

THE FAMILY

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Sitting on the old front porch swing, Julianne waits for the arrival of the unfamiliar, for the seventy-year-old-woman who gave her life. Gently pushing the toes of her left foot against the floor in rhythm with the suspended motion, Julianne is struck with the profound comfort of her own immobility. In the midst of the constant procession of life, I wait here, she thought. Had always waited, it seemed to her now, while her environment ripened around her, touching her, sustaining her, as the patterns of living changed routinely, yet predictably, through the years.

The squeaking of the chain under the weight of the added pounds of her middle age, the high-pitched voices of children hurrying past her house on their way home from school, even the whisper of the wind loosening the leaves of the faithful old oak beside the walkway, blend in her memory with all the other autumn afternoon sounds of life passing in this place. Identity. All around her, familiarity. Yet, inside of her, through her veins, flows the blood of strangers.

Julianne's husband, Zach, and her brother, Danny, have gone to the airport for Bobbie. If Danny had not wanted this reunion so badly, she doubts she would have ever agreed to see the woman. Her letter, the handwriting shaky and difficult to read—post-marked in Evansville, Indiana three weeks ago—had been little more than a note. Bobbie said she had been searching for the two of them for two years. Only two years?

Over fifty years have passed since the children were made wards of the court following the removal of Bobbie's parental rights. According to the adoption papers, they had been left in the care of vicious and immoral people, in unsanitary conditions without proper supervision, without food when the authorities intervened. The mother's whereabouts? County Jail. Charge? Soliciting men. The father? Unknown.

Julianne thought of her childhood as a somewhat fragmented whole. Her mind recorded a distinct division—the before and the after. The dark, shadowy form of a sad and lonely little girl steps in and out of Julianne's memory, like an image captured on a strip of old black and white film being run backward, then forward for reviewing. Recalling the day she was brought to this house, to the Springers, it seems as though the little girl she remembers was someone else.

Julianne sat on the bottom step of the porch, leaning over to peer under the Hawkins' house, into the darkness where the chickens pecked the damp, pungent dirt. She didn't want to look at Mrs. Hawkins standing behind her. The woman held Danny as she propped the screen door open for the social worker.

"Sorry it didn't work out," Mrs. Hawkins said to Mrs. Blanks, "but she's too much for us to handle."

Saying nothing to the gray-haired woman, the social worker reached down and took Julianne's hand. "It's time to go. I've got everything you brought with you."

Julianne watched the chickens under the house. Some of the hens looked back at her, like they expected her to crawl over to her spot in the middle of their huddle where she had crouched much of the past two weeks.

"Come on." Mrs. Blanks pulled on Julianne's hand. "It's getting late. We need to go." Julianne couldn't tell if the woman sounded sad, or angry.

As Mrs. Blanks led her to the car, Julianne looked back at Danny, his blonde hair a golden blur as Mrs. Hawkins carried him into the house. The screen door made a slapping sound when it closed.

"I want Danny, I want Danny, I want Danny!" Julianne screamed out helplessly, desperately pulling back from the woman who was taking her away. "Da-a-aneeee, Dan-n-nee—"

"Stop that, Julianne. You are going to have to stop it right now." Mrs. Blanks helped her into the seat, from the driver's side, and slid in beside her, tossing the large paper bag containing everything Julianne owned to the floor. As young as Julianne was, she somehow understood that her screaming was pointless.

Fear unlike any she had ever experienced gripped her, pinning her to the seat. It was the first time since Danny was born that he had not been with her. Julianne watched the farmhouse from the car window until it faded out of sight, losing it to the swirling cloud of dust trailing the automobile.

After a while, they drove into a town. Soon they stopped beside the curb on a pretty street lined with tall trees and white sidewalks. "This is Jefferson, Julianne. Let's go meet the Springers." Mrs. Blanks reached for the brown paper sack.

"No, I'll take that." Julianne's voice sounded gruff as she attempted a tone of maturity impossible for a six-year-old. She dragged her belongings behind her up the steps of another strange house. This was the third one in six months, since Danny and Julianne had been taken from Bobbie. Red flowers filled a wooden tub sitting on the porch beside the front door.

"We thought you'd never get here," the woman said with a friendly smile as she opened the screen door. She wore a yellow dress with a frilly, white apron and she had on lipstick. Her hair was blonde, like Bobbie's, but Bobbie's never looked as soft and shiny. This lady's looked more like Danny's. Julianne blinked

back the burning behind her eyes, determined not to cry. "I'm Mollie Springer. Y'all come on in."

Julianne had never been inside a house like it. Sunlight came through all the windows. A boy appeared from the hallway, and Mollie Springer gathered him to her side, inside the circle of her arm. "David, this is Julianne."

David's freckled face broke into a broad grin. Julianne thought he was probably about eight years old. His neatly parted hair was the color of the dust swirls in the road. "Come on, I'll show you the room we fixed up for you." David grabbed her hand and bolted for the hallway, pulling her through the house as she gripped her paper sack.

