Adventures in Genetics

by TheMissingDays

Tony McCallister is an ambitious college student on the cusp of graduation. With the promise of great rewards he puts himself on the line. But will things go as they should for him, or will complications arise?

A very special thanks to for the commission and coming up with the premise for this story.

The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

Adventures in Genetics: Part 1 - Chapter 1

A Little Sip

Tony McCallister took a deep breath holding the beaker with the cloudy mixture.

“You don't have to do this if you're having second thoughts,” Dr. Pai said with a serious countenance.

“I'm not having second thoughts,” Tony said shaking his head. “Just remembering the moment.”

Tony then took a deep breath as he knocked back the mixture with the expertise of a college student that was no stranger to the beer bong.

“How does it taste?” Dr. Pai asked with some curiosity.

“Very tart,” Tony said scrunching up his face.

“Good thing the taste doesn't matter,” Dr. Pai chuckled as he handed Tony a bottle of soda to wash away the taste. After Tony took a couple of gulps he replaced the cap.

“I don't feel anything,” Tony said.

“Give it some time,” Dr. Pai replied.

“We saw changes within the mice in an hour though,” Tony said.

“You are not a mouse,” Dr. Pai said. “Besides we don't even know if it will actually do anything. A mouse's genetic makeup is a little different than a humans.”

“I suppose,” Tony said.

“Why don't you stick around for awhile so we can make observations.” Dr. Pai suggested.

“Sounds good,” Tony said.

“I could look over your thesis in the meantime,” Dr. Pai offered.

“Sure,” Tony said going into his bag and pulling out the thick thesis that Tony was working on letting it fall with a thud on the doctor's desk. As Dr. Pai went through discussing it with Tony the 21 year old college senior was having trouble focusing. He was waiting to feel something, anything. This just had to work.

The reason Tony was even in the lab was because of Dr. Pai's research on an anti-aging serum that if he was successful with would take the anti-aging beauty world by storm. With a full dosage regimen one could easily take eight years off of their appearance. What Tony took, they estimated would take maybe one or two years. Tony was a college senior at the university studying genetics. He had worked hard his whole life to even get to this point.

He had grown up with his single mother and younger brother who was now a sophmore at the very same university. His Mom had worked hard to provide for her kids and they had

gotten by, yet Tony knew she would never be able to afford to send her kids to college. So he had scrimped and saved what money he could as well as landing a good scholarship. With graduation looming at the end of the year Tony knew he would need further education if he was ever going to land a good job in his field and while the scholarship he had gotten had helped him he had still accrued some debt. He didn't have money for a master's degree and beyond. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life on the lowest rungs of his field. Sure it wasn't as if he couldn't get an alright paying job, but he wanted more. He wanted to be able to provide for his Mom and maybe even take the burden off his brother as well. Their Mom was two years away from retirement, she deserved the rest and he wanted to provide that for her.

Tony had worked hard and had eventually found his way to Dr. Pai. Half the reason Tony had wanted to attend this school was because of the man'a research on genetics in the first place. The papers Dr. Pai had published had drawn Tony's attention. The man was ambitious. Tony had somehow talked the man into taking him on as a lab assistant. Dr. Pai had taken a liking to him sensing some of the same ambition in the young man that he possessed. That's when Tony had learned of what the man was working on. The anti-aging serum was being funded by some major pharmaceutical company. If successful there was a lot of money on the table. Tony had made himself indispensable to the doctor, so much so that Dr. Pai had promised Tony credit on the research upon publishing. It would be a huge boon for Tony to have his name on published research such as this, he would no doubt

have his pick on where to further his education. Dr. Pai had also promised him a part of the money that would be paid out upon completion of the research, which Tony needed.

The problem came when it was time to gear up for human trials. They would take years to get approved, years Tony didn't have. That's when the contact had said it. They either waited or they found a way to prove it would work on humans which would fast track the human trials into approval. Of course it had been said in jest. There was no way to prove something like that, unless someone volunteered.

Tony had told the Doctor he would do it. Dr. Pai had refused outright, it was too risky they would just have to wait. Yet Tony was nothing if not persistent. After months of convincing Dr. Pai had finally relented yet not without warning. Tony had brushed it aside. He had spent two years already on this, he knew it would work just as designed, it just had too.

“Tony look at me,” Dr. Pai said bringing Tony's attention back on him. The doctor stared at him for a long moment. Tony looked at the clock it had been two hours since he had taken the serum, where had the time gone? Dr. Pai took out a camera and took a picture. He then plugged it into his computer. He brought up a side by side view of a picture the doctor had taken before Tony had drank the serum. Tony stood behind him looking at the pictures side by side. It was subtle yet at the same time noticeable, he looked younger than he had.

“No way,” Tony breathed out. He took out his phone going through some photos before coming upon one of him from two years ago. He held it up to the screen they looked identical. It had worked. Tony and Dr. Pai turned slowly to look at one another before both of them threw up their hands in astonishment. “It worked,” Tony crowed. The two men celebrated jumping up and down holding each others shoulders as if they were athletes who had just won the big game.

“Okay, okay,” Dr. Pai said calming down. Tomorrow we will go to the research hospital to get some samples but for now I say we go and properly celebrate. Tony and Dr. Pai went down the street to a bar for a toast. To Tony's amusement he actually got carded. The last two years his face had changed a little, not a lot but enough to exude a sense of ruggedness that he didn't really get carded often. Although as Tony took back his card he did notice he did bear more of a resemblance to the fresh faced eighteen year old in the photo with the shaggy brown hair and the slightly rounder face. The two men toasted as they discussed what this meant. They were going to be able to fast track human testing now and if that went as well as this, Dr. Pai was going to be looking at a very large sum of money, which of course Tony would be getting a 25% cut off.

“That was more than we agreed.” Tony mentioned not wanting to seem greedy.

“You've pushed this project ahead by years,” Dr. Pai said. “You've earned it. Plus I know you can use it. You'll be able

to get into any master's program you want with this and my glowing letter of recommendation of course.

Tony thanked Dr. Pai. The two men then said their goodbyes as Tony began the walk back to his dorm. He walked up to the fourth floor before coming to his door. He walked into a darkened room. It was a little lame to still be living in the dorms as a senior but his scholarship included a free room provided he stayed on campus, plus it wasn't all bad since he got to room with Aiden.

Aiden was a sophmore and he was on the basketball team making a name for himself. The most important thing however was that he and Aiden were dating. They were a strange couple to say the least. Most would think that they would have nothing in common. What with Tony being more of a bookish scholar and Aiden a rising star athlete. They had met last year when Tony had decided to do some tutoring that would get him a stipend from the school. Aiden had needed some help with chemistry. The two of them hit it off immediately. Aiden had been very different than how Tony had anticipated. He didn't seem to have the arrogance that he should be above the school work like a lot of the athletes Tony tutored. Aiden seemed to take it seriously and he was one of the easiest people Tony had ever talked too, exuding a certain charisma that seemed magnetic. It was only their third session together when it had ended with them behind the library making out. The very next semester they were dorm mates.

Tony stood in front of the mirror in the room looking at his

face. He couldn't stop marveling at it. He hadn't even felt anything, which was a wonder. Just then he heard the door jiggling. Tony turned to see Aiden come striding into the room. His workout bag strung across his back and another plastic bag in his hand. Tony turned to face him a little nervous. Would Aiden even notice? He hadn't told him anything about what he and Dr. Pai had been working on. As Aiden saw him he smiled. His wide toothy smile gave Tony a fluttery feeling in his stomach.

“Got dinner,” Aiden said setting the bag down on a small end table near his bed before sitting down on his bed kicking off his shoes before ruffling up his short blonde hair. Tony grimaced a little seeing the food. He didn't like that Aiden brought and bought food for him all the time. Aiden always defended himself saying that he had to take care of Tony or he would wither away with his nose in a book. Tony didn't like to feel like he was being taken care of. Still the food smelled good. Tony took a seat on his own bed across the room from Aiden.

