

"Maybe I *should* run away." Carolyn hauled herself out of a snowdrift yet again. "This stupid ski trip is the last straw!"

This was not a new thought.

She stared across at the steeper slopes where the rest of her family gracefully shushed and slalomed, while she was stuck here on the bunny hill. She snorted. "Baby hill is more like it."

Her mother, Ellen, grinned and called something Carolyn couldn't hear, and her older brothers and sisters laughed in response. She blinked away tears. "I guess they ARE just as happy without me." Her shoulders slumped.

In the past few months, she must have thought about running away from home at least a hundred times. She shot a dark look at the tall, handsome man who came skiing to a showy halt beside her pretty mother. It hadn't always been this way. When dad was alive, things had been different.

Three years ago, when she was six, and finally starting to trust her adopted family, a drunk driver ran a red light and smashed into the car her dad was driving.

Even now, tears sprang to her eyes when she remembered him. She was his special pet, and it always amazed her that none of her siblings seemed to mind.

"Come on, squirt." He would call, as he swung her up, up, up, to sit on his broad shoulders. "Let's go..." for a walk... or to the park... or wherever else she might enjoy.

Carolyn blinked back the tears. She had been certain the family would send her packing after the funeral, and it was over a year before her heart stopped pounding every time someone came to the door. Of course, she didn't dare mention her concern to anyone. Why give people ideas that might not have occurred to them yet?

She knew her foster parents had adopted her when she was four, even though they already had five older children of their own. They willingly answered all her questions, but Carolyn didn't ask many.

"My birth mother didn't want me around, so why should they?" She muttered under her breath. And not asking for details let her keep her worst fears hidden.

She stared over at her family, calling happily back and forth to each other as they swooped down the slopes like brightly painted birds in flight. A figure in hot pink ski pants waved at her. Carolyn lifted her arm in limp response to her sister Laura's greeting, then

turned away from the merry group.

*They even look alike, tall, dark and athletic. Why should they want to hang around with a little blond shrimp like me?*

They might not tease her for being smaller, slower, and less coordinated; and they might praise her drawings and paintings, but they were probably just being polite.

With a deep sigh, she slogged her way back up the small incline.

She bent to undo her skis, tired of this whole vacation. No one had asked her opinion about going skiing.

Carolyn shot another dark glance at the group sporting on the steeper slopes. It was probably HIS idea.

A few months ago, her mom, Ellen, started dating again. The man's name was Peter, and her brothers and sisters certainly thought he was nice. And why not? He took David and Ricky to ball games, got Karen and Suzie concert tickets and even took Laura shopping.

Only Carolyn noticed he didn't do anything with her, though as usual she hid her hurt feelings. But two could play that game. Now she ignored him every time he tried to talk to her.

"But this trip is the last straw." She repeated under her breath.

The previous week, while she and mom were at the doctors for Carolyn's annual checkup, Peter had called a family meeting with the rest of the children. Together, they'd arranged this surprise for their mother's birthday.

"Yours was the most important part, ducky." Her sister Karen assured her when Carolyn protested later. "You kept mom out of the way so we could make plans."

She might have believed that if they'd told her ahead of time. *They must think I'm still a baby who can't keep a secret.*

To make matters worse, when they gave mom her card, Carolyn saw that everyone had signed it - except her.

And Mom never even noticed. *I guess that shows how much they all care.*

Her throat was thick with unshed tears as she trudged towards the lodge. She wanted to reach her room, where she could have a good cry before the others returned.

Parked in front of the hotel was a big silver bus. As Carolyn approached, a crowd

of noisy children, about her age, were cramming suitcases in the baggage compartment. They were having such a good time that Carolyn leaned her skis against the wall and turned to watch them. Three grownups stood to one side, not entirely ignoring the boisterous youngsters, but not taking attendance or anything either.

A sad half smile tugged at her lips. *It must be wonderful to be part of a group like that.* She thought wistfully. *To belong.*

The kids began pushing and shoving each other as they boarded the bus. On impulse, she moved forward, joined the group, and made her way on board. As she reached to top steps, she hesitated. *What am I doing?*

The press of children coming behind pushed against her, and she allowed herself to be swept forward. Ducking her head to hide her face, she hurried down the aisle.

