to the house. Deb said she might call tonight to see how Sweets was a-doin'." Eddy's daughter was married and living in Joplin, and she was the apple of her father's eye. He rarely gave up a chance to mention her, proud of her education and her job as a teacher.

"Suit yourself," Hobbs said, starting toward his pickup. "You get well, now, Miss Connor."

"I'll head out too," Eddy said.

"But, Eddy..." Danae protested.

"Nope. Nope. I ain't having nothing to do with you and that look-see. You go and ask your mother."

"Ed..."

"See you later, Sweets. Tell Maddy I'll come in tomorrow afternoon to see how things are." His steps were heavy as they flopped down the front steps. "Oh, heck. There's somebody you haven't said hello to yet," Eddy chuckled. From around the house, a thick-looking black and tan German Shepherd lumbered across the yard and past him, glancing at him and bowing his ears slightly, but clearly fixed on the small feminine figure on the porch.

"Raxer!" Danae braced her hand on the walker and knelt, faster than she should have, to greet the adoring dog. "You big baby, where have you been?" Eddy watched a bit of the cheerful reunion, then headed back out to the truck.

The old shepherd danced and licked like a puppy, his thick tail beating his excitement against the leg of Danae's walker. He sniffed first the strange object his companion was leaning on, then the contraption on her waist, then licked her caressing hand, then sniffed the walker again.

"C'mon Rax," Danae said almost in a whisper. Her mother was still on the phone in her office, and Maxine was in the kitchen. The dog followed obediently as his master led him to the elevator.

Out in the driveway, Hobbs was leaning on his truck smoking when Eddy reached his own vehicle. The sun was beginning to set, and the air was cool and clean. Eddy gave his britches a tug as he walked toward the other man and took a deep breath. "Thought you were leaving," Eddy said.

"I am. I was just wonderin' if you'd heard any more about it?," Hobbs asked with more than casual interest.

"Nothin' more'n I told you," Eddy replied. He had heard – Maddy had confided quite a bit to him in fact, and chances are it was what Hobbs was alluding to. But nobody was going to hear it from Eddy.

"They say that fall was no accident." Hobbs ground the glowing butt into the driveway with his heel. "They say she jumped from that building on purpose - that she was tryin' to kill herself. Damn shame, pretty little girl like that."

"I don't know," Eddy waved off the conversation to cover his lie. "I just help with the place," he grimaced at Hobbs. "Hell, why don't you spend more time workin' and less time gossipin' like some old woman?" He slapped Hobbs on the shoulder, walked to his truck, and was soon headed down the drive.

He struck a nerve with his old buddy, Hobbs thought to himself. He knew it. There was something more to this little girl than her snooty-toot mother wanted known. Hobbs opened his truck door and was soon gone.

The elevator jolted to a stop at the third floor. Danae opened the gate and moved out onto the balcony, and slowly she and Rax made their way up the few precarious steps to the cupola. Below her, the rooftops of the sections of the lodge looked like sharp sand dunes, punctuated only by the chimneys of the building's fireplaces, the largest one nearest to her. The wood floor of the cupola was dusty and water stained in places, and Danae leaned against a railing and looked west to the now setting sun.

She had wondered what it would be like to be this high again. Dr. Strane said if she had any anxiety about heights not to force the situation, just to go with it as it came. But this was her favorite place ever since she could remember. Even when the elevator was turned off, she and Rax had made the climb on the stairs almost every other day when she was home. It seemed like a long, long time ago.

She heard the elevator engage and go back downstairs. In a few moments her mother would be here, forcing her to come back downstairs and bitching about the doctor's orders. Danae would enjoy the serenity of her special place while she could, before Maddy's authority had to interrupt. The clear sky and the sun continued its beautiful show; the fading orange light gently illuminating the rolling, tree-covered hills.

The telltale clunking of heels on the balcony floor announced Maddy, who eased up the stairs to the cupola, being careful not to snag her skirt on the railing. She crested the stairs to see her daughter sitting on the crossbar of her walker and leaning on the southwest post, one of the four that held up the steeple-like roof of the open-air cupola. Danae stared quietly off into the scenery as Rax meandered gently over to smell and greet the intruder. Finally the elder woman broke the silence.

"Sweetheart," Maddy's voice was low, and strangely calm. "I really wish you wouldn't sit so close to the edge."

It took Danae only a second to perceive a hidden meaning. "What's the matter, mother? You afraid I'm going to take another hop?" Her voice was firm and cutting.

"You know that's not what I think," came Maddy's quick, terse response. "But what if you lost your balance, just for a split second. You're still stiff from the ride. You might not be able to catch yourself in time."

"Humph." Danae looked down at the shepherd and rubbed his ears, her eyes beginning to tear. She shifted a little so as not to reveal it to her mother.

"And I wish you wouldn't call it that - 'hop'," Maddy continued, purposefully keeping her voice and temper low and steady. "You know I don't like it."

"Strane said I should talk about it the way I'm comfortable," Danae said, looking down and betraying a sniffle as she began.

"It's just hard for me to hear," Maddy said softly.

Danae was softly sobbing now, revealed only by the rising and falling of her hair, which she'd now removed from the ponytail and which hung disheveled around her face and shoulders in a blond mess. "We might as well admit it," Danae said. "I tried to cancel my own ticket, and I don't even remember why."

Maddy felt herself twisting up inside. Her daughter, her only daughter, her beautiful, smart, funny, only connection to the life before her husband's death, was in such pain. Danae stood at one corner of the cupola, Maddy at the other, both silently crying and as far away from each other as they could get.

Their voices were detectable but indiscernible from deeper inside the aging timbers of the old house. Far below, the warm aroma of chicken and noodles worked its way through the kitchen dumbwaiter and up to the upper reaches of the lodge, penetrating further than one would think considering most of its rooms were closed off. There were more noises, more smells; the presence of people who sounded familiar and whose voices belonged here. The old lodge was living again. It was apparent to everyone.

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