“So how was practice?” Tony asked looking straight at Aiden.

“Ah you know same old same old, except coach was really riding me today,” Aiden said looking up at Tony.

“I see,” Tony said looking a little sheepish as he watched Aiden look at him for the first time. He became even more nervous when he noticed Aiden was staring at him.

“You look different,” Aiden finally said.

“I do?” Tony said looking a little flustered.

“Yeah you do,” Aiden said getting up and walking up to Tony. He lifted Tony's chin up as he peered down at him before smiling. “I knew it,” Aiden said. “You started using that facial moisturizer I gave you, right?”

“Yeah that's it,” Tony said laughing as he removed his chin from Aiden's hand. “How did you know?”

“Your skin looks clearer,” Aiden said sitting back on his bed. “Now you gonna come eat or what?”

Tony smiled as he went over to Aiden's bed. They sat cross legged across from one another as they ate talking about nothing in particular. Once they were done, Aiden grabbed both of the styrofoam trays and threw them away.

“Thanks for dinner,” Tony said. “What do I owe you?”

“Not a chance,” Aiden said. “My treat.”

“C'mon,” Tony sighed even though they had had this conversation many times before. “I don't really like it when you don't let me pay for anything.”

“If you really want to pay me back then help me with this organic chemistry homework,” Aiden said coming back to the bed with a thick textbook in his hand. “Nothing this professor says makes sense, honestly I just tune him out most of the class.”

“If you want to understand it, you really oughta listen,” Tony said with a chuckle.

“Why? I know you'll be able to help me out,” Aiden smirked. “Plus I like listening to you explain this stuff to me.”

The guys sat as Tony walked Aiden through the homework.

“So that makes sense now, right?

“Hhmhhm,” Aiden nodded. “Good thing I got you or else I'd never pass.”

Tony waited as Aiden packed up his stuff before getting down to just his boxers. Tony stood up looking at his boyfriend's toned physique. This was the first serious gay relationship he had ever been in. He had only come out upon getting to college. He wrapped Aiden up in a hug. He looked up a little since Aiden was a few inches taller than him before planting a kiss on his lips. Sometime he just couldn't help himself. Aiden was just too irresistible. He was everything Tony could hope for. He was funny, good looking, and generous. Aiden came from a well to do family, a stark difference from Tony's own upbringing. When he and Aiden had started dating it felt as if sometimes he was entering into a different world. A perfect example being last summer when Aiden had taken him up to his families lake house and they had spent the week together enjoying the summer days and having long nights of raucous partying and romantic encounters. The feelings of a new relationship had not yet left him.

“What's that for?” Aiden laughed.

“I need a reason to kiss you?” Tony asked.

“Nah,” Aiden said before they kissed again. Tony then sat

back down on the bed. For some reason he felt unnaturally tired all of a sudden.

“So like you wanna do something?” Tony then asked.

“To tell you the truth I'm a little sore,” Aiden grimaced. “But if you wanna I'm down.”

“Nah,” Tony said. “I'm tired too anyways.”

“Want to watch some more of that show?” Aiden asked.

Sounds good,” Tony said. It wasn't long before Tony had gotten down to his own boxers and the two of them were snuggled under the covers of Aiden's bed. Tony couldn't even remember the last time he had slept in his own bed across the dorm. They had their heads resting against one another as they watched the series they had started the previous night on Aiden's laptop. Tony found his eyes drooping before he finally fell asleep.

The alarm blared as Tony woke up. He could feel his head laying on top of Aiden's chest. Without even opening his eyes he reached over to silence the alarm clock, before laying his head back down on his boyfriends chest. He placed a hand on Aiden's chest. He caught himself marveling at how big Aiden's chest felt before quickly ushering the thought away.

“Aiden time to get up,” Tony croaked rubbing Aiden's chest. He heard him grumble a little. Suddenly Tony's head dropped down onto the pillow as he felt Aiden's body swiftly pull out from under him. He heard a loud thud. Tony opened his eyes and sat up and saw Aiden on the ground with a shocked look

on his face.

“Who the hell are you?” Aiden gasped. Tony rubbed his eyes in confusion.

“What are you –,” Tony froze. His voice sounded different. He then looked down at his hands. They looked smaller. He shook his head a little.

“Is this a joke?' Aiden said with an angry look as he stood up. “How did you even get in here?”

“I live here,” Tony said shakily confirming that his voice did indeed sound different. It wasn't nearly as deep as it should have been, sounding more like some kids voice who had only just dropped down a register.

“You do not,” Aiden bellowed. “I want some answers and now. Who are you?”

Tony then shot out of the bed running over to the mirror. What he saw looking back horrified him. The features on his face that showed his maturity had melted away. His clear skin was gone and replaced with a slightly ruddy and oily look. His face showing signs that it had only just started to shed some of its rounded features. He could see some wisp of peach fuzz just starting to form on his upper lip and a little acne on his jawline. Tony had not even got acne until he had started high school.

“Kid who are you?” Aiden then said although he wasn't yelling anymore and only looked a little annoyed.

“It's me Tony I swear,” Tony said his voice cracking into a high octave.

“Was this Tony's idea?” Aiden said looking a little disgusted. “Where is he this isn't funny.”

Tony didn't reply. He was following Aiden's gaze as his own eyes looked down. He certainly had never had Aiden's toned physique but he had still been somewhat fit. All that was gone as he was left with a scrawnier body shape. Tony then looked at the boxers he was wearing that were hanging on just barely to his waist and being helped by the tent he was now sporting on his crotch.

“Kid seriously,” Aiden said noticing the same thing as he looked away. Tony yelped as his face went a deep scarlet. He ran to his own bed grabbing the blankets to cover up. He didn't know why he felt so embarrassed with Aiden seeing him in such a state. He had been naked with Aiden plenty of times. So it really shouldn't be that big of deal. Yet at that moment he felt completely ashamed.

“Thats it,” Aiden said throwing up his hands. “I'm calling security right now.”

“Wait,” Tony squeaked. “I can explain!”

Chapter 2

Adventures in Genetics: Part Two - Chapter 2

“Thats a little far-fetched,” Aiden said cocking his head. Tony had just told him everything about Dr. Pai and the serum they had worked on. “You really expect me to believe that?”

“Its the truth,” Tony said. “I'm really Tony, I swear.” Aiden grimaced.

“You can't expect me to believe something like that,” Aiden said. Just then there was a knock on the door.

“Oh no,” Tony groaned. “That's probably Jamie we were supposed to meet up this morning. You gotta tell him to go away, I don't want him to see me like this.”

“Why? Does that ruin your little plan?” Aiden said somewhat bruskly as he pulled on some sweatpants before going to the door.

“Aiden no,” Tony yelped yet Aiden was already opening the door. Jamie was standing out in the hall. He looked was a little surprised to see Aiden shirtless.

“Did I wake you guys up?” he asked looking apologetically as he shook his head a little causing his curly chestnut hair to bounce a little.

“Not at all,” Aiden said. “But I think you need to have a talk with your brother.”

“I don't really want to get in between a lovers quarrel,” Jamie said with a chuckle walking into the room before he stopped dead in his tracks seeing Tony on the bed.

“Well kid here is your brother,” Aiden said giving a condescending smile towards Tony. “Go on and say hi.”

“Tony!” Jamie exclaimed as he ran over to Tony putting his hands on both of Tony's shoulders.

“What in the world.” Aiden looked on with a surprised look. “Are you in on this?” Aiden asked.

“In on a what?” Jamie said looking at Aiden with an incredulous look. “How did this happen?”

“You tell me,” Aiden said. “I woke up and this kid was in bed with me. You're not saying this is actually Tony?”