"There's my room!" He waved toward an open doorway, before leading her into the room across from his. Pink flowered paper covered the walls, and she felt her shoes sink into thick rose-colored carpet. Julianne stared at the floor, not knowing what to do next.

David plopped down on the bed and slapped his hands on his thighs. "What's that?" He looked at the paper bag. "Your stuff?"

She nodded, but continued to stare at the floor.

"You can put it there by the closet. Momma'll come show you where everything goes. Oh, yeah, we gotcha something." Running to the dresser, he opened the bottom drawer and pulled out a black shiny box. "It's a music box. See?" He opened the lid. A dancer stood in front of a mirror, one of her legs bent, her foot resting on the other knee. She clasped her slender hands above her head.

Julianne stared at the box.

"You turn this," David explained, flipping the box over, turning the key. As the music played, he showed Julianne the dancing figurine. "She's a ballerina." He offered her the box.

She wanted to take it, but her hands refused to reach out for it. As the melody filled the room, she looked at her shoes, and twisted the bottom of her dress.

"I'll put it on the dresser for you," David said with a self-conscious shrug. "There's some more stuff in there." He pointed toward the open drawer, and patted her shoulder on his way out the door. "I've got ball practice. See ya later."

Julianne heard the voices coming from the living room, Mrs. Blanks and David's mother talking. "See ya later, Momma," David called as a door slammed somewhere toward the back of the house. Looking around the room, at the white

curtains filtering the late afternoon sun, at the bed with its soft white bedspread and matching canopy, at the rocking chair with a Raggedy Ann doll propped against a ruffled lace pillow, her eyes moved back to the music box. She still could not bring herself to pick it up. She had never held anything like it in her hands before.

She took the paper bag over to the dresser, carefully, quietly, opening the top drawer. When she finished stacking her few articles of clothing inside, the drawer was less than half-full. In the bottom drawer, she saw a Big Chief tablet and a box of crayons. Taking them out, Julianne sat down on the floor to draw. She drew a picture of the Hawkins' house, just a crude box with a pointed roof and two square windows on both sides of the front door. She drew chickens in the yard. She never wanted to forget where Danny was. Someday, somehow, she knew she would go back for him. She fell asleep on the floor, clutching the black crayon. She awoke with a start, crying out her brother's name, blinking her eyes in confusion. "Danny, Dannneeee!"

Mollie came to her, kneeling beside her on the floor. She caressed the clay-colored curls, comforting the heartbroken child with her gentle touch and quiet voice. "What's this?" She picked up the picture. "Are these chickens?" Her hand caressed Julianne's shoulders, making small circular motions in the middle of her back.

"That's where Danny is." Julianne could feel thick, hot tears spilling like syrup onto her cheeks as she looked up at Mollie. "They made me leave him," she wailed. Her nose was stopped up with unshed tears, and her mouth jerked involuntarily when she breathed.

"I know," Mollie spoke calmly, "Mrs. Blanks explained it to me." She pulled the little girl's stiffened body into her arms, and Julianne relaxed for a minute. "I'm cooking supper now, if you'd like to help me. David and his father'll be home soon, ready to eat." Mollie laughed lightly. Hugging Julianne tightly before she stood up, Mollie added, "But if you'd rather stay here and draw, that's fine." Turning to go, she said, "Oh, why don't I take that picture and put it on the bulletin board in the kitchen?"

Julianne stopped crying. A bulletin board? And, she wondered, what was cooking that smelled so good?

"Come, bring your picture and I'll show you the bulletin board." Julianne thought Mollie must have read her mind.

She carefully tore the page from the tablet, handing it to Mollie. When she began picking up the crayons, Mollie stopped her.

"You can leave that, honey. Put it up later." Standing in the doorway gazing down at her, Julianne thought Mollie looked like an angel, the sunlight a halo washing her face and hair. She shrugged her small shoulders, the way she had seen David do, and said, "Okay."

"What's David's father's name?" Julianne asked timidly, following Mollie down the hall.

"Abe. Abraham Springer."

In the kitchen, pots boiled on the stove, the lids faintly jingling, and Julianne could see the back yard through the screen door. Beneath the trees near the fence, she saw a swing set with a slide. And green grass. Not at all like the Hawkins' yard, with its clumps of brown weeds with stickers here and there in the dirt. "Are there any stickers in your yard?" she asked.

"Not a one!" Mollie pinned the drawing to a board hanging on the wall next to the telephone. "There. Be sure you show David and Abe where Danny is when they come in." Taking a meringue-covered pie from the oven, she asked, "Do you like chocolate pie?"

"What's ball practice?" Julianne asked, bobbing her head up and down, trying not to lick her lips.

"Oh, you know. Baseball." Mollie washed a head of lettuce. Turning off the water faucet, she continued, "They have to practice." She rolled her eyes around, laughing down at Julianne. "A lot."

