

# JEALOUSY

*By Karen Anne Baumgardner*



ILLUSTRATED BY NEBOJSA RODIC

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A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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## JEALOUSY

By Karen Anne Baumgardner

### CHAPTER ONE

"Mom, it's dumb. I'm old enough to do it, and besides... Lots of kids' moms work, they don't... It's like..."

"Billy, you're too young, and that's final. Not another word. I want you and Danny ready for bed by the time she gets here. Are you listening to me, young man?"

"This is stupid," Billy grumbled under his breath. "Yes, Ma'am," he answered louder, resigned. "Am I getting my hair cut tomorrow? It's hot out, I'm too warm."

"We'll see. Let's see how much I make in tips tonight."

"You've been saying that for the last month."

"And there's never enough money. I can't help it."

"Maybe if you didn't pay someone to watch me while you're at work. Mom, I'm 15. I can take care of myself. And Danny."

"We're not going into that again. Go. I have to get ready for work."

Billy plodded heavily to the bedroom that had once belonged to his older sister, Christine, wondering what his 6—year—old brother was up to. He had disappeared shortly after the dinner dishes were put away, holing himself up quietly for nearly two hours doing God knew what.

*At least I don't have to watch,* Billy thought to himself.

That was one good thing about his sister running away from home last year, shortly after her 17th birthday. Danny had begun sleeping in her bed a few nights later, and eventually their mom had offered the room to him, after it became evident that Christine wasn't about to return anytime soon. Not that it looked anything like a boy's bedroom since Danny had moved in. Everything was still exactly as Chrissie had left it.

Billy sort of missed his sister, even if she had been weird since her sophomore year in high school, adopting a sort of grungy/punk hybrid mode of dress, her hair wild and seemingly a different color every other week, her nose and ears marked by numerous piercings, her attitude driving her mother crazy.

Hearing noise in Danny's room he opened the door to stare at his little brother in total surprise.

"I'm dressing my dolly so she'll look just like me. See?"

Danny held up the doll, trying to impress upon his older brother that the frilly blue dress that he was trying to fit on Christine's doll almost matched the one he himself

had taken from the boxes of old clothes in Christine's closet. "I'm telling Mom, you said a dirty word."

"MOM!" Billy called out, getting no answer. He returned his attention to his brother, who was looking up at him unabashed, cradling the doll in his arms.

"Danny, what are you doing?" he asked again.

"Playing."

"You can't..," Billy groaned and rolled his eyes at the ceiling. "Danny, Mom said to get ready for bed before Tracy Phillips gets here. Take that stuff off and get in the bathtub. Hurry up."

"I'm not Danny, I'm Michelle. That's what Chrissie said. Chrissie said I was pretty."

"Great. Danny, you look stupid. You're a boy, Danny. Boys don't wear dresses and play with dolls. Do you want people to make fun of you?"

"Chrissie said I can be a girl if I want to be. Who's Tracy Phillips?"

"I don't know. She's the new... She's going to stay here while Mom's at work."

"Is she nice?"

"How should I know, I never met her. Come on, put this stuff away and take your bath."

Before he could stop him, Danny had scooted past and was out the door.

"Mommy!" Danny ran into their mom's room and Billy sighed. *Great, she was going to be furious, and she wouldn't take it out on Danny. She never did.*

"Oh my, who's this pretty little girl?" Billy was shocked to hear his mom's gleefully surprised voice coming from her room.

"I'm Michelle."

"Such a lovely name. What's your dolly's name, Michelle?"

"Chelsea."

"She's pretty too, but not as pretty as you are. Your lipstick looks nice, and your blush. You look like a little dolly yourself."

"Really?"

"Really. Do you have a kiss for Mommy?"

"A kiss and a hug?"

"A kiss and a hug. Are you having fun?"

"Yes, Mommy. But... It was lots more fun when Chrissie played with me. Do I really have to get ready for bed?"

"Yes, sweetheart, you really have to, it's almost time. Did Chrissie dress you up like this before?"

"Uh—huh, lots of times. She used to make my hair curly and put ribbons in it and stuff, too, but I don't know how to. Billy said I look dumb."

"He does look dumb," Billy grumbled as he stood in the doorway behind them.

