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It was a cold night, the coldest of the winter season. Not one single member of the night shift wanted to be at the hospital, but duty called, and they were there. The heaters were blasting warmth, and in the halls, nurses shivered, despite the extra coats they were wearing. It was a night to be home, a night to be snuggled up on a couch by the fire, smothered in blankets and drinking hot cocoa.

However, infants who deemed it the appropriate time to make their entry into the world were not going to postpone that entry due to the temperature and the storm that whirled about Oakley, Kansas—nearly a blizzard. In fact, the Labor and Delivery section of the hospital was filled to capacity. Which is why when the doors of the Emergency main entry were pushed open to admit a young woman of perhaps thirty-seven, obviously about to give birth, the staff behind the counter sighed mentally.

She was short, and red-haired, and freckled. She was dressed rather well, but was apparently quite frail, for hardly had she stepped into the building than she collapsed in a faint. The hospital faculty had absolutely no information about her—but what could they do? They took her to a room.

Half an hour later there was a new person in the world—a tiny, red-haired little girl with her mother's hair and chubby chin.

The little one cried. The nurse, in a hurry with other babies to attend to, swaddled her and laid her down by her mother, who was still unconscious.

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"Peter. Please?" another young mother whispered pleadingly, tears still slipping down her already wet cheeks as she calmed down somewhat from

the disappointment of her child being stillborn. The nurse had left them alone, with the baby.

Her husband, Peter, looked at her dubiously. He was heartbroken, grieved, and disappointed, himself; but Peter preferred *not* to burst into tears and wail loudly enough to alert the entire hospital as to their misfortune. But now it seemed that his wife wanted something from him.

"What?" If it sounded gruff, it wasn't meant to be. Peter's voice was always gruff. Especially when he was sad.

"Please, Peter. Switch him out."

Okay. So that was what she wanted.

Peter Sullivan sighed, taking a deep breath and running his hands through his hair. How was he going to say no? Very gently, of course—

But his wife's voice, accompanied with a sob, broke into his thoughts. "Please, Peter. We had so many things planned... I can't take it. I just can't take it. There were supposed to be three of us.

"How hard can it be? The hospital staff are obviously extremely busy. Just pop into one room with...the baby, and bring a ray of sunshine back with you. The nurses won't notice. They can't keep track of everyone. Please, Peter..."

"If you feel like this, what about the other person?" Peter demanded to know, his tone almost angry. Why couldn't she see sense? "Sarah, maybe God'll send us more children. We just have to wait. And in the meantime—"

"No, Peter, don't talk about waiting. I'll absolutely die if I don't get to bring home a precious darling like we planned. Peter—!" And Sarah burst into tears again, so loudly Peter winced despite himself.

"Alright," he said finally, to calm her. "I'll do it. But you better not be wrong about this. And I better not regret it."

It was the work of a moment for Peter to slip across the hall and return with a bundle of red-haired little girl who had, luckily for him, fallen asleep. And it was the work of another moment for him and his wife to act perfectly startled when the nurse returned, asking, hadn't their baby been stillborn?

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However, it was not the work of a moment to explain to the still-anonymous woman across the hall that her child was dead, upon her awakening. She held the baby, staring at it with what seemed shock to the nurses. She did not cry or get upset. And she did not say a word.

"Ma'am, what's your name?" they pressed. But she only looked up for an instant, and spoke a few words in a language no one understood. Then she looked back down at the baby.

Finally they left her. When they returned, with a more advanced translator than had been at the hospital before, she had disappeared, leaving no trace.







***SIXTEEN YEARS***

BY

PHILOMENA  
DASHJR

**PREVIEW**

FOR MY NEW LITTLE SISTER JULIANA  
ANNUNCIATA ESTHER.

—*PHILOMENA DASHJR, 15 NOVEMBER*  
*2021*





# 1

"Juliana. Juliana Grace Sullivan! *Please* don't let Nicole go running down the stairs like that. I nearly had a heart attack!" a woman shouted from a laundry room in the basement of big, homey house in Oakley, Kansas.

"Okay, Mom, I won't," a fifteen-year-old girl responded, glancing away from her book momentarily and towards the stairwell across the room which led down to the basement her mom was in.