“I think I know my own brother when I see him,” Jamie said.

“That is not Tony,” Aiden said becoming fed up with a joke that had gone on too long. “That kid looks like he is in middle school.” Jamie then took out his phone.

“My mom uploaded all of our photo's onto the cloud,” he said as he began swiping. He held the phone up to Tony's face before shaking his head and swiping more. After a minute he held up his phone again and then got up turning to Aiden. “This is Tony's freshman year photo from high school,” he said handing the phone to Aiden. Not even Aiden could deny it any longer seeing an identical photo of the boy who was now sitting on the bed.

“No way,” Aiden said letting out a breath.

“Tony what happened?” Jamie said looking down at Tony.

“I was working on an anti-aging serum with Dr. Pai and well I volunteered to be the first subject,” Tony said hanging his head low. His only option being as upfront as possible.

“You what!” Jamie exclaimed.

“It wasn't supposed to work like this,” Tony yelped. “It was only supposed to take off two years.” There was silence in the room as Jamie rubbed the bridge of his nose. Aiden took a seat on the bed next to Tony.

“I'm sorry,” he said softly putting an arm around Tony. “I should have believed you from the start,” he said. Tony put his his head was up against Aiden's chest. He was just glad that Aiden finally believed him.

“It's okay,” Tony said. “I wouldn't have believed me either.”

“We need to go see Dr. Pai,” Jamie said.

“For sure,” Aiden said grabbing a shirt and pulling it on.

“You got practice though,” Tony said.

“I think this is a good excuse,” Aiden replied.

“You should go,” Tony said. “Its not like there is much you can do at this point,” Tony reasoned. He didn't really want an entourage with him. He was becoming a little uncomfortable with the way they were fussing over him.

“Alright,” Aiden said with some hesitation. “But call me with any updates.”

After Aiden left Tony went to get some clothes on. The boxers he was wearing were slipping down now. He dug through his clothes trying to find something. By the time he was done he had given up on underwear all together. The pants he had on were also baggy and he had to tighten a belt as much as he could. He then found a shirt. Looking at himself in the mirror Tony could only groan. He literally looked like a little kid trying on their Dad's clothes.

Walking across campus was also hard as his shoes were too big. At one point Tony tripped colliding into another student.

“Watch we're you're going kid,” the student said with some ire.

“Sorry,” Jamie said apologizing for his brother as he quickly grabbed Tony to steady him. They finally got to Dr. Pai's office as Tony hurriedly knocked. The doctor opened the door looking a little confused as to why a kid who looked no older than fourteen was standing in front of him.

“Can I help you?” Dr. Pai said.

“Its me Tony,” the frazzled teen said. The Doctor looked back with a blank expression before his eyes widened.

“Come in,” he said stepping aside. Once the two boys were in the room he shut the door turning towards them.

“Dr. Pai something's gone wrong. This morning I woke up

like this it was only supposed to be two years," Tony said his panicking voice cracking at the end.

"I can see that," Dr. Pai said running his hand through his hair with a befuddled look.

"I don't understand though, I took only a small dose this shouldn't be possible." Tony mewled.

"I think we should head to the hospital immediately to get those samples," The doctor said.

"Hospital!" Tony squeaked. "I don't want to go like this."

"We need to," Dr. Pai said. "Its the only way we will know whats happening."

"Can we revers this somehow?" Jamie piped up.

"I can't say," Dr. Pai said shaking his head. "Not until we know exactly whats happening only then can we come up with some way to stop it."

"B-but," Tony began to stutter. Going to the hospital was making him nervous. He had never been a fan. Even as a teenager he had tried to avoid going when possible, although he thought he had outgrown these feelings long ago.

"Tony we gotta go," Jamie said putting an arm around his brother. "I'm going to come to."

"Okay," Tony whispered.

Dr. Pai drove them over in his car. On the way over he was asking Tony all sorts of questions. Had he noticed any other

changes? Tony did not think anything had changed other than his physical appearance. At the hospital Tony was introduced to the doctor who was also helping Dr. Pai with research. He had remembered meeting him once before. After a long examination and another couple of hours of waiting the two doctors came into the exam room.

“We've gotten a good look at your cells,” Dr. Pai explained. He then went into a long explanation that Jamie couldn't follow yet Tony seemed to understand.

“I'm sorry,” Jamie said. “But what is exactly is happening?”

“In simple terms,” Tony said. “My cells are rapidly regenerating themselves its the basis of how the serum works but for some reason they kicked into overdrive and are doing it longer and faster than they should.”

“So wait,” Jamie said, with wide eyes. “Does that mean you'll get younger?”

“At this point no,” the other doctor said. “As far as we can see the cells have stopped.”

“They are still active though,” Dr. Pai said.

“So we can't really rule it out,” Tony said with some worry. Everyone was silent for some time each of them grappling with the facts of the situation.

“We'll just have to hope that doesn't happen,” Jamie finally said.

“I'm going to stay here and work on a way to reverse this,”

Dr. Pai said.

“I can help,” Tony said.

“No,” Dr. Pai said. “You've already been through a lot, you should probably rest.”

“I don't think I could,” Tony said.

“Dr. Pai is right,” the other doctor said. “Your body has been through a big change, pushing it might actually cause another regression.” Tony fell silent as he nodded.

“I'll give you a ride back,” Dr. Pai said.

“Thats alright,” Jamie said “We'll take the bus, I'm sure Tony would rather you get to work.”

Dr. Pai just nodded. Tony sulked on the bus. His mind was racing as he thought about what he was going to do. He could very well be stuck like this. After some time Jamie got up from his seat beckoning Tony to follow as the bus came to a stop.

“What are we doing?” Tony asked upon getting onto the sidewalk and realizing this wasn't their stop.

“I thought we should get you some clothes,” Jamie said pointing to a big box store down the way. Tony just nodded. Getting into the store Tony made his way to the men's department. He looked through some of the clothes, realizing he didn't even know his size anymore.

“You know maybe we should try a different section,” Jamie

said picking up a pair of pants and looking at the tag.

“I'm not small enough to shop in the kids section,” Tony said with a gasp.

“I realize that,” Jamie said. “I think we need to go to the young men's section though.”

“Jamie,” Tony whined a little. “I don't want to dress like a kid.”

“Its not like its going to be full of Sesame Street stuff,” Jamie sighed. “They'll look normal, now c'mon,” Jamie said as he walked off. Tony followed along without a hint of resistance. As they walked along he realized how easily he had listened to Jamie's command. Tony felt like he was shopping with his Mom again when he had actually been a teenager. As they got to the section Tony walked ahead just so he didn't feel like he was following along with Jamie.

As his younger brother had said the clothes looked normal and after taking a pair of pants into one of the dressing rooms Tony figured out his size. He grabbed another pair of jeans and a couple of shirts.

“Sure you don't want more?” Jamie asked looking at the meager selection that Tony held in his hands.

“I don't want to buy a lot,” Tony said. “I'm hoping Dr. Pai will come up with something fast.”

“Yeah, I guess you're right,” Jamie nodded as they both seemingly wanted to hold out hope this was going to a minor

glitch and that Tony would be back to his old self in a day or two. “I guess we need just some shoes and underwear then,” Jamie said.

“Jamie!” Tony exclaimed as his face went a little red. Jamie chuckled.

“What?” Jamie asked.

“Don't say stuff like that,” Tony mumbled.

“You're embarrassed by me mentioning underwear?” Jamie asked looking befuddled.

“A little,” Tony mumbled once again feeling more and more like he was a kid being taken around on a shopping trip.

“Now you really do sound like a teenager,” Jamie chuckled. Tony just walked away. They got to the underwear section where Tony grabbed some plain black boxer briefs before leaving hurriedly to go to the shoe department where he picked out a pair of sneakers that would fit his feet. After that they went to the register to pay.