His mom gave him a warning look as she ran her fingers through Danny's long blond hair.

"You don't look dumb," Carrie, their mother, shushed, sitting on her bed and pulling Danny onto her lap. "You're the prettiest little girl I've ever seen. I know what we can do..." She brought Danny over to her make-up table and brushed his honey-blond hair out, then began rolling it in hot rollers. "After you take your bath, come back and I'll take these out, and your hair will be all curly. Don't get it wet, though."

"I won't." Danny beamed up at her, thrilled. He spun around excitedly to leave, and Billy caught a glimpse of a lace-edged white cotton slip and white nylon bloomers underneath the powder-blue dress Danny wore. "Mommy?" Danny paused as he headed for the door.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Will you fix Chelsea's dress for me? I can't do the buttons."

"Sure. Wait. Why don't we find Chelsea a nightgown and we'll get her ready for bed, too."

"I know where they are."

"Good. Here, I'll undo you, too." She spun Danny around and unzipped his dress, then slid it off his shoulders.

Billy watched, disturbed, as she sat him back down on the bed and slipped off his white patent T-strap shoes and rolled his lace-trimmed anklets off his feet.

"All set," Carrie proclaimed. "I'll hang up your dress."

Danny gave his mom another kiss and skipped to the bathroom in just his slip and panties, the hot rollers bobbing up and down as he traipsed happily down the hall.

"Don't you say a word," Carrie's mood changed abruptly as she stared across the room at her older son.

"Mom, he's weird."

"Billy, he's just a little boy, he's not hurting anybody. He misses Christine, you know that."

"Chrissie made him do this, he just said so. Mom, if somebody finds out, everybody will make fun of him, you know that."

"Him or you?"

Yeah, well..."

"That's what you're really worried about, isn't it? You're afraid your friends will make fun of you because of your brother?"

"He acts like a little sissy," Billy almost whispered, blushing, but not because she had guessed at the truth. In fact, he didn't really have any friends to speak of.

"He's only 6 years old. Besides, it's nice to see somebody in this house happy for once. Leave him alone. I mean it."

"Yeah, yeah. You're not going to let "her" see him like that, are you?"

"Who? Oh, you mean Tracy Phillips? I'm sure she won't care. Go start getting ready for bed, I have to get dressed.

Billy was sitting in his room listening to his walk—man when Danny came in fresh from his bath.

"Mommy said to tell you I'm out and you have to take your bath now. I used bubble bath, Mommy said I could. And I get to stay up late. Ha ha."

Billy didn't hear Danny's misdirected gloating, he was only aware of his presence. He took his attention from the magazine he was thumbing through and disengaged the ear—phones, looking up at his brother standing just a few feet from the foot of his bed.

"Mommy said I could stay up late," Danny repeated. "I got to use her bubble bath. Mommy said to take your bath."

"I don't take baths, stupid. I'm taking a shower. What the hell did you do?"

"I'm telling Mom you said 'hell'."

"Danny..." Billy got up and grabbed his brother's hand, dragging him roughly to the mirror over his dresser.

"Ow! You hurt me. I'm telling Mommy."

"Shut up. Look what you look like, you look like a girl, stupid. You have to change before she gets here."

"No I don't. Mommy said so, she said I look pretty. My hair is all curly, she fixed it like this for me. Stop calling me stupid, or I'll tell."

"You always tell Mom, you little cry—baby." Billy gave his brother a push on the shoulders, half—unintentionally shoving him into the chest of drawers. Danny fell to his knees and stayed on the floor holding his forehead as he began to bawl loudly.

"What's going on in here?" Carrie rushed in tugging awkwardly at the back zipper of her waitress' uniform, the hem of her dress riding up to reveal her black lace panties. Billy looked away, blushing heavily as she squatted over Danny's sobbing form.

"Billy hit me."

"I did not! I didn't hit him, Mom, honest. He fell into..."

His stammered explanation was interrupted by the door bell. Carrie helped Danny to his feet, and with him clinging to her side she went to answer it, leaving Billy to resume his position on the bed.

Danny was still crying when a harried Carrie Johnson opened the front door to admit the young woman she had hired to stay with her two sons for the night.