"Is Abe at ball practice, too?" Julianne eyed the chocolate pie on the counter, hoping Abe was not like Mr. Hawkins. She scanned the kitchen walls for a razor strap, remembering Mr. Hawkins' threats at night. *You stop that cryin' right now, or I'll get my razor strap! We can't have you keepin' this baby up all night.* She shuddered, remembering his cold, dark eyes staring down at her. *Go on, now, if you don't want a whuppin'!*

"And here they come now." Wiping her hands on a dishtowel, Mollie smiled down at Julianne, who quietly pulled out a chair and sat at the kitchen table.

Abe Springer was huge, powerfully built, with muscles rippling along his arms as he hung his cap on the rack beside the back door. He had to duck his head of black bushy hair to get through the door. His brown eyes lit immediately upon Julianne. "Well, now, look who we got here. A mighty pretty little lady sittin' at my kitchen table!" His booming voice terrified her. She shrank into the chair, wishing she could crawl under the table.

"Hi, Julianne." David waved shyly from behind his father, hanging his cap next to the larger one. Opening the refrigerator, he pulled out a bottle of water, and drank thirstily.

"David, don't drink out of the bottle. Here's a glass." David looked sheepishly in Julianne's direction, as Mollie tousled his sweaty hair. Abe hugged his wife, and then he kissed her squarely on the mouth.

"C'mon, let's go outside." David rushed to the back door.

"Okay, but I need to be excused." Julianne remained glued to her chair, speaking directly to the place mat in front of her. She was humiliated that all of them knew she had to go pee.

"This way, sweetie, I'll show you the bathroom." Mollie took her hand.

Julianne slid out of the room, hugging the wall to avoid Big Abe, who was looking under the lids on the stove, tasting everything. "I'm hungry as an ol' work horse after a full day of plowin'!" One bright eye winked at her as she scooted past him.

"Here you go." Mollie opened the door into the bathroom at the far end of the hallway. The room smelled like lemons, and the walls were covered in cream-colored paper printed with yellow roses. A pale yellow shower curtain draped both sides of the tub, and fluffy yellow towels hung on the rack beside it. "Do you need me to stay with you?"

"No ma'am."

After Mollie closed the door, Julianne sat on the toilet and looked out the window, watching a squirrel jump from limb to limb of the tree growing just outside the wall. The outhouse at the Hawkins', dark, smelly and crawling with spiders, sat at the very back of the yard, almost to the barn. Oh, Danny, Danny, she thought, feeling the familiar tightness returning to her chest. Hurriedly, she washed her hands with the little round bar of lemony soap, and then buried her face in a soft towel, drying fresh tears.

After supper, the family remained seated at the table, talking. Julianne looked at the new faces around her. When Mollie directed everyone's attention to the bulletin board, Julianne smiled at her. Big Abe's chair scraped the floor loudly as he pushed away from the table. "You really outdid yourself, Mollie. Best meal I ever had," he said, taking his glass of iced tea with him over to study Julianne's drawing. "Now, there are some fine-lookin' chickens in that yard. You didn't draw 'em, not by yourself?"

"Yessir." She nodded, nervously twisting her napkin and forcing herself to look at the man. She hated the way her voice quivered.

"Well, now." Big Abe lowered his voice and leaned closer to examine the drawing. "A house with chickens like that," he said, "ought not be too hard to find."

Later, after Julianne had bathed and gone to bed, Mollie came into the room. Julianne was lying there in the dark, trying not to breathe too loudly. "How about some light?" Mollie turned on the lamp beside the bed. The room glowed softly, just enough light to get rid of the darkness. Mollie sat down on the bed, straightening the covers around Julianne's chin. "Do you feel like a story? One about a family of kittens my mother used to tell me?" Mollie stroked Julianne's hair to one side, pushing the still damp curls behind one ear.

Taking a deep breath, Julianne tried to force a smile as she looked into the woman's face. She did not want to seem ungrateful, but sadness weighed so heavily upon her heart she could not speak. This was the first time since Danny's birth they had not slept in the same house. Even when the people took them away from Bobbie, they remained together.

"Once upon a time," Mollie began anyway. "There was a little baby kitten who came to live with a family of people who had two very ferocious dogs. Those dogs just tormented that poor kitty, day and night. They chased her, snapped at her, and barked at her all the time. She thought she would never have any peace and safety in her life." Mollie's fingers stroked Julianne's hair tenderly.

Julianne stared at the music box on the dresser as Mollie's soft voice continued. "One day that little kitten couldn't take it any longer. She decided she would be better off in the woods, alone, than running for her life everyday in the yard of that house. So, as soon as the old dogs fell asleep under the tree where they had chased the scared little kitten, she ran down the trunk and took off for the woods.

"Now, what that little kitty didn't know was that those woods were just full of other kittens who had come there too, for some peace, just to get away from a world full of barking dogs. In fact, she had not gone very far when she came upon Lawrence, one of the most respected cats in all the woods. Lawrence was on his way to his office, carrying his briefcase."