“That'll be 215 dollars,” the cashier said after she had rang everything up. Tony balked at how expensive it was. He muttered under his breath as he went for his wallet when he realized he didn't have it with him.

“I don't have my wallet,” Tony said sheepishly as he looked back at Jamie.

“I got it,” Jamie said with a smile. “Why don't you go change while I pay.” Tony nodded taking the bag towards the

bathroom. As he was changing he took stock of the changes. He could see that he looked more like a kid that had started puberty not too long ago, yet it wasn't that far off from what he usually looked like. He still had hair under his pits as well as his groin although he could still tell there had been a slight downgrade between his legs. Tony actually began to think about what would happen if he stayed like this. He would certainly be shorter but he could still attend classes just fine and maybe he could even start working out a little to regain some the mass he had lost. Tony shook his head. What was he thinking? He didn't need to make plans like that, he wasn't staying like this. Dr. Pai would have a fix soon. Coming out of the bathroom he found Jamie waiting by the doors.

“Looks like it fits,” Jamie said giving his older brother a once over.

Um yeah,” Tony muttered. “I'll pay you back once we get back to the dorm.”

“Don't worry about it,” Jamie said waving his hand. Tony grimaced. He was going to pay Jamie back no matter how much he refused.

Back on the bus the brothers didn't talk much. Tony was feeling beyond tired as he let his head slump against Jamie's shoulder. Some time later he was being shaken awake by Jamie as they were now at their stop.

“Oh sorry,” Tony said standing up quickly. “I didn't mean to fall asleep.”

“The doctor said you would be tired,” Jamie noted. As they walked back onto campus Jamie asked what Tony was going to do now. Tony said he was just going to go back to the dorm and sleep.

“You want me to walk you back?” Jamie asked.

“No,” Tony said shaking his head. “I got it.”

Tony made it back to his dorm coming into the empty room. He collapsed onto his bed. There were so many thoughts racing through his head, yet at the moment he couldn't seem to focus on even one before another popped up pushing the other one away. He kicked off his shoes and got his pants off before he crawled under the covers. All he wanted to do was go to sleep – and that is what he did.

Tony felt himself being shaken as he opened his eyes. He sat up wiping the sleep from his eyes he looked over to see Aiden staring down at him. He smiled to see the face of his boyfriend feeling oddly at ease. However Aiden's face was painted in concern.

“I don't want to freak you out...but” Aiden said. Tony took in a sharp breath as he looked down at his hands. They were smaller, of that he was sure. He tore the covers off of himself. His legs had become even more slender and completely smooth. The shirt he was wearing was noticeably more baggy.

“Nooo,” Tony mewled as he felt his voice in a higher register. He swung his legs out of the bed to run over to the mirror, he took two steps before his boxers fell around his ankles as he

tripped falling on the floor. However he had no time to react as he scramble back to his feet to get to the mirror. What he saw staring back at him was a boy. His brown hair had exploded out into shaggy mop. His face was round with two apple like cheeks. His skin had lost the oily esque sheen and looked clear and smooth without a hint of even peach fuzz. Tony watched as his big green eyes blinked back at him. His shoulders were slender as the shirt looked baggy and came to just above his thighs.

“Aiden,” Tony yelped turning to face his boyfriend.

“Just calm down and take a deep breath,” Aiden said motioning with his hands in a downward motion. Tony's face crumpled a little as he buried his face into his hands.

“Call Jamie,” Tony wept. “I want Jamie.” Aiden nodded as he grabbed his phone to make the call.

As soon as they heard the knock on the door Tony regretted making the request. Why had he called out for Jamie like that? Aiden opened the door as Jamie came in. He took in a breath through his teeth. Jamie went and took a seat on the bed next to Tony who was now under the covers sitting up.

“You feeling okay?” Jamie asked with a worried look.

“That's what you have to say,” Tony screeched. “I look like a little kid.”

“I can see that,” Jamie said slowly. “But you need to calm down, screaming isn't going to get us anywhere. We knew this was a possibility.”

Tony bit his lower lip before flopping back flat onto the bed pulling the covers over himself almost feeling as if he had just been reprimanded by Jamie of all people. Jamie, his little brother whom Tony had looked out for all their lives growing up. Even if there was only a small age gap between them Tony had always been the de facto older brother. He had been the one who had been put in charge when their Mom had to work late and he had given Jamie all sorts of brotherly advice over the years. To feel that he was being scolded in anyway by Jamie did not sit well with Tony in the least.

“We need a plan,” Jamie said looking over at Aiden. “I'm gonna call Dr. Pai and let him know whats happening.” Jamie said as he got up and walked out into the hall to make a phone call. Once Jamie had left Aiden sat on the bed next to Tony.

“Hey can you sit up,” Aiden said shaking Tony's leg underneath the covers.

“Why?” Tony grumbled from underneath.

“Because I want to talk to you,” Aiden said in a sing song voice. Tony sat up giving Aiden a grumpy look.

“What,” he said gruffly. Aiden gave him a small smile.

“I know you're going through a lot but I want you to know I'm still here with you,” Aiden said as he leaned over wrapping Tony up into a hug. “I'm gonna help you with whatever alright,” Aiden said. Tony returned the hug.

“Thanks Aiden,” he said softly. “That means a lot.”

“There feel better?” Aiden asked as he released his small boyfriend.

“A little,” Tony said. He did find himself feeling a little better after getting some comfort from Aiden. Then again that wasn't new. Aiden seemed to always be able to sense when Tony was having a bad day despite his best efforts to conceal it. He would always come out of nowhere to offer a hug and that seemed to be enough to help Tony a little.

“So how old do you think you are now?” Aiden then asked.

“I dunno,” Tony shrugged.

“Well don't you have pictures on your phone like Jamie?” Aiden asked.

“Oh yeah,” Tony said grabbing his phone from the end table near his bed, remembering all the photo's stored on the cloud. He began swiping through them although he found it a little hard to compare them to himself. “I can't really tell,” Tony said handing his phone to Aiden who took over. Aiden began swiping stopping to look at the photo to Tony's current appearance. After a couple of minutes Aiden held the phone screen up side by side next to Tony's face.

“Perfect match,” Aiden said giving an awkward smile as he handed the phone over to Tony who saw a picture of himself in a fishing vest as he held up a large fish on a line next to him. Tony saw the date displayed at the top from when the picture was taken.

“I'm nine,” Tony said scrunching up his face before slumping

forward letting the phone fall from his hand.

“Hey that's not too bad,” Aiden said trying to be optimistic, yet Tony could gather no such agreement for the comment.

“Whats so good about that?” Tony grumbled.

“At least its not eight,” Aiden chuckled. Tony only looked back un-amused. Jamie then came back into the room.

“Well?” Aiden asked.

“Dr. Pai said, well unexpected, this was not outside the realm of possibility as I said before,” Jamie said.

“So he's just going to keep getting younger?” Aiden asked looking at Tony with some concern.

“No,” Jamie replied. “The good news is that the cells they observed have slowed down. So Tony shouldn't get any younger suddenly like he did today. But he still did caution that the cells could re-activate if Tony is put under a lot of stress, so he should take it easy. Dr. Pai also said he has gotten Tony excused from classes for the next couple of days and he has some other papers for us as well, that will smooth out any problems that may arise with people seeing a kid walking around the dorms. I just have to run over to his office an grab them.”

“I'll go get them,” Aiden said standing up. “I'll also run down to that thrift store down the street and see if I can find some clothes for him to wear.” Tony took in a breath. He didn't like how they were talking about him as if he wasn't there, in fact

it was starting to annoy him.

“I'm right here you know,” Tony said. Both Aiden and Jamie looked at the small boy giving him a small smiles before turning back to one another.

“Thanks,” Jamie said. “I'll stay with him till you get back.” Aiden nodded as he left the room. Jamie then took a seat on the bed.