She was tall. Her flaming red hair, chubby face, and sprinkling of freckles made her stand entirely apart from her younger siblings, all of whom had sharp features and blond hair like their parents. And not all the differences were on the outside—her temper matched her red hair, while in contrast most of her siblings were easygoing. Right now she was absorbed in reading a book she very much enjoyed, *Little Men* by Louisa Alcott. Juliana loved books, a passion not one of her siblings shared. But she laid the book aside as she heard her little sister Nicole's giggles on the stairs. Nicole was coming back upstairs—obviously with the intention of running back down again.

Nicole was only four, which was why her mother, Sarah Sullivan, didn't like her scrambling down the stairs screaming gleefully, although it was Nicole's favorite thing to do. Quietly, Juliana snuck up to the railing, and waited. One would've never guessed that Juliana didn't really believe that she was a Sullivan.

Moments later, the four-year-old Nicole reached the top of the stairway, laughing and shouting, "Downstairs again!" But the shout changed to a surprised yelp and then a disappointed howl as Juliana swept her little sister off her feet and carried her off to the couch.

"No!" the little one protested. "Out! Off! Lemme go!"

"Mom says no!" Juliana replied, swinging the little girl around in the air. Nicole squealed.

Just then three boys came tramping up the stairs, carrying air-soft guns and talking noisily about a new game they were inventing.

"And you can't go past the creek, that isn't fair," one of them, eleven years old, was telling the others.

"Right. But the woods is fine," his older brother, of thirteen, insisted.

"What about the mountain?" the third requested.

"No, the mountain isn't ours."

"But we can ask Mr. McKenna to let us—"

The boys had reached the top of the stairs, and now Juliana interrupted them. "Nathan, take Nicole with you."

"No!" Nathan, the thirteen-year-old, returned indignantly. "You watch her. You just wanna read!"

"Yeah, you just wanna read," the eleven-year-old echoed. "Books are stupid."

"Actually, they're amazing, and something must be wrong with your head," Juliana returned annoyed. "Take her with you!"

"Mo—om," wailed the youngest of the three. "Juliana's tryna ruin our game—"

"Take Nicole outside, Nathan, Jack, Michael—but you can ask Carol to watch her; she's in the garden with Lily and Fay," Sarah shouted from the laundry room. "But, boys: let Mark play with you, okay?"

"Okay, Mom!" Nathan, Jack, and Michael yelled in unison. Nathan grabbed Nicole's hand, and the four headed for the door which led from the kitchen to the deck.

Juliana was about to sit back down with her book, but her mother addressed her once more. "Juliana, can you sweep the kitchen?"

"Yeah!" With a reluctant glance at her book, still lying face-down on the sofa where she'd been sitting, Juliana walked into the kitchen.

Upon her opening the closet, Juliana was met with two brooms, a dust pan, cleaning supplies, and other closet items. She grabbed the dustpan and one of the brooms, being careful not to slam the closet door on her way out.

As she swept, she heard the sound of the washer starting up. Her mother came up the stairs and into the kitchen, where she opened the freezer and scrutinized its contents.

"Juliana, do you know where the pork chops we got yesterday are?" she asked finally.

Juliana nodded. "I brought them to the other freezer; this one was too full."

"Right." Sarah Sullivan shut the freezer and walked over to the other

one. "Are you sweeping under the counter edges?"

"Yeah," Juliana returned.

"Finish your homework?"

"Nah, but I'll do it later, when Rey comes over." Rachel Spruce, nicknamed Rey, was Juliana's best friend. Tall, with long and curly strawberry blonde hair, Rey was extremely popular at the school they went to, St. Joseph Catholic School, but when it came to associating with people she didn't know well, she was extremely shy and hated to be seen. Although Juliana was more outgoing, they got along well, and over the course of the years had become the best of friends, and inseparable. They loved to do homework together and they did it together every chance they got.

"Okay, so long as you'll get it done," Sarah nodded, carrying the pork over to the sink and turning on the water. "When's she coming again?"

"At five. She can stay till dinner. We'll do it on the porch," Juliana explained.

"Sounds good. When you finish sweeping, do you want to make dessert?" Sarah wondered, glancing fondly at her eldest. "And we could eat dessert before dinner, so that Rey can have some."

Juliana nodded, although she really wanted to finish *Little Men*. "What kind of dessert?"

"I dunno. What do you feel like?"

