

Wilmington, 1960

Chapter One Excerpt

Anyway, that May a judge finally found the time to see us. We all met in a big courtroom. The room had a high ceiling and a marble floor the color of cooked shrimp. The judge's bench was the same color only it had a lot of dark veins in it like the tops of old people's hands. The judge was fat-faced and had Miss Reinheart's eyes. He sat behind all that marble like an old king on a throne. I grabbed a piece of Mama Cope's dress and didn't let go. Every so often she would give my arm a little pat to calm my jitters. It worked, too. Once the judge starting talking, things proceeded pretty quickly. I tried real hard to keep on track. And I did right up until Miss Reinheart and the judge starting throwing around a lot of big, legal-sounding words I didn't understand.

I used those occasions to look over my real mother and father. It felt strange, like staring at strangers at the supermarket and thinking you might know them and you might not. My father had an old face and wide shoulders and, except for a tattoo of a rose just above his right elbow, he was plain looking. What was left of his hair was brown. He didn't have my nose, my chin, my lips, nothing. Anyway, he noticed my gaze and returned it with a dime-store smile. The smile was stiff and looked forced and made his cheeks and lips lift up unnaturally. His eyes were as black as crow's eyes and stuck in my mind. I looked up at Mama Cope but she was busy trying to figure out what Miss Reinheart and the judge were getting at. I felt Mama Cope's dress balled up in my hand and my fingers squeeze into a fist. I was reminding myself to hold onto my faith, like Mama Cope told me to, when I heard Miss Reinheart say: "Your Honor, Mr. Toppin is

now gainfully employed and I have a doctor's report confirming Mrs. Toppin has regained her health; therefore, it is the position of Children's Services that the natural parents be given full permanent custody of their daughter."

Slowly I turned and looked at my mother. She was a short, slim woman and wore a white dress with tiny red roses on it. Her hair was a pretty auburn color and shiny. I studied her for quite a while before she returned the attention. When she did, she looked at me with pale eyes that were soft and sad-looking. Then she glanced over her shoulder at Carole and Bootsie and slowly turned her eyes back on me before pointing them at the judge. Carole and Bootsie were skinny and had my father's plain looks. I could tell by their bored expressions that they didn't want to be there any more than I did.

When the judge and Miss Reinheart were done, my father spoke. Seems he was willing to give me up, but my mother said: "Blood is blood. Can't change that by turning our daughter over to some stranger to be raised."

I heard my mother tell the old, fat-faced judge those exact words. Then I saw the judge nod his head as if what she was saying made perfectly good sense. In the best interest of the child," the judge concluded, "effective June 1, 1960, I am granting the natural parents, William Henry and Virginia Toppin, permanent custody of Billie Elizabeth Toppin, also known as Betsy Toppin. I further order that effective June 1, 1960, all contact with the foster mother, Rebecca Cope, be terminated." When he was done, I saw Miss Reinheart's skinny lips part in a smile and Mama Cope crying. My father was smiling, too, a real big smile that came out through his eyes.