The back four seats of the bus were piled with extra suitcases and sleeping bags. Carolyn shoved in past the pile in the last seat on the right and squeezed into the corner. For once, she was glad she was small.

Once seated, Carolyn risked a peek over the mound of luggage. Her heart beat faster as she waited for someone to realize she shouldn't be here. But the other children were busy with their friends; tired from a fun school trip; and glad to be going home. No one paid any attention to the quiet girl hiding behind the back seat.

The three adults she had seen outside boarded the bus. One man slid behind the wheel, while the woman took out a clipboard and began taking attendance.

The other man walked slowly down the aisle, counting heads. He was so tall he had to bend forward from the waist to avoid hitting his head. Carolyn slipped off the seat onto the floor, and the smell of diesel fuel and wet fabric filled her nostrils.

She heard the growl of the engine, under the children's chattering. When she felt the gentle rocking peculiar to buses in motion, she risked another peek over the bags piled on the seat in front of her. Both teachers were sitting with their backs to her.

*I did it.* She snuggled back into the corner. *I really have run away from home!*

The thought didn't make her as happy as she expected, and there was a dull pain in her chest. Carolyn forced herself to remember her recent mistreatment and lifted her chin defiantly.

"Who needs a family, anyway?" She whispered.

Tears rolled down her cheeks and splashed on her hands.

She turned her head and stared out the window, watching the landscape rush by in the dying light of the setting sun. Soon the rocking motion, a day of fresh air and exercise, and the speed of the view flowing past her window, combined to make her eyes grow heavy. Before long, she was fast asleep.

Carolyn awoke, startled, when the bus lurched to a halt. She peered out the window and her heart sank. One glance assured her they had not stopped at a roadside restaurant where she might sneak off the bus and hide.

Facing her stood a red brick building with the prison-like appearance older schools often have. Bright pools of light shone from floodlights, exposing any hiding places the dark night might have offered.

A quick glance out the opposite window showed several parked cars, with doors opening as parents came to collect their children.

Intent on figuring out how to escape, Carolyn failed to notice the approaching teacher. The man who had counted heads earlier came to unload the extra baggage, and she had no place to hide. He stopped short when he saw her small golden head tucked in the corner.

"Well, hello there!" He grinned cheerfully. "Couldn't you find a better seat than that?"

She stared up at him, unsure what to say, her heart beating frantically.

"Cat got your tongue? I don't think I know you. Are you in Miss Wilson's class?"

Carolyn nodded. Maybe she could still get away once she got past this friendly giant. Unfortunately, Miss Wilson appeared behind him.

"Who's in my class?" She demanded. "I was sure I had everybody! Who'd I miss?"

The man obligingly turned sideways, and Miss Wilson peered past him. Her eyebrows rose in surprise as she stared at Carolyn.

"I'm sorry Mr. Davis. I have no idea who this young lady is."

He whistled softly as he looked down at her, then back at Miss Wilson. The teachers moved down the aisle and quietly consulted together, while Carolyn stared miserably down at her hands.

When he came back down the aisle, he began unloading the baggage. Miss Wilson

disappeared, and a few moments later Carolyn saw her enter the school.

Mr. Davis didn't speak again, but continued working, giving her a warm smile every time he caught her eye. However, he never left the bus, and his presence in the aisle effectively blocked her escape.

Miss Wilson had returned by the time the other children collected their belongings. Mr. Davis waited at the front of the bus as she walked towards Carolyn.

"Come along, my dear." Her voice was kind, and she held out her hand. "Let's go inside and get warm."

Subdued and defeated, Carolyn slowly slid across the seat to the aisle. Taking Miss Wilson's hand, she allowed herself to be led off the bus and into the school. Mr. Davis fell in place on her other side.

*I can't even run away properly. A stray tear ran down her cheek. No wonder no one wants me. Now these teachers will ask a lot of dumb questions and send me home.*

Miss Wilson smiled sympathetically over her head at Mr. Davis, who looked concerned. But neither of them asked her any questions. Instead, they took her into the teacher's lounge, where she was allowed to go to the bathroom and wash her face.

When Carolyn returned, she found hot chocolate and donuts waiting. At first, she wasn't sure she could eat anything, but she had missed supper and the sweet, chocolaty aroma was too tempting to resist. She was working on her second donut when she heard voices out in the hall.