Julianne could not keep her eyes open. They kept falling shut, even though she wanted to hear about the scared kitten. The bed moved slightly, and she opened her eyes enough to see Mollie turning the key on the music box. As the music played, Mollie left the room.

Julianne dreamed of chickens. They were all colors. Some red and gold, some blue and silver, others bright orange and green. Their legs were completely covered in glittering jewels that flashed and sparkled when they walked around under the house. Their beaks were diamonds, and their eyes were blue. But two ugly chickens lived on top of the porch. They were white and dirty, with beady black eyes. They had Danny on the porch between them, pecking at him, and the woman chicken clucked all the time.

"Danny, come here, come with me," Julianne cried in her dream. "Come look at all the pretty chickens, Danny." She climbed up to the porch and moved toward him. The two chickens ran toward her, their dirty wings flapping, their mouths wide-open, making frightful, squawking sounds. Their black eyes glared hatefully at her, chasing her off the porch. "Leave him alone!" she shouted at their angry faces. "Quit pecking him like that! Stop it, stop it! Stop—"

Someone was holding her, rocking her gently, stroking her hair away from her face. "Go back to sleep, sweetheart. It's okay, now."

"No!" She pushed at Mollie. "No, no, no. They still have Danny. I want Danny," Julianne sobbed. "Why can't Big Abe go get him? Please, go get him!" she shrieked, her voice piercing the walls of the house. "Please, please, please!" she begged, kicking her feet into the bed. "He said he could find the house."

"Okay," Mollie said, "Now, try to calm down. We can't go tonight."

Julianne stopped kicking, and tried to stop crying, but her heart pounded inside her chest and her shoulders jerked with the sobs. She couldn't stop the sobs. She closed her mouth, but they kept coming through her nose. Then she saw Big Abe standing in the room. He came toward her, and she clutched at Mollie, hiding her face in the woman's sweet-smelling nightgown.

"Julianne." Big Abe's voice sounded different. "I'll see if I can get Danny back for you." His enormous hairy hand patted her shoulder. "Now, I'm not sayin' I can." He leaned over to kiss her hot, wet cheek. "But I'm sure gonna look into it."

David entered the room and stood beside his father. "My daddy can do anything," he said, shakily, fighting back his own tears.

"Well, let's all try to get some sleep. We'll talk about it tomorrow." Big Abe placed his hand on David's shoulder, leading him toward the door.

"I'll be there in a minute," Mollie told her husband, as she lay down beside Julianne.

Julianne began school that year. Mollie took her shopping for new clothes and shoes, and to the beauty shop for a haircut. "Not much," Mollie told the woman, "just a trim."

Big Abe drove them to school in his truck. "It says Springer Construction Company. For All Your Building Needs, Call Abraham Springer," David explained proudly when Julianne asked what the red and white sign on the door of the green truck said. "Dad's a carpenter, and sometimes I help him."

Every afternoon, they walked the two blocks home. Not long after school started, they arrived home one day to find Big Abe already there. There were two more cars in the driveway. One of them, the gray one, looked familiar—like Mrs. Blanks' car, and when Julianne saw Mollie waiting on the porch swing, she decided to run, to hide until the cars were gone. She headed for the backyard, to the back alley that ran all the way back to the school.

"Wait," Mollie called. "They're here to talk about getting Danny."

Stunned, Julianne stopped. Turning immediately, she ran toward Mollie's outstretched arms.

David sat down in the swing beside them, and patted Julianne's back tenderly. "Who's here, Momma?" he asked.

"Well, it's Mrs. Blanks, and Mr. Turner, a lawyer. They're inside with your father," she spoke to David, for Julianne's face was still buried in her breasts. "They want to ask Julianne some questions." Mollie put her hands on each side of Julianne's face, pushing her away enough to look into the tear-filled eyes. "About Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins." Her blue eyes studied the frightened ones looking back at her, searching them, steadying them in her own calming way. "Come on, you two, let's have a snack. How about Coke and cookies?"

"Coke!" David's eyes lit up as he looked at Julianne, licking his lips and rubbing his stomach. They usually had milk with their cookies.

Inside, everyone sat around the kitchen table. Mrs. Blanks was the first to speak. "Hi, Julianne, it's good to see you again."

Julianne lowered her head self-consciously, as her eyes slid timidly around the table, to Big Abe. He sat next to a small man with dark-rimmed glasses and black shiny hair. The lawyer wore a suit and tie.

"Mr. Turner, this is Julianne," Big Abe said, looking at her in the protective way she had come to depend upon, winking at her as he reached for her hand. She went to him, snuggling comfortably against his flannel shirt, finding security in the muscled arm. Her face rubbed against his chest, and she smelled the scent of

wood, which always accompanied him into the house. "Why don't you have a seat right here?" He pulled out a chair for her at the end of the table. Then he turned his attention to David, "Here, son, you sit next to me."

