

C H A P E R . 1

“HE IS, TOO!”

“He ain’t, either!”

“He is, too!”

“He ain’t, either!” I screamed back at my little sister.

Grief! Why in the world did Mother and Daddy want so many kids? It was peaceful and calm and quiet and easy when it was just me. Now I have to deal with two bratty sisters plus another kid on the way.

I glared down at Ann with her grimy little hand on her hip, tapping her dirty, bare foot. It’s amazing how someone so small can make your life so miserable.

She balled her fists, stretched up on her tiptoes, and screeched at the top of her lungs, “He is, too!”

I’d had enough. I bent over her, stared into those squinty blue eyes, and growled through my teeth, “He . . . ain’t . . . either.”

We were eyeball-to-eyeball, nose-to-nose. Her hot breath hit me in the face, but I didn’t blink.

“Bitsy, what’s going on in here?” my mother yelled as

she came through the back door with her empty laundry basket.

Now, correct me if I'm wrong here, but weren't there *two* kids in this argument?

I stood up real straight and held myself as tall as I could. "Ann says that Bobby Crumley is my boyfriend, and he ain't."

"He isn't," Mother said.

I turned to Ann and smirked. "See, I told you so."

"No, Bitsy," my mother corrected. "You said 'ain't,' and it should be 'isn't.' Now y'all stop all this fussing and set the table for supper."

I looked at my mother and didn't say a word. *Is that it? Just "Now y'all set the table for supper?" How about an apology from Ann? Is that too much to ask around here? Grief!*

I climbed up on the counter and pulled down five chipped plates from the cabinet. I wanted to ask my mother what was the big deal about setting the table anyway. It's not like we have a real supper. It's not like we have real food. But I kept my mouth shut.

As I set the plates on the table, Mother sliced the fatback and threw it in the frying pan, just like she had done for the past three days. I watched the sweat trickle down her face and wondered if she was as tired of fatback and honey buns as I was.

Mother says we should just thank the good Lord that we have food to eat. She says there are poor kids who don't have any food at all. Now, don't get me wrong, I

thank God every day for the greasy fatback and old honey buns. But I certainly wouldn't mind it if He decided to send some pizza my way. Hey, maybe on that day I could send my fatback and honey bun to the poor kids!

Anyway, Ann plopped down in front of the TV and started watching "Sesame Street" with my baby sister, Lynn, while I did all the work. But I wasn't complaining. At least they weren't bugging me, for once. I looked across the room at Ann and wondered how we could possibly be sisters. I guess you could say we're complete opposites.

I'm always the shortest person in my class; that's why they call me Bitsy—my real name is Elizabeth Ruth Burroughs. I have short brown hair that's real curly, and brown eyes, and a big dimple right in the middle of my chin, just like my daddy. I'm not the least bit shy, and I can beat up any guy my age. I've done it lots of times. I'm the only girl in the whole softball league, and most of my friends are guys.

And then there's Ann. Her real name is Margaret Ann, after my Aunt Margaret. But Mother didn't want to have two Margarets in the family, so we just call my sister Ann. Anyway, like I said, she's not at all like me. She's kinda tall for her age, has straight blonde hair, and those squinty blue eyes. She's real shy and doesn't like to be with other people. I wish she didn't like to be with me, but she sure seems to be hanging around all the time. And believe me, a twelve-year-old does not want a six-

year-old hanging around.

Now, my baby sister, Lynn, isn't as much trouble. Maybe it's because she's just three and hasn't learned how to aggravate me yet. Or maybe it just doesn't seem like she's as much trouble since she looks exactly like me. But she's still a bratty little sister. Her name is Lynn Jeanine. Mother wanted to have a redheaded daughter, but Lynn ended up looking just like me and Daddy.

