

# Hide And Seek

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Johnny glanced at the house. “Mum’s too busy to play, Matt. Like always.” He aimed a half-hearted smile at his brother. “But *we* can play. Go hide; I’ll count.”

Matt nodded, leapt up and scurried away.

Johnny covered his eyes. “One... two... three....”

On reaching fifty, he uncovered his eyes and searched the garden for the splash of red marking a t-shirt amongst the toys and bushes.

“The house is cheating, remember?”

The whisper of a chill breeze blew through the empty garden.

Disappointed at his failure to trick a response from his playmate, Johnny checked the swings, tree house and shed. “Matt, that’s not fair.” He stamped his foot. “You can’t hide in the house; Mum said we’re not allowed!”

Silence.

Grumbling, Johnny trudged back into the house to search each room.

“Matt?” He cupped his hands around his mouth. “Matt!”

His search took him to the study, where Carol hunched over her laptop, grey hair falling into her eyes. He flinched when she turned on him.

“I thought I told you to play in the garden.”

“I was, Mum,” he sniffed, “but it’s hide and seek. Matt’s cheating.”

Coral stared at him. “Who?”

“Matt. And he’s cheating. Remember; you said we could only play in the garden, but he’s inside. That’s cheating, right?”

“Jonathan,” Coral’s voice softened. “I think you’re getting confused. Matthew isn’t here, remember?” She grasped his hands.

He shook his head. “I know you said he’s gone, but we were playing, just now; I swear.”

Coral blinked rapidly. “No, darling. We talked about this. Matt’s sleeping with God’s angels now. He can’t play any more.”

Johnny stared at her. Bit his lip. At last he said; “Don’t worry Mum, I think I know where he is.” He tugged free and walked away.

Coral pursed her lips. Turning to the laptop, she gazed at the framed photo beside it, featuring two young boys with identical features. One wearing blue, the other, red, both grinning.

She touched the face of the second child. Pressed the frame against her chest. "Where did you go?" She whispered. Tears scalded her eyes.

Sniffing, Coral followed the sound of Johnny's voice to his bedroom. "Maybe if I explain one more time..."

She squatted beside her son, turning her gaze from the carpet indents marking a recently absent bed. "Are you okay?"

Johnny tugged at the air conditioning vent.

"Sweetheart?"

"He must be here. He's come here before."

Coral frowned. "No, I warned you about getting stuck in here, didn't I? That's why we screwed it shut."

"Matt!" Johnny shouted over her. "You cheated."

"No, Johnny. That's enough."

"But, Mum, he's right there. Look!"

Despite herself, Coral's gaze followed his finger.

Deep within the gloom of the vent she glimpsed five tiny fingers and a small body, covered in dust. A body wearing blue denim and a dusty red t-shirt.

Coral screamed.