“You don't have to stay,” Tony grumbled. “I'm not a little kid.”

“I know that,” Jamie said with a raised eyebrow. “But I just want to make sure you're all right.”

“I'm fine,” Tony said crossing his arms. Jamie just nodded.

“So do you know like how old you are?” Jamie asked.

“Nine,” Tony said with a sigh as he showed Jamie the phone with the photo.

“Oh hey I actually remember this day,” Jamie said as he looked at the photo. “I was so jealous of you because I couldn't even catch one fish. Mom just told me that sometimes you catch one and sometimes you don't, that's fishing. Speaking of which we should probably call her and let her know whats happening,” Jamie said as he went to the contacts to call their Mom.

“No,” Tony yelped as his hands shot out covering the phone with his hands and pushing it down into Jamie's lap. “Don't say anything to her, I don't want to bother her.”

Jamie gave a side eyed glance to his brother. “I think this is exactly the kind of thing you should bother her with.”

“Jamie please,” Tony said a pleading look taking over his features.

“Okay I guess you're right,” Jamie said putting his phone away. “You're going to be back to normal soon anyways right.”

“Yeah,” Tony said yet not without a hint of doubt.

“So how are you feeling?” Jamie asked. “Anything hurt?”

“No not really,” It was the first time Tony actually gave any thought to it. His body had just gone through massive changes. Organs had shrunk, bones had shifted. Yet he didn't feel any discomfort at all. “I guess I just feel a little hungry.”

Jamie smiled. “I'll go get us something to eat. You think you'll be okay by yourself?”

“Why wouldn't I?” Tony said with some annoyance. Jamie just nodded as he left. Once he was gone Tony got out of the bed and went to stand before the mirror again. He looked at his small body standing before him with just the oversized t-shirt. His hands went down shakily to the hemline of his shirt as he pulled it up for an inspection. As he looked he could see that he had become diminished. Smooth and small, he certainly couldn't call it his manhood anymore. Tony groaned as he let the shirt drop. He picked the boxer briefs he had been wearing off of the ground. Even if they no longer fit he could at least cover up. While holding them up he went over

to his desk grabbing some of his research notes before finally making his way to his bed. He pored through the notes to see if there was something there. Some way he could reverse all this or at least give him self some comfort to see a way forward. Yet as he read he felt he couldn't really understand it. Even his own research notes he had written himself seemed alien. Tony set them aside after some time. He was just too frazzled to really concentrate on them. Jamie returned with some food. Some pizza and a water.

“I could really use an energy drink or something,” Tony grumbled after finishing his pizza.

“All that caffeine would be bad for you,” Jamie said.

“Don't treat me like a kid,” Tony said.

“I'm not,” Jamie said. “But as things are now that's how your body is, so you gotta be careful.”

“I'm not staying like this,” Tony protested.

“I know that,” Jamie said. “But if you drank something like that you would be wired and it would be bad for your heart. I would say the same thing if you were an adult.”

“I don't need advice from my little brother,” Tony spat. Jamie shrugged.

“If you want one that bad then you can go get it yourself,” Jamie shrugged. Tony scowled there was no way he could even leave the room. He was growing increasingly more angry with the fact that is sounded like Jamie was lecturing

him. Just then Aiden returned with a bag and some papers. As he walked into the room he could sense there was tension.

“Everything all right?” He asked.

“Tony is just pouting over something stupid,” Jamie said.

“Shut up idiot,” Tony said.

“Don't call me names,” Jamie said furrowing his brow. “I'm only trying to help.”

“If this is how you're going to be then just get out of here,” Tony said as he curled back into the covers on the bed hiding his face.

“Hey,” Jamie began with some offense yet was stopped as Aiden placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Maybe you two should stop,” Aiden said with his disarming smile. “You've both dealt with a lot today.”

Jamie took a breath before shaking his head.

“Alright,” he said throwing his hands up a little. “I'll check in tomorrow.”

Jamie then left the room. Aiden let out a little sigh.

“You want to talk about it?” Aiden said addressing Tony.

“There is nothing to talk about, he was being a jerk,” Tony said sitting up with a scowl.

“Jamie? Doesn't sound like him.”

“He was talking like he knows whats best,” Tony said.

“He's just worried about you dude,” Aiden said with an understanding look.

“Well he has a funny way of showing it,” Tony said. Aiden then picked up the bag tossing it on the bed next to Tony.

“Anyways, I got you some stuff that should fit. Just don't expect any Gucci in there.” Aiden said.

Tony began to dig through the bag. There was a couple of pairs of jeans and some t-shirts. The shirts were somewhat childish. One of them had a generic game controller on it with the words “Get in the game” written on it. There was also another one that had the faded logo of the local football team on it and the other one was Minecraft themed. He then pulled out a rather worn pair of blue sneakers.

“Hope they fit,” Aiden said. “I kind of had to guess your shoe size.”

“They'll be fine,” Tony said. He noticed another thing at the bottom of the bag. He pulled out seeing it was an unopened package of white briefs.

“Whitey tighties?” Tony said scrunching his face up.

“It was a thrift store,” Aiden shrugged. “They don't exactly sell used underwear, its all they had.” Tony nodded. He wasn't going to throw a fit about the clothes, its not like they were going to be a permanent part of his wardrobe.

“You working on something?” Aiden asked noting the papers

strewn all over Tony's bed.

“Not really,” Tony mumbled. “I can't seem to think straight.”

“Maybe you should take a shower, that always help you clear your head,” Aiden suggested. It was true. A hot shower always helped Tony clear his head. Aiden then picked up the package of briefs and tore them open before tossing a pair onto Tony's lap. He then went to the closet and pulled out a bathrobe. “You can cover up with this.” Aiden said. Tony got out of the bed.

“Could you maybe turn around?” Tony asked. Aiden smirked yet turned his back so that Tony could pull on the underwear and take off the baggy shirt and replace it with Aiden's bathrobe which looked comically over sized on him. Tony then grabbed a towel and walked off down the hall towards the showers. He got a couple of strange looks yet no one said anything. Getting into the showers he was thankful that they were empty. He disrobed and quickly got into the shower. It was a quick shower as he was still feeling awkward looking at his body. After getting out of the shower he toweled off before putting the underwear on. As he he was putting his arms through the sleeves of the robe a voice sounded behind him.

“What are you doing here?”

Tony spun around to see the last person he wanted to see. Lewis the RA. Lewis was well known for taking his duties a little too seriously.

“Wh-wha,” Tony stammered.

“I asked you a question kid, who are you and why are you here?” Lewis said walking straight up to Tony who immediately felt a little intimidated by the tall man.

“I stay here,” Tony said not wanting to actually say who he really was.

“This is a college dorm not a daycare,” Lewis said. “So who are you staying with then?”

“Uhhh Aiden Banks,” Tony said.

“I see,” Lewis said. “Well lets go see what Mr. Banks has to say then.”

“You can go talk to him if you want,” Tony said trying to take a step past Lewis yet the other guy grabbed his arms.

“You're coming too,” Lewis said as he began to pull Tony out of the bathroom.

“H-hey wait,” Tony yipped. Lewis didn't let go as he pulled Tony along down the hall. Tony fruitlessly tried to close up the robe to no avail. He could hear a couple of snickers as they went past other students and some muffled whispers. Getting to their door, Lewis banged on the door. Aiden opened the door and as soon as he saw Tony in Lewis's grasp his face turned angry.

“Let go of him,” Aiden growled. Lewis seemed to pull Tony forward sending him stumbling into Aiden who caught him. Tony stood frozen not sure what to do as he felt Aiden put his

hands protectively on his back and Tony buried his face into Aiden's stomach.

“Whose the kid?” Lewis asked.