"Hi, Mrs. Johnson. I thought I'd come over a few minutes early, like you said, so you'd have time to give me a run—down on everything before you left. Is now okay, or am I getting you at a bad time?" She turned her attention to Danny as Carrie ushered her into the living room and locked the door. "Oh, what happened to you?" she purred, leaning over and hugging him warmly. "I'm Tracy, what's your name?"

"Michelle," Danny sniffed.

"I love your nightgown, Michelle, I used to have one just like it when I was your age. 'Strawberry Shortcake' was always my favorite. How come you're crying? You're too pretty to be crying..

"Billy pushed me and I hurt my head."

"Boys are stupid, aren't they?"

Danny shook his head vigorously in agreement. "They're dumb. I hate boys."

"Let me see how bad it is." Tracy lightly brushed the spring curls away from his forehead and examined the red mark. "I bet that hurts. You'll probably have a bruise tomorrow and a little bump. But I can make it feel better." She kissed the spot tenderly and began conspiring with him. "I've got some ice cream, we can have a party later for just you and me, okay? Before bedtime. It's chocolate with marshmallows in it, and we won't invite any boys, okay?"

Danny looked to his mother eagerly for permission, his pain forgotten.

Carrie, impressed with the way Tracy had handled the situation, began nodding her approval, then stopped short when she realized that she was going to have to explain what was going on to her new baby sitter.

"Can Chelsea have ice cream too?" Danny asked shyly.

"Is Chelsea your sister?"

"She's her." Danny offered up the doll he had been carrying cradled in his left arm, and Tracy accepted it, straightening up and rocking it in her arms.

"She's a pretty doll. You have matching nightgowns, too, that is so cute. Of course Chelsea can come to our party. What time does she have to be in bed?"

Danny looked hopefully at his mother again.

"Well..." Carrie considered, a playful look on her face. "Tomorrow's Saturday...I guess Chelsea can stay up until 10 o'clock, maybe. If she's a good girl. Are you going to be good for Tracy?"

"I'll be good. I'm always good, only boys are bad." He took Tracy's hand and tugged at her. "Wanna see my room, Tracy? It's neat, I have lots of dresses and dolls and stuff. They used to be my sister's, but now they're mine."

"I will in a minute, sweetie, your mom and I have to talk about some things first." She handed the doll back carefully, kissing both him and Chelsea on the cheek.

"Honey, why don't you and Chelsea wait for us in your room, we'll be up in a little while."

"Okay, Mommy." He turned to leave, then stopped short. "Is Tracy going to stay with us all the time?" It was more than a question, more like a desperate plea. Carrie understood right away that Danny adored the new "sitter", and so far the feeling seemed to be mutual.

"That's up to Tracy. She's only been here a few minutes, why don't you give her a chance to think about it. Okay?"

"Kay." Danny turned again and went off to his room under the dotting eyes of both Tracy and his mother.

"She's a little angel," Tracy gushed as they stepped into the kitchen.

"Believe it or not, it's not an act, either. He...er, she's always this good. You won't have any problems on that end."

"I can tell. I love her, she's adorable. Mrs. Johnson, I must have misunderstood you when you called last week... Oh well, it doesn't matter now, never mind. So how did you wind up getting my number? I'm sorry, do we have time?"

"You're early, and it only takes me ten minutes to get to work. I was thinking, if I could get my shift rescheduled, I might take some night classes starting next fall, so I went down to Harwood to look into it, and saw your name on the bulletin board. Anyway, so this is the kitchen, help yourself to whatever you want. The dishes will be done by the time you get here, I'll make sure of it, and the VCR and stereo are at your disposal. I'd kind of appreciate it if you didn't have your boyfriend over, at least not past 10 o'clock, okay?"

"No problemo," Tracy giggled a bit nervously. "Right now I'm sort of in Michelle's corner on that one. Boys are pretty stupid. At least the ones I know."

"That makes three of us," Carrie sighed wistfully.

"So what's regular bedtime?"

"Normally, Michelle is in bed no later than 8:30. Preferably 8 o'clock. Weekends are an exception, like tonight, unless she starts getting cranky. But she's never a problem, she usually goes when you tell her to."