Mollie poured the grownups fresh coffee, and placed a plate of peanut butter cookies in the middle of the table. After she brought the Cokes, she sat down beside Mrs. Blanks. Mr. Turner sat at the opposite end of the table from Julianne. When he spoke, his voice sounded strange in Mollie's kitchen. "I understand you have a little brother you miss very much." He looked at Julianne over the top of his glasses. He had a stack of papers in front of him. Flipping through them, he pulled a page from the stack. "Is that right, Julianne?"

"Yessir," she squeaked.

"I'm going to ask you a lot of questions, and I want you to think before you answer each one of them. Once we get through with all the questions, we won't have to talk about it again. Okay? Okay," Mr. Turner said. "Now, what did you do at the Hawkins' house? Did you play?"

"Just with the chickens."

"The chickens? Out in the yard, then. You played in the yard?"

"No, there's too many stickers in the yard."

"Where did you play with the chickens?"

"Under the house."

"Did Mrs. Hawkins mind if you played under the house?"

"No. That's where she told me to."

"Why did she tell you to do that?"

"I don't know," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders. She was afraid to tell Mr. Turner why, afraid he might think she really did bother Danny, the way they always said. Mrs. Blanks' hand flew as she wrote in her notebook. "I guess so I wouldn't step on the stickers in the yard," Julianne finally added, aware that Mrs. Blanks' hand had stopped, and everyone waited.

"Why didn't you wear shoes?" Mr. Turner asked.

"She wouldn't let me, 'cept to church." Julianne looked at her new shoes swinging beneath the table, and reached down to rub at a scuffmark that had not been there before.

"Why didn't you play inside the house?"

"Cause I might bother Danny." The words came out anyway. Her heart pounded, and her throat tightened.

"Is that what they told you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Would they let you touch Danny, hold him?"

"No." Julianne raised her head and looked at Mr. Turner for a long time. He waited patiently, his eyes looking across the table at her kindly, encouraging her to go on. "They said Danny's theirs, for me to leave him alone." She wanted to scream out that Danny was not theirs, but she knew she would start to cry if she did that. So she struggled to keep her voice from quivering, lowering it to the level of gruffness that held back the tears. "She locked the door so I couldn't come in the house."

"She locked the door?"

"Uh-huh, the screen doors. She let me look in the house, but I couldn't come in. She rocked Danny all the time in the chair by the window. I could see them through the screen." The words poured out of her. "One day I yelled at her. I told her she wadn't his mother, that Bobbie was."

"What did she do?"

"She put Danny on the floor and came to the porch and grabbed my arms. She pulled me in the house, pushed me in the closet. I couldn't open the door." Julianne looked at Mollie, and saw tears in her eyes. Big Abe clenched and unclenched his hands around his coffee mug. His mouth was pulled tight, and he just shook his head as he stared down into his coffee. Glancing around the bright, sunny kitchen, at David's freckled face, at the large plate of cookies in front of them, Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins seemed like a bad dream to Julianne, like the dirty white chickens.

"How long did you stay in the closet?"

"Til Mr. Hawkins got home."

"What did he do?"

"He opened the door and showed me his razor strap. Said if I ever said that Danny wadn't theirs, he'd whup me with it."

"Did he ever hit you with it?"

"Uh-huh." She felt the sting of the thick leather coiling around her legs, attacking and biting like a vicious black snake. She looked at her legs, but saw no trace of the red, swollen welts the strap always left.

Big Abe put his coffee mug down on the table loudly, and pushed his chair backward, scraping the floor. He locked his fingers behind his neck and rolled his head back and forth, from side to side, as he stared at the ceiling. He squeezed his lips together tightly, and his face took on a hurt, sad expression.

"When? Did he hit you with it that night?" Mr. Turner's voice remained the same. His eyes encouraged her to continue.

"Nosir."

"Listen to me very carefully, Julianne. Tell me when Mr. Hawkins hit you with the razor strap."

"When I cried about going to the outhouse. And when I couldn't go to sleep. That's when."

"You were scared about going to the outhouse?"

She nodded her head. "Yessir. It stunk, and had spiders. I's scared to go by myself, but they made me."

"Where did he hit you?"

"On my legs. He always hit me on my legs."

"Where did you sleep, Julianne?" The lawyer asked calmly, his voice, and the steady hum of the refrigerator motor, the only sounds inside the house. Outside, the wind blew through the leaves of the sycamore trees, and an occasional car drove by. Mollie's snow-white bed sheets flapped in the breeze out on the clothesline.

"On the floor."

"Where on the floor?"

"In the kitchen, on a quilt."

"Did Mrs. Hawkins ever hit you?"

"Not with the razor strap. She just slapped my back."

"Did they ever hurt you in any other way? Besides hitting you with their hands, and the razor strap, did they do anything else to hurt you?"

Nosir."

"Did they ever spank Danny?"

No, just me."

"Where did you eat, Julianne?"

"On the porch."