“He's To...” Aiden began before coming to a pause. “He's my cousin,”

“You need permission for family to stay over and they don't let kids stay here in the first place.” Lewis said with some smug certainty.

“Jesus, Lewis don't you have better things to do other than hassle people?” Aiden said.

“I'm doing my job,” Lewis said with a smirk. “I didn't hear anything about this.”

“Maybe because its none of your business,” Aiden said as he lead Tony back into the room before grabbing some papers. “But if you simply must know I have all the permission I need,” Aiden said shoving some paper's into Lewis chest. The RA looked through the papers before Aiden grabbed them back. “Now why don't you go power trip somewhere else.”

Aiden then closed the door. Tony stood in the middle of the room. His face was red and tears were starting to form in his eyes.

“Hey, hey,” Aiden said softly as he put his hands gently on Tony's shoulders and began to rub his upper arms. “Don't cry over that asshole, he's not worth it.”

“I'm not,” Tony said using his sleeve to wipe the tears from

his eyes. Aiden placed a hand on top of Tony's head.

“Oh geez,” Aiden said. “Your hair is still sopping wet. Where is your towel?”

“I guess I left it in the bathroom,” Tony said shaking his hair out a little. It was longer than usual and he had been trying to go as fast as he could in the bathroom.

“Guess we'll do this then,” Aiden said as he took the robe off of Tony before plopping it on top of Tony's head.

“Aiden stop what are you?” Tony mewled.

“I'm drying your hair silly,” Aiden chuckled.

“Well stop,” Tony said stepping away.

“I'm just taking care of you,” Aiden said with a frown.

“You don't need to,” Tony protested.

“You're my boyfriend I'll take care of you if I darn well please,” Aiden said. “That doesn't change.” Tony huffed a little. He knew there was little point in protesting. Aiden was always doing stuff like this. Tony then let out an involuntary yawn. “Feeling a little sleepy?” Aiden chuckled.

“Maybe a little,” Tony said.

“Then maybe you should go to sleep,” Aiden suggested. Tony looked over at the clock seeing it was only eight o'clock.

“Its too early,” Tony mumbled.

“What does that have to do with anything? If you're tired

you're tired. Plus you've been through a lot today."

"I guess thats true," Tony said. He then walked over to Aiden's bed as he had done every night getting on top of it and crawling to the middle.

"Hey uh Tony," Aiden said with an awkward look.

"What?" Tony asked.

"Maybe it would be better if you slept in your own bed," Aiden said pursing his lips.

"Oh yeah," Tony said. He could certainly see why his physical appearance would make things a tad awkward for Aiden. Tony sat for a moment the realizations crashing in. Everything was changing so fast. Tony whimpered a little as some new tears came.

"More tears," Aiden said sympathetically as he sat next to Tony on the edge of the bed putting an arm around him.

"I'm sorry," Tony said wiping his tears away. "Its just too much. This body is too much. What if it can't be reversed? I'm going to be stuck like this, and if that happens we can't be together."

"Don't worry about that," Aiden said. "I have no plans on leaving you. It may be true that we can't carry on as normal but that doesn't mean I still can't love you." Aiden then wrapped Tony up into a big hug. "I can still hug you." Tony found himself nuzzling into Aiden's chest. He felt so big now and for a moment Tony felt secure and warm. "And I can still

give you a kiss to those adorable cheeks," Aiden said as he kissed one of Tony's cheeks.

"I guess," Tony giggled a little.

"And I can even do this," Aiden said before a moment later he was standing with Tony in his arms with one hand supporting his butt and another on his back.

"Aiden stop," Tony said although he still had a smile on his face. "This is weird."

"When else am I going to get a chance to do this?" Aiden laughed. "Now are you going to let me tuck you in?"

"Just this once," Tony said. He certainly didn't want Aiden to know that he was secretly enjoying any of this. Aiden carried Tony to his bed. He laid him down and then tucked him in tightly. "Sorry about not getting you any pajamas, guess I didn't think about it," Aiden said.

"I guess I could just wear one of the shirts Jamie got me," Tony suggested.

"Yeah that would work," Aiden said. "Tomorrow night then, you're already tucked in anyways.

"Aiden," Tony then said looking a little sheepish. "Thanks for being there for me, it means a lot."

"Of course," Aiden said. "But when this is all over, you're going to owe me big."

"Sure," Tony nodded. Aiden then leaned down.

“Do I get a goodnight kiss?” Aiden asked. Tony smiled before the two of them shared a quick peck on the lips. After that Aiden turned off the lights and went to his desk and turned on the lamp to do his homework while Tony fell asleep.

Chapter 3

Adventures in Genetics: Part Three - Chapter 3

Trapped

It had been two days since Tony had shrunk. He stood in his dorm room at the mirror looking at himself. It was still weird to see his nine year old self looking back at him. He grabbed a brush and went back to the mirror brushing his shaggy hair that curled slightly at the ends. No amount of brushing seemed to get them out. Tony let out a frustrated groan before tossing the brush aside. Aiden had offered to take him to get a haircut but Tony had rebuffed his offer. No haircut would actually make him feel better. Plus he didn't really want to leave the dorm room. In fact he had spent most of his time in his room. Aiden had dragged him out last night to go eat dinner in the cafeteria, but that had been it.

Tony looked over at the clock seeing it was nine in the morning. Aiden was at class and then would be at practice until six. Which was fine for Tony, if anything he was happy for the break – Aiden had been acting weird. Tony wondered if Aiden even realized it half the time.

He was starting to talk to Tony more like a kid saying things like kiddo, and squirt when referring to him. Tony had been quick to call him out yet Aiden brushed it off as a joke, he said it was good to have a little humor about the situation. The biggest thing being that Aiden seemed to have instituted

a bedtime for Tony. Somehow at nine o' clock every night Aiden had Tony tucked into bed. The first time Tony hadn't thought much of it. Yet on the second night Tony had outright refused. He had come back from taking a shower and Aiden had then shepherded him to the bed without a word.

“Hey lay off,” Tony had yelped. Aiden had then scooped him up and put him over his shoulder as Tony struggled before laying him in his bed and tucking him in tightly under the covers. “Aiden knock it off, I don't need to go to sleep,” Tony had protested.

“I know you may still be an adult in your head,” Aiden had explained. “But you got a kids body and it needs its rest.” Tony had responded with a discontent grumble. Aiden then flopped down on the bed next to him. “Since you're here, listen to my speech I'm working on for class,” Aiden had said as he brought a paper in front of him as he began reading about some economics stuff Tony couldn't even feign interest in. Aiden had then began to stroke Tony's hair as he read and Tony had fallen asleep.

Tony frowned in the mirror. Tonight was going to be different, of that he was sure. Jamie hadn't been around much either. He had called to see how Tony was doing yet the boy had still been rather curt with him. He was still a little mad at him. Dr. Pai had also stopped by to see how Tony was. He wasn't close to finding a cure. Tony had half-expected that though. He knew the mechanism of what Dr.Pai was trying to reverse, it wasn't going to be simple, yet Dr. Pai had seemed optimistic at least. But he had informed Tony that he had no

choice but to inform the college. Tony was going to have to attend a meeting with the chancellor and other top officials next week. Tony wasn't looking forward to that. Dr. Pai had told him that the college was worried about liability and if Tony was smart he would show up with a lawyer in tow, yet Tony knew he couldn't afford that. Tony let out a sigh as he looked around the room. He was starting to go a little stir crazy. He then stood up straight puffing out his chest a little. He was an adult, he could do whatever he wanted he told himself – and right now he needed out of this room.