Carrie was amazed at how easily she had begun to think of her younger son as her precious little girl. He was a spitting image of Christine when she was the same age, from the golden blond curls and peaches and cream complexion right down to the pink—painted nails on his chubby little hands and feet. She wished she could call in sick to work and stay home cuddled up in front of the television with him, brushing out his curls, reading him a fairy tale as he fell asleep, seeing his pretty tresses spread out over the pillow slip as he closed his eyes and dreamed about being a princess or a ballerina. She eyed Tracy almost enviously as the girl took a pint of ice cream from her backpack and stowed it in the freezer.

"So, are you into sports?" Carrie asked, admiring the royal blue spandex running outfit that flattered Tracy's tiny but well—toned body.

"I was on the gymnastics team in high school a couple years, until I hurt myself. Stress fracture; I came down real hard on my foot. The coach told me to work through it. Yeah, right. What a boob. I still run a lot, and I do aerobics and isometrics. I mean, when your favorite pig—out food is chocolate—marshmallow ice cream, you know...?" She looked at Carrie impishly and they both laughed. "I'm big on martial arts, self—defense, that sort of stuff now. I got into it in my senior year."

"Where did you go?"

"Queen of Heaven. There were these two girls holding Saturday classes for a while."



"Oh, I work with a girl who graduated from Queen of Heaven, her and her younger sister. In fact, I'm going to be relieving them in about an hour. Did you know an Annie Richmond? She's Ann Borsky now. She'd be a year ahead of you, I think."

"That's her! Annie and Patti, they're the ones who taught us martial arts."

"Patti?" Carrie raised an eyebrow. "Little tiny redhead?"

"Yeah, isn't she unbelievable? When they started out, they brought in this big guy, he's like 6'6," and Patti 'd just grab him by the wrist and flip him like he was a blow-up doll or something. And she's only, like 5'2", like me. You should have heard us scream. It was awesome! Hey, you have a pool. Awesome," Tracy noted with enthusiasm, looking out the kitchen window into the back yard. "Oh...um..." she blushed shyly.

"It's okay, you're welcome to use it," Carrie assured her. "I don't want Michelle out there unless you're with her, though. Understand?"

"Gotcha. How deep is it?"

"About four feet. She's a good swimmer, I had her at the 'Y' before she could walk, but still..." Tracy nodded her understanding while Carrie pictured a little girl in bouncing pigtails climbing the steps of the pool slide, concentrating as she carefully reached the top and sat on the platform, the tiny polka-dot skirt of her one-piece bathing suit fluttering back against her belly as she pushed off and slid gleefully into the water with a big splash.

*Or maybe a little two-piece suit, she thought. Michelle would look so cute in that pink bikini of Chrissie's, with the little rows of white fringe trimming the juvenile bra. God, I hope it's still around somewhere.*

"Don't worry, I'll be real careful," Tracy reaffirmed, bringing her out of her reverie.

"I love to swim myself," Carrie enthused. "That's what I did in high school. God, it seems like such a long time ago. I guess that's because it was," she giggled. "Keeps me in shape, anyway. That and the ten mile hike I take every night."

"Really? You walk a lot?"

"It goes with the job, what can I say. I can't complain, I think I look pretty good for a woman my age, if I don't say so myself. I'm 38, in case you were wondering."

"Wow, you look great," Tracy admired. "I would have guessed... I hope I look that good when I'm your age."

"I hope you don't have to wait tables six nights a week to do it. You would have guessed what?" she smirked.

"Oh." Tracy blushed again. "Twenty five or twenty six. Really. I bet that's what most people 'd guess."

"Thanks, Trace," Carrie said fondly, and they both started giggling again. "I know you're not just sucking up. I'm pretty damn proud of the way I look. It's nice to hear it from somebody else, though. So... You've met Michelle, I think you two hit it off pretty well together, am I right?"

“Oh yeah, she's precious. You have a little boy, too, right? I'm sure I'll get along with him just fine, don't worry.”

“Yes, well... He's not exactly a 'little' boy, although he acts like it most of the time. He's 15.” Carrie watched Tracy's reaction closely, noting that the smirk of ridicule she managed to suppress verbally was nonetheless evident in her eyes. “That's okay, laugh all you want. Billy's actually the reason you're here.”

“I don't get it. Isn't he kind of old for...”