"You never ate at the table, with Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins and Danny?"

"Two times." Julianne held up two fingers. "On church day, when the church man came to eat."

"I think that'll be enough." Mr. Turner looked around the table at everyone. "Did you get all of that, Mrs. Blanks?"

"Yes," she said, as she turned to Mollie. "I need to look around the house, Mrs. Springer, for my own report, since someone else did the first evaluation."

"Sure," Mollie said, "just make yourself at home. I'll wash these dishes while you're looking around."

"Now that your role has changed from Julianne's foster family to possibly her adoptive one, we need a bit more information." The social worker handed Big Abe some sheets of paper. "I need you to fill out these forms."

"When can we get Danny?" Julianne asked Big Abe, as Mr. Turner put his papers away, snapping them shut inside his briefcase. He reminded her of Lawrence, the most respectable cat in the woods.

"Mr. Turner?" Big Abe asked the lawyer.

"Danny's adoption by the Hawkins family will be final in two more months, so we have to work fast to stop it. We have to get a court date set, then present our case. I plan to convince the judge that they are not fit candidates for adoption." As Mr. Turner was leaving, the children trailed along behind him and Big Abe into the living room. "I'll be in touch with you in a few days," the lawyer continued. "I want to do some investigating on my own. Find out a little more about Mr. and

Mrs. Hawkins." Looking down at Julianne, he added, "You're a brave girl, young lady. I'm going to do everything I can to get Danny back for you."

Mollie came into the room to stand beside Big Abe, who was shaking Mr. Turner's hand. Big Abe's arm looked like a tree trunk and the lawyer's, only a limb.

"Julianne," Mollie said, "Mrs. Blanks would like to ask you some questions. She's in your room."

As she went down the hallway, Julianne met David with his bat and glove. Racing past her, he grinned.

Mrs. Blanks sat in the rocking chair, and held Raggedy Ann in her lap. "Do you like your room?"

"Yes," Julianne said, leaning against her bed.

"I can see why you would be very happy here. With the Springers. But, tell me, what do you like best about living here, Julianne?"

Julianne raised her shoulders, leaning her head to one side. Biting her lower lip, she glanced around the room, moving only her eyes, trying to find a way to explain what it meant to live in this house. She rubbed the soft material of the bedspread, her small fingers picking at it nervously. She understood the importance of her words. She loved everything, the nice room, the new clothes, the toys, but none of these things was responsible for her happiness. For the warm, sunny feeling that awoke her every morning and slept inside her every night. For the sense of belonging that kept the bad dreams away. Thoughtfully, she considered Mrs. Blanks' question. Then, it came to her.

"The family." She swallowed hard and looked straight into Mrs. Blanks' eyes. "I like the family best."

One morning Julianne awoke early. It was Sunday, and everyone usually slept late. She heard Big Abe and Mollie talking in their room next to hers. Big Abe's voice sounded like he was trying to whisper, but even his whisper could be easily overheard.

"Turner says the judge will make all the difference. Says the evidence may not matter much if the judge happens to be a good ol' boy. Pray he's not, Mollie." He exhaled loudly. "Hawkins is big in his church, got the preacher's testimony and the support of the whole congregation. Turner says that could carry more weight than anything else in the court room."

"That, and financial security," Mollie said, softly.

"Well, they sure got us beat there. But, hey," Big Abe's voice rose, "by the time a man's Hawkins' age, he oughta have a pretty hefty nest egg. Ought to have his place paid for. We will, too, by the time we're their age," he added gruffly.

"Any judge will have to consider the evidence." Mollie's words were barely audible, she spoke so quietly. "Mrs. Blanks said a person would have to be blind not to see the hatefulness in those two. She said you could feel it."

"Well, it'll be over soon." The bed squeaked. "It just infuriates me to think that the court might support those two. Mean-hearted, narrow-minded fanatics. Why would anyone think a child would be better off with people like that? My God, the man beat her with a razor strap. A little six-year-old girl!" Julianne imagined Big Abe raking his fingers through his unruly hair in his frustration, but she had never heard his voice that angry.

"Sh-h-h," Mollie whispered.

"Oh, Mollie, what if we lose?"

"We can't."

Julianne got out of bed and went to the dresser, to turn on the music box. She looked at her worried face in the mirror, her hair a mass of reddish curls, her eyes blue as the chickens' with the diamond beaks. Blue as Mollie's and Danny's, she thought. The music played and the dancing lady twirled as the sun came through the window. She ran back to bed and pulled the covers over her head, confused about why Big Abe was talking like that. She pressed her hands tightly against both ears.

The afternoon David and Julianne came home to find Mr. Turner and Mrs. Blanks' cars parked in the driveway again, they both knew something had happened. Everyone waited on the porch. From way down the street, they could see Mr. Turner sitting on the steps. As they got closer, Julianne could see he didn't have his suit coat on, and his white shirt was opened at the neck, with his tie pulled loose. She could hear the swing making its familiar creaking sound as Mrs. Blanks and Mollie swung back and forth. Big Abe waited for them in the yard. Grinning, he scooped both children into his arms as they started up the walk. Swinging them round and round, he shouted, "We won!"