Tony steeled himself as he walked out into the hallway. There weren't many people around which made it easier. As he got out onto the campus he noticed he was getting more than a few looks. That's when Tony decided to get off campus all together. Soon enough he was walking down a street. He came upon a chain link fence on the other side was an asphalt area where a bunch of kids were playing. Tony had never realized there was an elementary school down the road from campus. He stood for a moment watching the kids at play. Some of them were playing four square and some were running around playing tag or on the basketball courts. Tony smiled for a moment seeing how care free they all seemed. He had been feeling like that a couple of days ago. Everything had seemed to be going his way and now...this. Tony jammed his hands in his pocket before he began walking.

“Where do you think you're going,” a voice said. Tony looked up to see a somewhat plump woman with red hair and glasses

marching towards him with an irate look. “You have exactly three seconds to get back on that playground,” she said.

“Wha,” Tony mumbled looking back at the woman with a gormless look.

“Get over here,” she said grabbing him by the wrist and dragging him into the playground.

“Hang on,” Tony said realizing what she thought, having mistaken him for a student.

“Walking off property is a serious problem,” the woman said as she took him up the steps. “We are going to the principal's office you are in very big trouble young man.” Tony was being taken down the school hallway. He tried to pull himself away yet the woman had an iron grip on his wrist. As they got into the office the lady walked over to a chair in front of the large front desk pointing at it for Tony to sit.

“I don't go to this school,” Tony finally managed to sputter out.

“Oh yeah,” the lady said. “You really think that's going to work.”

“Its the truth,” Tony said.

“Whats your name?” she asked. Tony balked a little. This situation was spiraling out of control and he didn't really know how much information to give.

“Tony,” he finally said not having much choice but to comply somewhat.

“Well Tony you, me, and the principal are all going to be having a long talk. She went over to a door and knocked on it. A moment later a burly man with a beard opened his door. The woman then explained the situation to the man who Tony presumed was the principal. He came walking out to stand in front of Tony.

“Okay son, whats your name and whose class are you in,” the principal said.

“My name is Tony McCallister and I don't go to this school,” Tony said crossing his arms.

“You really expect us to believe that you don't go here?” the principal asked raising his eyebrow. Tony didn't say anything as he turned his head away. The principal then walked behind the desk to a computer he began to type before a moment later he looked up a little confused. “He's not in the system, so I guess he is telling the truth.”

“Great so I can go,” Tony said getting up.

“Not so fast,” the woman said. “Its very suspicious for a kid to who should be in school to be walking around by themselves. We absolutely cannot let you leave.”

“But that's,” Tony stammered.

“So what school do you go to?” she asked cutting him off.

“I don't go to school,” Tony said before clenching his teeth realizing what he had just said. Both the woman and the principal looked at each other with a raised eyebrow.

“Well lets just call his parents then,” the principal said. “I'm sure there is reasonable explanation for all of this.”

“Tony sweetie do you know your parents numbers, Dad, or Mom?” the woman asked her demeanor having softened.

“You can't call my mom!” Tony exclaimed out of instinct rather than thinking about choosing his words carefully. “She's two hours away she doesn't know anything about this.” Tony then felt his face flush as he realized what he had just said.

“Who do you live with then?” the principal asked.

“I umm I..don't live with anyone,” Tony jibbered drawing a complete blank on coming up with a plausible excuse.

“You live with someone, and they're going to need to come here to pick you up.” the woman said. “Who takes care of you?”

Tony sat silent for a moment. What was he supposed to say now? He had no story to back any of this up now at this point. His first thought went to Aiden. That is who he lived with after all. Yet he knew Aiden was in class at the moment and he would then be at practice till six, he probably wouldn't even check his phone till after. Plus it would be hard to explain since he and Aiden weren't related and didn't look similar in the slightest. Tony then thought of perhaps calling Dr. Pai yet he didn't know the mans number. His options had slowly dwindled down to one – it was going to have to be Jamie.

“Umm my brother you'll have to call him,” Tony said with some resignation. “But he probably wont pick up right away. He's in class right now at the college.”

“I'll just leave a message then,” the principal said. Tony gave the number and the principal left a message.

“I guess the question is what to do with you until your brother is able to come pick you up?” the woman said.

“He could join a class here for the day,” the principal suggested.

“That's a great idea, you should be in school anyways,” the woman said. “So Tony what grade are you in?” Tony looked back at the woman with a clueless look. He hadn't the foggiest idea of what grade he was supposed to be in at nine.

“How old are you anyways?” the principal then asked.

“Um nine,” Tony said meekly.

“And when is your birthday? Tony did some quick arithmetic in his head giving his birth date with an amended birth year.

“Oh having a birthday next week huh?” the principal said. “Well given that I'd say you're a third grader aren't you?

“That's right, I guess,” Tony said.

“Why don't you take him down to Mrs. Lamb's class,” the principal said.

“Alright then lets go Tony,” the woman said. As Tony got up she grabbed his hand and lead him out of the office. “You'll

love Mrs. Lamb," the woman said. However Tony wasn't listening. He couldn't believe what was happening. Everything had happened so fast and now he was staring down a day back in elementary school. He just hoped Jamie checked his phone soon. Tony found himself in a classroom. Kids were sat at desks that were pushed together six to a group. The woman left him standing in the doorway as she went and talked to the teacher. Tony thought about running, but hesitated. What would happen if he actually made it out. He had already told them his real name, mistake one, and he had gave them Jamie's number as well, mistake two. If he did manage to escape they would no doubt call the cops. Things would only get more complicated from there. Dr. Pai had already warned Tony about telling people what had happened. Tony had of course signed and NDA courtesy of the company funding the research, not too mention if the news media got a sniff of this he would no doubt be thrust into the spotlight. Tony could not allow that to happen.

The teacher of the room came over to Tony kneeling down to his level.

"Hey there Tony," she said with a raspy voice as she smiled warmly at him. "I hear you're joining us for the day."

"I guess," Tony mumbled.

"I'm Mrs. Lamb and this is my classroom so why don't you follow me, I have an open desk for you." There was nothing Tony could do as he followed the woman to a desk in at one of the pods sitting him at the end. "This is Jarret," Mrs. Lamb

said nodding toward a boy that was to Tony's right. “He will be your seat partner.”

Tony sat at the desk looking at the boy Jarret. He had spiky blond hair and freckles, he looked at Tony with a blank expression before going back doodling on a piece of paper in front of him. Mrs. Lamb then went to the front of the classroom and called their attention.

“Now some of you may noticed we have a new friend,” Mrs. Lamb said. “Tony is brand new to us and will be joining us for today so please make him feel welcome.” Tony shrunk down in his seat a little as he felt every eye in the room on him. “Alright class,” Mrs. Lamb said, shifting the attention away from him. “Please take out your math books and work on page 24 with your seat partner.”

The kids all opened their desk pulling out a workbook as Tony sat looking on. Mrs. Lamb came by with an extra book for Tony to use.

“I'm sure Jarret has a pencil you can borrow,” Mrs. Lamb said.

“I do,” Jarrent said as he plopped a pencil on Tony's desk.

“Thanks,” Tony said with a gloomy tone. Not only was he stuck here now he had to do work. He opened up to the page and looked at what was in front of him. It seemed the kids were learning about division. They were being asked to fill in the missing number of the equation. Tony was a little relieved, if he was going to have to do work at least it was easy work.

“Okay number one, what divided by four makes two?” Jarret asked.

“Easy two,” Tony said. Jarret gave a small smirk towards Tony.

“Yeah of course, that one's easy,” Jarret said. The boys worked together making their way through the worksheet, although it was more like Tony was giving all the answers.

“Okay how about this one,” Jarret asked looking at one problem. Tony looked at it and then paused. He realized he didn't know the answer right off the top of his head. The bigger problem was that he knew he should. He was a college student after all and this was simple arithmetic. Tony stuttered for a moment.

“Oh so the math genius doesn't know everything,” Jarret laughed a little. “Well I guess nine times ten is ninety which is close to what we need so we just count up,” Jarret said as he used his fingers for a few moments before writing down an answer. “I think that's right,” Jarret nodded.