And then there's the new one. I couldn't believe it when Mother told me we were going to have another baby. Why would anybody want four kids? Especially since Mother and Daddy always say we don't have enough money. When she told me there was going to be another one, I asked her where the money was going to come from to pay for it. I even reminded her of that awful day when me and Ann and Lynn had to hide in her bedroom while that bill collector was banging on the front door.

He was yelling, "I know you're in there, Mrs. Burroughs. And you know you're three months late on your payment!" It was really scary for the little kids, but I knew I could protect us if I had to.

Anyway, Mother said that money isn't everything and that they were very thankful for the new baby, even if I wasn't. Then she told me she hoped it was another girl so we could have a Burroughs Sisters Quartet. She keeps saying she wants us to sing on TV like the Lemon Sisters, whoever they are. Can you believe it? Me singing with my bratty sisters? Now, don't get me wrong. I love to

sing, and I'm great on stage. But personally, I'd rather just have a baby brother and sing by myself on TV.

Supper that night was like every other night, with Ann and Lynn making their usual racket while we asked God to bless the food, and their usual mess while we ate it all up. And, as usual, Daddy didn't get home in time to eat with us.

See, my daddy drives a bread truck, which means he delivers bread to all the stores and restaurants around town. It's a hard job and he works long hours, but at least we get the old bread and honey buns for free. Daddy says this job really does put food on the table. And I always laugh when he says it, even though I've heard him say it at least a thousand times.

"Nine o'clock, girls," my mother announced as "The Waltons" rerun ended. "Time for bed."

"Please let me stay up till Daddy gets home," I begged.

"Me, too!" cried Ann.

"Me, too!" echoed Lynn.

But my mother didn't back down. "No. I said it's time for bed, and that's what I mean."

Now, I have to give my mother credit here. She says what she means and she means what she says. So when Mother says, "Time for bed," that's it. No amount of begging or pleading or tantrum-throwing will get her to change her mind. But sometimes I just have to give it a try. And this was one of those times. I needed to see my daddy.

I decided to try the adult approach. I didn't cry. I didn't even whine. I just said, real grown-up-like, "Mother, please let me stay up. I'm too big to go to bed the same time the little kids do." Now, that was a mature statement if I've ever heard one.

"Yes, Bitsy, you're right. You really should be able to stay up later. But to be honest, I need you to go to bed early tonight. I need the peace and quiet."

She needs the peace and quiet? *She* needs the peace and quiet? I'm the one who has to live in a tiny bedroom with wall-to-wall beds holding wall-to-wall kids! I'm the one who'll have to put up with a bawling baby in the crib and Ann and Lynn sharing the bunk below me. I'm the one who has to put up with kids getting into my stuff. Why can't some of these kids go sleep in *her* room where they can bother *her* stuff? Grief!

So much for adult conversation.

Fifteen minutes later I was lying in bed, feeling sorry for myself and listening to the endless *slurp-slurp-slurp* of my two thumb-sucking sisters. Then I remembered the box, the big cardboard box under the crib.

You see, Daddy is always working extra jobs or inventing new gadgets in order to make more money for our family. His latest business was filling bubble gum machines, and a year's supply of gum balls was hidden in the box under the crib.

I was the only one who knew it was there. The day I found it, Daddy explained that there was no other place in our little house to put the box, and he would just have

to trust me not to eat up all his profits. He didn't say I couldn't have any, he just said there were a few rules attached.

First of all, I could only chew one piece a day. Second of all, I couldn't go to sleep with gum in my mouth. And third of all, I had to brush my teeth after I finished the gum. I followed the rules almost every day.

But that night I imagined a crunchy red ball rolling around my mouth and could even taste the sweet juice as it ran all over my tongue. The temptation was more than I could bear. "I'll brush my teeth twice as long tomorrow," I promised God.

I climbed down from my top bunk, quietly opened the lid of the box, and reached my hand into the secret stash of bubble gum balls. My heart was pounding like a jackhammer as I waved my fingers back and forth through the round goodies. In the darkness, I selected the perfect gum ball, pulled it out of the box, and placed it between my teeth. Just as I crunched the gum in two, I heard the screen door creak open. Daddy was home!