One was her mother's.

Her mouth went dry, and Carolyn dropped the half-eaten donut onto the table.

*Mom and Peter will be furious with me. They'll shout at me for causing a fuss and ruining their vacation. She picked nervously at the donut, breaking it into little pieces. Now mom will finally have the excuse she needs to send me away. Then Peter will marry her and the others can have a new dad.*

The door flew open, and her mother rushed to her side. Kneeling, she grabbed Carolyn and began hugging and kissing her.

"Are you all right? I was so worried! If you ever do that again..." Tears streamed down Ellen's cheeks as she laughed and cried in relief.

"Thank you so much for calling the lodge, Miss Wilson." Peter shook her hand.

Carolyn's brothers and sisters came bursting into the room, as the teachers headed for the door, leaving her alone with her family.

She reached out and wiped the tears from her mother's face.

"You missed me?" Her voice was full of wonder.

"Of course I missed you." Her mother said fiercely.

"We all did." Peter came over and stood beside her. "How could we not miss you?"

Carolyn shrugged, annoyed to see him there. A little of her earlier anger came flooding back.

"Well, you didn't miss me when you planned this trip without me." She snapped. "Or gave mom a card without my name on it."

Her brother, Ricky, gave a moan and slapped himself hard on the forehead.

"The card!"

Everyone looked at him in surprise. "I'm sorry, munchkin." He said contritely. "I was supposed to get you to sign the card, and I forgot!"

Laura punched him in the arm as the others groaned. Carolyn gaped at him. They hadn't forgotten about her! She smiled. Not on purpose, anyway. Peter knelt beside her chair.

"I'm sorry I didn't include you in the family meeting." She refused to meet his eyes. "I thought you would be an excellent distraction for your mom, but I should have checked with you first. Forgive me?"

"I guess so." Carolyn shrugged and turned her head away from him.

"I missed you too." Peter continued softly. "I was afraid I'd have to go to the art show at the Museum all by myself."

Carolyn's head whipped around and she stared at him through narrowed eyes, her expression clearly daring him to prove it. Peter solemnly opened his wallet and handed her two tickets.

"I've been trying to ask you to come with me." He grinned slyly. "But you kept giving me the brush off."

Her cheeks flamed as she remembered all the times she had ignored and snubbed him when he tried to talk to her. Her mom hugged her again to get her attention.

"Why did you run away, hon?" She asked gently.

It was too much for Carolyn, who burst into tears, burying her face in her hands.

"M-m-my b-birth m-mom didn't w-w-want me." She sobbed. "W-why should y-you?"

"Oh, sweetie!" Mom drew Carolyn onto her lap on the floor and rocked her back and forth. "Your birth mother DID want you and loved you very much. But she was young and poor when she had you, and she had no family to help her. But she did the best she could for two years, then she gave you to us, because she wanted you to be healthy and happy.

"She didn't come to see you very often because it hurt her too much to leave you again." Mom stroked her hair. "That was a mistake though, because you were so young. When she came to your fourth birthday party, you didn't know her anymore.

"You made strange with her and cried every time she came near you. She felt bad about that, but that's when she knew you considered us your family. So she asked us if we would adopt you." Mom smiled. "She already knew we loved you."

She wiped away the tears on her daughter's cheek.

"We promised to tell you anything you wanted to know about her, but you never wanted to hear. Until now!" She shook her head ruefully. "If we had known the silly thoughts you were having, we would have MADE you listen." She kissed Carolyn again.

"We are your family." She swept her hand around the room, including all Carolyn's brothers and sisters, and Peter too. He winked at her, and Carolyn smiled shyly back. But her mom wasn't finished yet.

"Your birth mom is your family, too. I always planned to introduce you when you got older, but if you would like to meet her now, I can arrange it." She fixed her daughter with a mock stern stare. "But that does not mean I will ever stop loving you, or being your mother. Got it?"

Carolyn had to laugh out loud. Suddenly, she was so happy it seemed she might burst if she didn't let some of it out. Her brothers and sisters surged forward to pat or kiss her as she nodded and gave her mom a hug.

*Who needs a family?* Her smile lit up her face.

*I do!*