“He's impossible. I went through this with my oldest daughter, she started up when she was his age, and I see myself going through the same thing with Billy, only worse. I don't know his friends, he's lazy, he's belligerent, he seems to have developed a cruel streak — you saw what he did to Michelle.”

“Beating up on little girls,” Tracy nodded in disgust. “Why don't you just tell him to shape up or ship out?”

“Because that's how I lost Christine.” Carrie started crying. “She ran away. I haven't seen her in almost a year. It's all just an act, he's so immature, and he thinks that by acting like this it makes him a man.”

“Sounds like a challenge. I'm sorry about your daughter, Mrs. Johnson, really I am. I think I'm starting to understand. But do you think I can handle him?”

“I think a couple of things could happen. He could develop a crush on you and follow you around like a lost puppy. Or he might be so embarrassed having someone so close to his own age baby—sitting him that he'll try to straighten out.”

“He could get worse, though,” Tracy posed. “Boys like him tend to think that the more obnoxious they act, the more they're impressing people.”

“I'm going for broke here, Tracy. I'm not going to let this happen again, and nothing else seems to work.”

“I haven't lost a battle with a boy yet, Mrs. Johnson. One way or the other, between the two of us I think we can break him, if that's what you want.”

“Yeah,” Carrie sighed. “I guess that's what I really want. If he doesn't change pretty soon he's going to be in real trouble.”

“I'll see what I can do about bringing him down a few notches. No holds barred?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Nothing yet. I don't know, let's see how he reacts to my being here. I have a brother his age, but he's a pretty cool dude. Most of the time, anyway.”

Danny interrupted their conversation as he came into the kitchen, crying, and ran up to Tracy. She lifted him almost without effort from the floor and he wrapped his arms around her neck, burying his face in her short brown hair.

“What's wrong, sweetheart?” Tracy patted the back of his head as she cooed sympathetically in his ear. Carrie had a good idea what was wrong, and felt her anger growing inside.

“Did he hit you?” Carrie snapped.

"N—no," Danny sobbed. "He took Chelsea, and he won't give her back to me. He said Tracy doesn't like me, that she makes fun of me like everybody else."

"Nobody makes fun of you."

"Billy said they do. He says that's why nobody wants to play with me."

"Oodhh," Tracy purred. "You know what I think? I think Billy is jealous 'cause you're so pretty. I bet you have lots of girlfriends."

Danny nodded.

"And I'm you're friend. We're gonna be best friends, right?"

Danny looked up and nodded again through his tears.

"Your mommy is so lucky to have a little girl like you." She kissed the red spot on his forehead and put him down. "Your mommy has to go to work in a few minutes, we have to finish talking. Then we'll go get Chelsea so she can say good night to her. Okay?"

"Kay." He turned to his mother. "Mommy, do I have to be a boy again tomorrow?"

Carrie cringed, and she stole a look at Tracy, who was doing a double—take. "Honey, go wait for us in your room like a good girl. No, you don't."

The two women remained uncomfortably silent as they stood facing each other, until Tracy finally broke the ice. "I didn't misunderstand you, did I? You did tell me you had two boys, didn't you?"

"Up until an hour or so ago, that's what I thought. I'm sorry, I should have said something right away, but...I got so caught up with her... You should have seen her in Christine's old dress, she was so happy. I didn't want to break the spell. Tracy, you have every right to be mad at me, but I had no idea this was going to happen."

"I'm not mad," Tracy sighed. "I don't know...I don't suppose there's any harm in it, I was just kinda shocked, you know?"

"She is an angel, isn't she?" Carrie suggested, almost slyly.

"I could love her to death," Tracy agreed.

"So you'll stay and work for me?"

"I need the job," Tracy shrugged. "Yeah, I think it'll be cool."

"What about Billy? You haven't met him yet."

"I'm sure we'll get along, no sweat." She winked conspiratorially, and they both started giggling again. "Guess it's time to meet him, huh?"

"He's in his room. That's pretty much where he stays all the time, with his headphones. I really don't think he has too many friends. It's hard to say, the only time he ever talks to me is when he's complaining about something. He's a lot like his father that way. That's one of the reasons I worry so much. It's like he's got this big chip on his shoulder. Not just with me, but with everybody."