"Well, I mean, *I* feel like ice cream," Juliana giggled, sweeping her pile into the dust pan and dumping the dust pan into the trash.

Sarah shrugged. "Well, ice cream will do. But maybe you could make brownies or something to go on the side."

Juliana moaned convincingly. "Ooo, you're making me hungry, Mom!"

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"No nuts, please," Rey cautioned Juliana as Juliana served her ice cream: two heaping scoops of vanilla ice cream on top of an oversized brownie.

"Just peanuts, right?" Juliana teased her friend about her allergies as she spooned a layer of strawberry sauce onto the ice cream. It ran down the sides of the scoops and pooled around the edges of the bowl in a way that made Juliana literally lick her lips.

Rey made a face at her. "How about no dessert for you?"

"My turn! My turn!" Nicole, Fay, and Mark clamored as Juliana handed Rey's to her. Juliana grabbed Nicole's bowl from her and set about serving her siblings, starting with the youngest.

"I'll see you on the porch, Julie," Rey shouted to Juliana as she headed towards the front door with her dessert and her schoolbag.

"Right," Juliana yelled back.

Serving Nicole, Fay, Mark, Lily, Michael, Jack, Nathan, and Carol was easy, as the kids didn't care about Juliana's style of putting it in their bowls, only that she gave them as much as was allowed, and that everyone got equal shares. Then it was a simple task for Juliana to serve her mom and herself; Peter Sullivan hadn't come home from work yet. Sarah took to the living room, with a newspaper; the younger kids ran outside to the deck.

Shoving the nearly empty ice cream into the freezer, and putting the strawberry sauce back in the fridge, Juliana slung her backpack over her back, grabbed her bowl, and headed for the front door. The front porch wasn't as high up, nice, or cool, as the deck on the other side of the house, but it was quieter, as the deck was the boys' favorite place to play their war games, so Juliana and Rey often went there to do anything they wanted quiet for.

When Juliana got outside, Rey already had her books out. As they were all in the same classes, each of them only brought home certain books from school every day—they had everything they needed, because they did homework together, and it really lightened their backpacks. Juliana swung her backpack to the ground, letting it rest between her and Rey's rocking chairs. She sat down, her ice cream bowl on her lap. She and Rey took a few spoonfuls. It was the perfect complement to the late summer evening.

"Okay, so what are we starting with?" Juliana asked a few minutes later, pulling her homework planner out of her backpack.

"How about physics?" Rey suggested, licking her spoon.

"That works," Juliana replied. "Okay, so we have two pages of unit conversions," she added, glancing over her planner quickly. Its pages were covered in Juliana's neat and quick handwriting, handwriting no one else in the school could match.

Rey groaned, but Juliana grinned at her. "It's alright. Come on, why don't you like science?"

"It's all so stupid and useless!" Rey countered. "I'm not going to be a scientist!"

"It's *not* useless," Juliana contradicted her. "It's fun!"

Rey rolled her eyes. She wasn't going to argue with Juliana about science; no one could change Juliana's opinion on that subject—Juliana was a passionate science lover. "Whatever." She opened her physics workbook. "Here we go..."

Juliana saw her dad coming down the driveway, and waved. "Hi, Dad!"

"Hi, Juliana and Rey," Peter Sullivan smiled as he came up to the front porch, looking tired. "What's up?"

"Homework and ice cream," Juliana grinned.

"Lovely," Peter smiled, opening the door to go inside. "Have fun!"

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"Dishes, Juliana!" Nathan shouted after dinner that night.

"Very funny," Juliana laughed, getting up and putting her bowl in the sink. "It's your night and Mark's. I still have homework." She paused at the kitchen doorway. "Mom, need help with anything?"

"No, go ahead and finish homework," Sarah told her, scrubbing away at Nicole's messy face with a wet washcloth. Nicole always had a ball when spaghetti and meatballs were on the menu.

"Thanks," Juliana nodded, heading to her room.

Once there, she turned on the light; outside, the sun was setting. She pulled out her literature book, *The Fellowship of the Ring*; literature was all she had left for homework. She tried to lay on her stomach on her bed to read, and stick her feet in the air, but it was too uncomfortable.

"How on earth do they do it in books?" she muttered, grabbing a pillow from the headboard and tossing it across the bed against the wall. She sat on the bed, against the pillow and the wall, and pulled her knees up. Then she opened her book to Chapter 7.