I threw the gum into the trash can and ran the few steps from my bedroom to the living room. "Daddy!" I jumped into his arms just as Mother was waking up on the couch.

"I'm glad you're still awake, Bitsy," he said, grinning from ear to ear.

I turned to Mother and smiled. I wanted to say, *See, I knew Daddy wanted me to stay up.* But I didn't say anything.

Daddy continued, “I have some good news!”

Mother pulled herself up, and Daddy patted the couch for me to sit beside him. His brown eyes were sparkling as he proudly said, “Guess what. We’re going on a vacation!”

I jumped up and down. “A vacation! We’ve never had a vacation before!”

Daddy stood and held out his arms for Mother’s hug.

But Mother was already arguing. “Robert, you know we can’t afford a vacation. How can you even suggest such nonsense?”

He sat down. “Well, Ruth, that’s the first exciting part. We *can* afford it!”

My mother couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “What are—?”

“At work today they announced the Salesman of the Quarter. And guess who got it? Me!”

I jumped up and down. Daddy stood and held out his arms again. But Mother wasn’t giving up that easy.

“I’m very proud of you, Robert,” she said. “But what does that have to do with us going on vacation?”

I stopped jumping. Daddy sat back down on the couch.

“That’s the second exciting part,” he said. “Along with the award, I also got a hundred-dollar bonus!”

I jumped up and down again. Daddy stood and held out his arms.

But no hug was coming from Mother. “Honey, that’s great,” she said. “But a hundred dollars won’t pay for a vacation.”

I stopped jumping. Daddy plopped back down on the couch.

“That’s the third exciting part,” he said. “There’s a man at work, I think you’ve met him—Mr. Mull?”

Mother stared at Daddy. She didn’t say anything.

“Well, anyway, he said we could use his cabin at Tybee Island, Georgia, for only twenty dollars for the whole week. And it’s right on the beach!”

I didn’t jump up and down this time. I watched my mother and waited. But Daddy stood again and held out his arms.

“Twenty dollars?” she whispered.

He had her! My mother could always appreciate a good bargain. At last she ran into Daddy’s arms. I jumped up and down.

Daddy continued with the plans. “After the twenty dollars for the cabin, we’ll still have eighty dollars to buy gas and food while we’re there.”

Food? Did Daddy say “food”?

“Do you mean real food like you buy in the grocery store?” I asked.

“Yep! No stale honey buns or fried fatback for this family for a whole week! We’ll even go out to eat one night at the famous Williams Seafood Restaurant!”

“Hot dog!” I yelled. “When do we get to go?”

“Next week.”

“Next week?” Mother said. “Robert, you know we can’t go until after the baby is born. It’s too close to time.”

“But, Ruth, next week is the only time the cabin is available. And the baby isn’t due for another month. If it will make you feel better, I’ll find us a doctor as soon as we get there, just in case. But it’s next week or not at all.”

I looked at Daddy. I looked at Mother. Don’t tell me this kid is going to mess up my life before it’s even born!

“Okay,” Mother said. “Just remember, it’s a vacation for me, too.”

“Uh, one other thing,” Daddy said. “I’ve developed a suntan lotion—”

“A suntan lotion? Robert, what in the world do you know about suntan lotion?”

“That’s not the point. Look, everybody’s buying some kind of lotion and getting a suntan. And what about this stuff called Bronzetone? Do you know what’s in it? Nothing but lanolin and mineral oil and a few other things. And somebody’s making a million! It might as well be me!”

“But, Robert—”

“Don’t you see, Ruth? This could be our year to make it big.”

“But, Robert—” Mother tried again, more forcefully.

“No ‘buts,’” Daddy said. “I’ve already decided. My lotion is called TanTone. And we’ll test it at the beach!”