"Sounds like a million boys I know," Tracy commiserated, the words "boys" sounding like an incurable disease.

"At least with Christine, I knew what she was thinking." Carrie shook her head in dismay, remembering the terrible arguments she and her daughter had on a regular basis. "I even kind of understood what she was going through. But with Billy..." She shook her head again. "Just like his dad."

"Your husband was a bad guy?" Tracy asked tentatively. "Sorry, I shouldn't be so nosey."

"He was a good provider," Carrie answered almost proudly, then wondered why she was defending a man she had grown to hate over the course of fifteen years. Tracy was looking at her quizzically. "Well, he was, actually. He worked hard. We've got this house, and the pool, and we always had nice things and money in the bank. He's generous with child support now that he's gone. At least I can say that for him."

Tracy kept looking her directly in the eye, almost daring her to go on.

"I hated him. He was a miserable SOB, I hope I never see his face again."

"Did he hit you?"

"Oh yeah, all the time. Not in front of the kids, ever, but I'm sure they had an idea. That's one reason I worry so much about Billy. And that damn Chrissie, she adored the rat. She thought he was God, and he never so much as held her in his arms. Not even when she was a baby." Carrie's tale of woe had started picking up steam. "He was hardly ever home, which I guess was just as well. He had his nights out with the boys, which eventually became stretches of days a' a time, and it wasn't his buddies he was sleeping over with, if you know what I mean. And there were lots of them, he made a point of letting me know how I measured up to the other women he was sleeping with. I was stupid enough to put up with it, so in a way it was my own fault, I guess. But, there were the kids to think of, I couldn't see myself just throwing him out and maybe winding up on welfare, or homeless even."

"So what finally happened?"

"Oh, it was hilarious, practically. He came home one night for once, and we got into an argument, and he smacked me around, then he packs himself a suitcase and says he's had it with me. HE'S had it with ME! Unbelievable. After about a week I changed the locks on the doors, then sat around waiting for the other shoe to fall. It never did, really. He never came back. So I started looking for a job. You know how that goes, it's not like I was overqualified for anything. So that's how I wound up working at 'The Flaming Steer' the last 3 years. Oh geez, look what time it is. You ready to face the music?"

"Sure, why not."

The two women started up to the second floor, Carrie leading the way.

"You know, I've never talked about all this to anybody before. Thanks for listening, Trace." Carrie gave Tracy a warm smile as they stood outside Billy's room. "Thanks for being so nice to my little girl."

"We're gonna be best friends." Tracy beamed back at her. "All three of us. Who knows, maybe even all four of us."

"You're an incurable optimist. Okay, I'll make the introduction, then he's all yours. I'm going to work."

She knocked on the door loudly, and when they didn't get any response she edged it open and poked her head inside the room.

"Billy, I want you to meet your new baby sitter."

Billy lolled back on his bed wearing his best glower. He had turned down the volume on his earphones when he felt them coming up the stairs, but he wasn't about to let them know that. Why did his mom have to use that word?

Then SHE came in, and his heart almost stopped. He could feel himself blushing although he prayed that he wasn't, or at least that she wouldn't notice. How could his mom do this, to him? She hardly looked older than he was, 16 at the most, and she was going to watch him like he was a little kid? No way was he going to stand for this humiliation.

Tracy stood next to Carrie and examined the boy busily ignoring them a few feet away. In a way she was surprised. He looked so pretty, his long blond hair tickling his shoulders, the headphones framing a delicate face that was quickly turning beet red under her scrutiny. Long, wispy lashes highlighted his downcast blue eyes, and his soft lips were frozen in what was meant to be a scowl, but in fact looked more like a childish pout. Tracy had a momentary flash and decided to run with it.

"This is your other little girl, then?" She turned and winked at Carrie, watching Billy from the corner of her eye. He flinched and turned even redder as his jaws clenched, and she knew he could hear them, headphones or not. Time to lay it on thick, she decided.

"She's a darling, just like her little sister. They're both so pretty, you are SO lucky, Mrs. Johnson. Do you dress them to match a lot?"

"Tracy, this isn't my daughter, this is my son, Billy." Carrie's eyes were twinkling as she played out her own Version of the game.