It was only a few minutes, however, before she heard faint yelling from the other side of the wall. Juliana cringed and tried to ignore it. Sometimes her parents got mad at each other, and sometimes they yelled. Usually in the privacy of their room. Like they were doing now.

She'd finished the chapter, and had just about decided to do the second chapter somewhere else, when she heard something that caught her attention. It was the word *Juliana*. And her father had shouted it.

Juliana's hand tensed. The book fell closed on her lap, unnoticed.

Why did Dad say my name?

Sarah's reply was too quiet to hear. But Peter was obviously at the end of his rope, and his next words came through the wall loud and clear.

"It was unnecessary. Even you have to admit that now. And totally unfair on Juliana and her real family—whoever they are!"

Obviously the next thing Sarah did was warn him to be quiet, for the voices faded. But Juliana stared at the wall in shock.

Her real family?

She wasn't a Sullivan?

Why would an adoption—if she was adopted—be unfair to her 'real family'?

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Half a dozen times the next day, which was Wednesday, Juliana thought of broaching the subject to her mom. But she ended up postponing it till after a quieter-than-usual day at school. Till they were working on dinner together.

"Mom, was I adopted?" Juliana's voice was quiet and pensive.

Sarah stared for a moment. It wasn't the first time Juliana had asked that question. She'd asked it in second grade, and again in fifth. Sarah had answered 'No', both times. But this time there was something in the fifteen-year-old's eyes that forced Sarah to make a concession.

Sarah glanced at the floor, keeping her eyes off Juliana's face. "Well." Her voice was softer than usual. "You *were* adopted, Juliana. I won't hide it from you any more. You probably guessed on your own."

"Why did you and Dad keep it a secret?" Juliana wanted to know, trying not to sound as unconvinced as she was. "Why didn't you tell me? I asked before..." There was a hurt tone in her voice.

"We didn't want to hurt your feelings. We love you as much as the others, Juliana. You know that, don't you?" Sarah asked, finally venturing to look at the sophomore's face. Their eyes met.

"Yeah. I do." Juliana smiled.

But it was a fake smile. Juliana wanted the truth about her past. And *not* something she'd been able to guess easily.

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"Juliana, what's wrong with you?" Carol asked her older sister at dinner. "You've been so quiet all day!"

"I'm fine." Juliana forced a grin. She picked up her fork and ate a bite of stroganoff.

Carol smiled back at her, and Juliana looked around at all of them.

Adoptive siblings or not, she loved them. Helpful, caring Carol. Mischievous, rude Nathan, Jack, and Michael. Quiet Lily. Boisterous Mark.

Sweet Fay. Cute Nicole. Happy and affectionate, every one of them. She loved them all.

But there was a secret somewhere. Juliana wanted to know where she came from. Her roots. If she had another family, she wanted to know who they were. Their names. What they were like. Why she, Juliana, had been adopted.

For the first time, Juliana was wondering if maybe there was something more to it than adoption.

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"Psst. Juliana."

A few desks behind and diagonal to Rey's was Juliana's desk. She sat there, staring at the graded test Ms. Caroline Arthurs had passed back to her with the others. Juliana was completely zoned out, a fact that was really annoying her best friend.

"Juliana!" Rey hissed, under cover of the science video Caroline had projected to the screen at the front of the classroom.

No response.

Desperately, Rey aimed her pencil, and flicked it cautiously.

The pencil hit Juliana's arm, near her elbow. It startled her out of her reverie, and she just managed to catch the pencil out of reflex. She glanced around, seeing Rey pointing at the note she'd kicked to Juliana's desk.

Juliana bent momentarily to pick it up. She unfolded it in her lap.

Whassup?

Juliana glanced back at Rey, who was grinning at her. Quickly, using her hand to cover the edge of a scrap piece of paper, she penned back:

Nothing much, u?

The answer came back a few minutes later. While she waited, Juliana was careful to pay attention to the video Caroline was showing them—though it was just a review of stuff Juliana already knew.

Ur acting like a ghost!

Juliana glanced at Rey again, and shrugged. Rey looked frustrated, and bent down again to write something.

Come on, seriously. What's going on?

The answer Rey got then satisfied her curiosity.

Tell u later, k?

Rey tipped Juliana a thumb's-up.

To Be Continued...