"Where's Danny?" Julianne squirmed free, her eyes flying toward Mollie's.

"We get him tomorrow."

The next day, David and Julianne stayed home from school. Mama Jo, Mollie's mother, came to the house. The family waited for Mrs. Blanks to bring Danny home. Julianne could not sit still. She ran up and down the sidewalk watching for the gray car. There was crispness in the air, and the trees had lost all their leaves. Every time he heard a car coming, David would call to her from the porch steps, "Is that them?"

Mollie had put David's old baby bed up in hers and Big Abe's bedroom. The whole family had gone together to buy new sheets, and a puffy white pillow. Julianne picked out a toy, a soft, white kitten with blue glass eyes. The kitten felt real. From inside the house, the music that had been coming from the radio stopped, interrupted by the announcer's voice. "Stay tuned to the mid-day news for this, the 12th day of December, 1947," he said, just as the gray car topped the hill.

"They're here, they're here!" Julianne jumped up and down, running toward David, then back out to the curb. Everyone rushed to the car as it pulled up, to crowd around Julianne and David. Another woman rode in the front seat with Mrs. Blanks, but all Julianne could see was Danny. Already two years old, his round, solemn face peered back at her through the car window. He looked surprised, like he was going to cry when everyone gathered around him. The woman put him down in front of his sister on the sidewalk, and Danny reached for Julianne's hand, a smile breaking across his face. Then, looking at David, he laughed, stomping his feet up and down on the sidewalk.

"Looks like he's dancin'," David said.

Julianne walked slowly toward the house, with Danny tightly clutching her index finger. He toddled along beside her to the steps, where Mollie scooped him up. "Hello, Danny." She hugged the squirming little body tightly, before she put him down on the porch.

"He wants to walk," Julianne said, opening the screen door for her little brother. They all followed Danny, his round little shoulders thrust back boldly, as he toddled into the house.

That night, when the family was finally ready for bed, Julianne called Mollie into her room. "Would you tell me the story about the kitten again?"

"Well, let's see." Mollie sat down on the bed. "Where do you want me to start? At the beginning?"

"No, where she met Lawrence."

"Did I ever tell you the kitten's name?"

"No."

"Why don't you name her, then."

"What did you call her when you were little?"

"I called her Lucy, short for Lucille," Mollie said, brushing a curl away from Julianne's forehead.

"I'll call her Lucy, too."

"Okay. So Lucy met Lawrence. She called him Larry for short, and before long, Larry got her a job in his office. The next thing you know, Lucy had enough money to build her own house, so she didn't have to keep moving from one tree limb to another."

Julianne giggled, and snuggled down into her bed, into her happiness. She felt whole again, like none of the pieces was missing. "She shoulda got Daddy to build her house."

Mollie took a deep breath, her only reaction to Julianne's not calling him Big Abe. She continued in her sweet, clear voice. "Before long Lucy forgot all about those barking dogs that had chased her into the woods and—"

"You can turn my lamp off now, I need to go to sleep." The words slurred as she wavered on the edge of unconsciousness, just long enough to whisper, "Goodnight, Momma."

"Goodnight, Julianne Springer."

Julianne would never forget the feel of Mollie's fingers as she stroked her hand that night, a mother's caress, true and constant. That night she put away her memories of Bobbie, tucked them away with her name, along with the Hawkins', not even knowing if she would ever remember them again.

Julianne focuses on the smooth boards beneath her feet. The wood bears the indentions made by life on the old porch, the systematic wearing away of the wood under gentle pressure. First her parents', now hers and Zach's, this old house has been her refuge, home to everyone she had loved. Like a protective cocoon, it wrapped its walls around my brothers and me, she thought, and then my own children, allowing each of us our own individual compartments for metamorphosis.

She knew Momma and Dad moved into the smaller, more manageable garden home so that she could raise her own family in this house. Oh, they had many reasons why the move would be better for them. No maintenance, no lawn work, no high utility bills. *So Zach and Julianne could have the house.* Of course, they never said it, but everyone knew it.

Danny and David live in Dallas with their families. Needing the grinding wheels of the metropolis for the livelihood of their jointly owned advertising business, they crave the excitement the center of commerce generates. Julianne's brothers thrive on the tension of city life.

Not me, she thought.

She glances at her watch, thinking they should be arriving. She begins to pace up and down the old walkway, her eyes glued to the top of the hill. Soon, her horizon will be expanded, she knows. Then, her heart quickens for here they come.

Standing at the curb, Julianne feels no joy, no expectation. As the car pulls into the driveway, she walks to the passenger's side. Bobbie sits there, a tall, thin woman with faded, rusty-colored hair. Watery, gray eyes peer at her daughter from a bird-like face through the window. A sad-looking, aging woman. Opening the door, Julianne offers her hand, and notices the identical freckles covering each of their arms as Bobbie takes Julianne's for support. Julianne's eyes move past Bobbie, toward Zach who has already gotten out of the car. He winks at her, the way he always does when he is behind her, no matter what.