"Oh...I thought...I mean, with the doll and all..." She sat on the edge of the bed and picked up Chelsea, who was nestled against Billy's thigh. "I think that's just so cute, a little boy who plays with dolls. How old is he? 10? 11? I swear, Carrie, if you put a dress on him and curled his hair, he and Michelle could be twins, practically," she noted, realizing that she was only stretching the truth a little. Then she started having second thoughts. *No wonder this kid is having problems. He's 15, and he looks like he's 12 — a 12 year old girl on top of it. Maybe I'm making a mistake.*

She watched his pouting lips begin to tremble, and waited for him to start crying, but no tears came. Just as well, she was starting to feel guilty enough as it was. She got up, brushing out the doll's mussed hair with her fingers.

"Oh well..." She shrugged at Carrie and moved for the door.

"That was dumb of me, I shouldn't have done that to him," Tracy whispered to Carrie when they were out in the hall again.

"Oh, I don't know. I thought you put him in his place pretty well," Carrie giggled. "I liked the part about the little girls in the matching dresses."

"He is pretty," Tracy admitted, noting that Carrie had that far—away look in her eyes again. "You know, I think maybe that's his whole problem. Plus, he's so petite on top of it. He must have it rough.~I think he needs a friend, somebody who'll boost his confidence a little. Someone to talk to. I hope I didn't blow it just now."

"I bet that would fit him," Carrie murmured to herself.

"Huh?"

"Chrissie always had such pretty things, she adored getting dressed up. Until she started changing, anyway. There's just lots of clothes in her closet he could wear." Tracy stared at her as Carrie Came back down to earth, realizing she was no longer talking about Michelle, but her other son. "Oh, sorry. I'd better watch out, or you'll think I'm nuts, talking to myself like that."

"Who doesn't? I talk to myself all the time. Maybe we're both crazy. Did you write down a number where I can reach you if I need you?"

"It's on the wall next to the phone with the emergency numbers," Carrie told her. "By the way, if you feel like a midnight swim, there's some bathing suits in Chrissie's closet. The box is marked, Michelle probably knows where they are. Or you could borrow one of mine. Or you could just do like I do in the middle of the night," she smirked. "It's pretty private with that high fence around the yard. Just don't stand on the slide."

"Gotcha," Tracy snickered. "Thanks, Mrs. Johnson."

"Carrie. Time to say good night to my little girl," she announced, crossing the hall to Christine's old room. The sight of a perfectly sweet little girl sitting on the floor playing with her sister's old doll house made her eyes mist over, and she quickly stooped down for a kiss and a smothering hug. Carrie was surprised to discover that Danny was crying softly to himself.

"What's the matter, sweetie?"

"Mommy, do I hafta go to school Monday?" he sniffed.

"That's 3 days away, honey. Just think, two more weeks and then summer vacation." *What's this all about?* Carrie wondered. Danny loved school and got along well with his teacher and classmates, especially the little girls.

"I have to be a boy then?" he lamented.

"Oh. Yes, honey, I'm afraid so," she answered regretfully. "Tell you what..." she paused. "That's only when you're at school, though. When you're at home, you're our little girl. Mine and Tracy 's. Okay?"

"Kay. Can I help cook breakfast tomorrow when you come home?"

"Sure. You can be Mommy's little helper. I have to go now, honey. You be good for Tracy." She hugged him again, and he covered her cheeks with kisses, his curls tickling her face. Carrie once again wished she could just call in sick, send Tracy home, and spend the weekend with this little bundle of joy. She stood up, Danny still clinging to her, and patted his head. "Sleep tight."

“Don't let the bedbugs bite,” he answered, happily now. “Can Tracy see my room now?”

“Sure, if she wants to.” She turned to Tracy. “It's all right, I can see myself out. You'll be okay with...?” She let Billy's name hang in the air, unspoken.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Mind if I come in?” Tracy tapped lightly at the door which had been left curiously ajar, as she poked her head into Billy's room. He sat, sphinx like, on the bed, a magazine in his lap, leaning back against the headboards, staring back at her while refusing to acknowledge her presence. She gave him an easy smile, then came over and sat on the edge of the bed next to him.

“My name's Tracy, by the way.” *God, he looks so cute when he blushes like that.* “Look... I'm really sorry about what I said before. I was just teasing, but I know it was a pretty mean thing to do. So anyway, I apologize.” No response. “So, like, what school do you go to?”

“Ogden,” he grumbled.

“Really?” *Hey, I'm making progress already.* “My brother goes there. Do you know Jason Kelly? He's a freshman. You are too, right?”

“Thought your name was Phillips,” Jason mumbled, his face turning redder.

“Well, he's my step—brother, actually. My dad died when I was 12, and my mom remarried. My step—father is nice. So's Jason, he's a cool kid. I still miss my dad a lot, though.”

“I don't. I'm glad mine is gone.”

“Oh...Yeah...Well...” Tracy was surprised. From what she had seen so far, and from what Carrie had told her, she was under the impression that Billy was doing his best to imitate his dad. “So do you know Jason?”

“Uh—uh,” Billy lied. Of course he knew Jason Kelly, he was in some of his classes at Ogden High. Everybody knew Jason: He was smart, good—looking, a good athlete, probably the most popular boy in his class. All the guys wanted to hang with him, all the girls were driven to fits of whispering and giggling whenever he passed by. Even some of the sophomores and juniors. Unlike most boys with his enviable status, Jason was quiet and unassuming. Shy, even. Billy wasn't sure what he wanted most: To be like Jason Kelly, or to be a part of his social circle.

But he was Billy Johnson, a nobody. Not a punker, or a jock, or a brain — although he always got good grades. Not even a nerd. Just Billy Johnson. The Invisible Kid. He doubted if Jason Kelly even knew who he was.

The strange part about it, the part that made him really uncomfortable, was that any time he was around Jason, he felt weird. Just thinking about Jason made his heart beat faster, his legs would get all rubbery, he'd be tongue—tied, almost in a state of panic.

It was so bizarre, he acted just like most of the girls at school did when Jason was around. He had even dreamed one time — more than once, actually — that he was a girl, and Jason was kissing him. He wondered what that made him. He wondered even more why the fact that another boy was kissing him didn't bother him as much as did the emptiness inside, of knowing it would never happen.

In his dream he was a babe, a real fox, prettier than any of the girls at school, and Jason was so sweet, so kind, so handsome. He chose Billy over all the other girls, and when they were alone, Jason put his arms around her, and their lips met, and he wanted it to last forever, and then he'd wake up crying.

"Are you okay?" Tracy was craning her neck, trying to look into his eyes.

*Oh God, she knows what I'm thinking. What if he finds out? She's going to go home and tell Jason that she's my baby sitter. Then what will he think? Maybe he won't recognize my name. Oh God, I hope not. Please God, don't let her tell.*

"Billy?" She eyed him speculatively. He's going to cry or something, he looks like he's about to jump out of his skin. "I'm a freshman too," she went on, trying to keep up a semblance of normalcy. "I'm at Harwood Community College. It's pretty laid-back, I was surprised at first. It's a lot easier than high school was. Weird."

No response.

"Look...Michelle's asleep. I brought some ice cream, there's some left if you want it. Just..." She looked around as if someone might be listening, then started whispering. "Don't tell Michelle, she'll get mad if she finds out you ate the rest of it. You wanna watch a movie? You've got some pretty good tapes, we could make some popcorn?" she offered.

"Nngghh."

"Or maybe not," Tracy sighed, giving up. "Look, we both know this is condo oddo, I know it's embarrassing for you, me being here and all, but it'd be easier if we could try to be friends. I don't care what you do, as long as you tell me where you're going and stay out of trouble, okay? Let's just say I'm here to take care of Michelle, how's that sound?"

"His name is DANNY!" Billy shouted.

"Shhh. You'll wake her up. I think your mom decided a few hours ago that her name is Michelle from now on. And if you ever lay a hand on her again, I'm going to make you real sorry. Got it?"

Billy stared at the wall opposite, as if she had already left the room.

"You'd better be listening," she warned him again as she got up.

"Yeah, I heard you," Billy muttered. *What could she do to him? She was barely bigger than he was, and she was a girl. Besides, he couldn't let her find out the truth: Not only did he have a crush on Jason Kelly, he had a crush on Jason's sister, as well.*