"Hey, Sis." Dan is beside her, hugging her, taking Bobbie's other arm, as the woman slides from the seat. Bobbie's print dress slips a little above her knees, exposing varicosed, spider-veined legs visible through gray-colored hosiery. Quickly, she releases Julianne's arm and pulls modestly at the dress.

Her ankles are slim, her feet graceful in stylish, low-heeled pumps. She takes her daughter's arm again as they walk toward the house. "I hope I haven't put you out, Julianne." Bobbie's voice sounds quivery, uncertain. Nervous.

"Oh, no. Not at all. Come on in."

Inside the living room, Bobbie begins to cry. Sitting on the sofa, beneath the gilt-framed family portrait of Mollie, Big Abe, David, Danny, and Julianne, taken the year Julianne graduated from high school, Bobbie sits weeping. She takes a white lace-trimmed handkerchief from her black purse, and dabs at her eyes.

"I came to tell you both how sorry I am. To ask your forgiveness." She blows her nose, quietly. "But seeing what fine people you are, being here in your pretty home," she says to Julianne, smiling in a rehearsed kind of way, "my planned

apology seems inappropriate. How presumptuous of me to think you needed it?" She twists the handkerchief in her lap, and stares at the floor. "How presumptuous of me to think there'd still be a place for me in your lives. If only I could go back, change things."

Her eyes shift toward the front window, her voice falls to just above a whisper. "You have to understand. I was young, and there was so much I wanted to do with my life. Why, what was I suppose to do with you two? No, kids were the last thing I needed, back then. Now, of course, I realize how important the family is."

She shifts her body and crosses her legs. "Two years ago, after Papa died, I decided to find you, to apologize. I could have kept you, it's true. I had time to get my life together. The court gave me that much. But by that time, I figured you were both settled in somewhere.

"Then, I got this chance to do a road show with a band I was performing with." Her eyes brush over Zach and Julianne, settling on Danny. "I was a singer. Never really made a name for myself, but had a lot of fun on the road." She caresses the side of her neck with her fingertips and smiles wistfully at Danny. He evades the smile, and sends his sister a searching glance.

A rush of unexpected pity for the woman mixes with an odd sense of gratitude, and the only words Julianne has for her spill out. "Thank you, Bobbie." Zach lays his warm hand over hers. "For our lives, I mean." Julianne pauses. "But, you had to leave us," she continues, her voice confident and clear, the way she feels. "For the Springer family would not have been complete without Dan and me." Looking across the coffee table at Bobbie, Julianne peers into the woman's eyes, her face, looking for some trace of memory from her fragmented childhood. She sees nothing familiar. Feels no connection.

Bobbie takes a deep breath, then smooths her skirt, brushing at it nervously, "Is there anything you want to know? About your history or—"

"Yes." Dan interrupts her, coming to sit on the floor at her feet, his face still boyishly expectant despite a few lines around his eyes and the slight thinning of his burnished blonde hair. "I want to know about my father."

His name is Abraham. Abraham Springer. How can you ask such a thing? Julianne wants to scream the words at him from where she sits across the room, but says nothing. Zach's hand tightens over hers.

The room darkens into early evening, into silence. Julianne cannot even hear her own breathing. In the dining room, Mama Jo's old grandfather clock strikes. Julianne's eyes rest on the photographs on the piano, on the framed faces of her own children—apparently unnoticed by Bobbie, who has made no inquiry about

her grandchildren. She does not speak again until Julianne turns her attention back to her.

Bobbie's voice seems stronger, energized by Danny's interest, and lighter, almost frivolous. "He was a soldier, Danny. A friend of Julianne's father. They were both in the war together, but I never married either one of them." She pauses, looking at Julianne. "Could I have something to drink, please? This is gonna take a while."

Julianne does not want to hear this. Not now. Later, maybe. "After all these years, surely the story can keep until after supper." Getting up, she adds, "Come with me, Bobbie." The assurance, the authority she hears in her own voice, pleases her—the tone firm, yet gentle, much like Mollie's, had she been there. "I'll get you something to drink and show you the guest room."

Bobbie rises, looks at Danny apologetically, then moves toward Julianne, her eyes avoiding her daughter's face, as she follows her.

Bobbie's presence in Mollie's old kitchen feels strange, artificial to Julianne. Her eyes linger on the woman's freckled, blue-veined hand moving back and forth across the unfinished surface of Mama Jo's old butcher block.

Suddenly, while pouring a glass of ice water, the freckled, blue-veined markings on Julianne's own hands, come into focus. This obviously inherent family trait seems unnatural in its kinship to her, yet there it is. Momentarily, it unsettles her.

But only for a moment, for Julianne knows who she is.