“Yeah it is,” Tony said. The boys then moved onto the story problems as Tony's worry's increased. He was having trouble actually deciphering what was being asked. Jarret was sat looking a the paper as he lightly kept tapping the end of his pencil against his lips.

“I don't get it,” Jarret said. “What about you?” Tony sat looking at the paper reading the question over and over yet he couldn't make sense of it. His hands were on top of the paper

as he pressed down harder.

“Why don't I know this?” he asked himself through clenched teeth.

“Its not that big of a deal,” Jarret said looking a little concerned. “We'll just ask Mrs. Lamb,” Jarret said raising his hand.

“No, wait,” Tony said. He didn't want to admit he was having trouble with third grade math. Mrs. Lamb had already made it over to the desk though as Jarret told her he and Tony were confused. The teacher smiled as she took the pencil from Tony and started to explain the problem to the boys as she wrote out what they were supposed to do.

“Oh I get it now,” Jarret said as he began writing. “So this is the answer then.”

“That's exactly right,” Mrs. Lamb nodded before turning to Tony. “Did you understand all that dear?”

“Oh uh yeah.” Tony said.

“Just let me know if you're having trouble with this,” Mrs. Lamb said. “You might not have gotten to this yet at your other school.”

“He knows what he is doing,” Jarret chimed in. “He knew like all the other answers.”

“That's great,” Mrs. Lamb said. “Now it looks like you boys are done early so you can sit and talk quietly while everyone else finishes up.”

Tony looked over at the clock with a sigh. Jamie was nowhere near done with class yet. Tony wasn't exactly sure when he got out, it wasn't as if he had his schedule memorized. He just had to hope he wouldn't be spending the rest of the day here.

“You like video games?” Jarret asked snapping Tony back to attention.

“Huh,” Tony said looking clueless.

“Your shirt,” Jarret said pointing to Tony's shirt which had a game controller on it.

“I guess,” Tony said, the truth was he was clueless. Growing up they didn't have money for stuff like that. Jamie had played some game on the computer for a little while but Tony had never been that interested in the first place. He had been too busy taking care of things. Helping his Mom keep the house together.

“So what do you play?” Jarret asked. “Minecraft, Roblox?”

“Minecraft,” Tony said remembering Aiden had gotten him a shirt from the game. Thankfully that seemed to be the magic word to set Jarret off. Tony didn't have to talk much, just nodding along as Jarret went on and on. Finally Mrs. Lamb called the attention of the class to the whiteboard. She began to go through the math lesson for the day. Tony wasn't listening much as he kept looking at the clock.

“Tony why don't you try it,” the teacher said, as Tony sat up.

“Wha,” he said shaking his head.

“Jarret said you were good at this,” she said with a marker held out towards him across the room. Tony grimaced as he got up from his seat and walked up to the board taking the marker from Mrs. Lamb. He looked at the board trying to figure out what she wanted him to do. It was a long division problem and one that did not seem hard. Yet as Tony went to start he stopped. He couldn't seem to bring up in his head what the first step was. He shook his head.

“Just start here,” Mrs. Lamb said pointing at he number as she then proceeded to walk him through the problem step by step. “Great job,” she said as he wrote the answer.

“Sorry,” Tony said handing the marker back. “I should have known how to do that.”

“Its new for everybody,” Mrs. Lamb chuckled. “You did great.” As Tony went back to his desk he didn't know what was happening. Why was he having so much trouble. This stuff should be no problem. As he sat thinking he could bring things up his head no problem. Mathematics formulas and philosophical treaties that were well beyond Elementary school, yet whenever something was put in front of him all his knowledge just seemed to fall out of his head. A bell then rang as all the kids got up from their desk to line up at the door.

“Whats going on?” Tony asked.

“Lunch,” Jarret said. Tony got up and joined the line. As they walked through the halls Tony felt incredibly childish to be walking in a line following the teacher. Getting to the lunch

room he moved through the line taking a tray and holding it out as he moved down the line as the lunch ladies slopped the food onto his tray. Today they were having pizza, green beans, and a brownie. He then got to the end seeing a cooler with various cartons of milk. He grabbed one for a minute realizing he hadn't paid for any of this, yet at this point he wasn't going to question anything. As he stood at the lunch room looking at the tables he was struck by a moment of nostalgia yet it didn't make him feel all warm and fuzzy. Here he was back in school wondering where to sit. He looked around for an empty table.

“Tony over here,” Jarret called out waving him over to a table with some other boys. Tony approached with some hesitation as he took an empty seat. As soon as Tony sat down the boys began to pepper him with questions.

“Did you move here?

“Where do you live?”

Tony didn't really know how to answer. Its not like he was about to tell them the truth. That he was a college senior and he had been basically abducted by the school.

“Uh yeah just moved here,” Tony said. That seemed to satiate the gaggle of kids enough to turn their conversation towards something else. Tony ate quietly, being hungry. The food was painfully average yet he didn't seem to mind it. A bell rang out as the other kids began to get up.

“Is lunch over?” Tony asked as he followed Jarret to a trash

can to clear their trays.

“Yep time for recess,” Jarret said placing his tray in a window which Tony followed suit. The kids lined up in their classes before being lead out to the area that Tony had been standing outside of that morning. Tony stood looking out across the yard. He saw the exit, part of him thought about making a run for it, but he knew he couldn't. It would just cause bigger problems than it was worth. Tony cursed a little under his breath. Why had'nt Jamie checked his phone yet? “You play basketball?” Jarret asked bringing Tony out of his thoughts. The boy had an orange basketball in his hands.

“A little,” Tony said. Aiden often roped him into going down to the local park and being his practice buddy sometimes. Whether that be passing the ball so Aiden could practice his dunks or trying to fruitlessly guard Aiden. Of course Tony was no match for Aiden and he sometimes wondered if it was really all that helpful for Aiden, but the other guy seemed to enjoy it and Tony would admit it was a fun thing to do together. As Jarret lead Tony over to the other kids it seemed Tony being the new kid elicited some excitement and the boys began to argue whose team he was going to be on.

“He's my seat partner so he's on my team,” Jarret said bringing an end to the conversation. “You okay with that?” Jarret asked looking at Tony.

“Yeah sure,” Tony said. If these kids were expecting him to be any good they were going to be a little disappointed. Yet as they played Tony found that he had picked up a few things

from all those practice sessions. He was actually able to keep up pretty well. Although Tony wasn't exactly used to his small body yet so his ball handling left something to be desired as he fumbled the ball trying to dribble it between his legs. The part that he seemed to excel at though was shooting. The hoop was high and the other boys had trouble even propelling the ball high enough. Tony had good form though. By the time the bell rang bringing an end to recess Tony had made more baskets than anyone else. His good performance on the court had earned him some cred among the others.

“He's on our team next recess,” one of the other boys said. As Tony walked over to line up the woman from that morning was there walking up to him.

“How's it going?” she asked smiling. “Having fun?”

“Its fine,” Tony said although he was still a little mad at her. She had been the one that had lead him into this situation after all.

“It looks like you've made some friends already,” she said not picking up on Tony's disdain.

“I guess,” Tony said.

“I'm happy that you're fitting in,” the woman then continued on. “I think you are going to have a fun year here.”

Tony's eyes widened at the thought of attending elementary school again. There was no way he would agree to that. Would they even let him when they found out the truth. Before Tony could even respond one of the boys came up

behind him and grabbed his arm.

“C'mon Tony we're going, come stand by us in line,” the boy said leading Tony away and bringing him in line with some of the other boys that were in his class. Getting back to his seat in the classroom Tony looked over at the clock. It was one' o clock. He had spent nearly a whole day here. He began to get a little nervous that Jamie wasn't going to show up before the end of the day. What would happen to him them? Mrs. Lamb began to go through attendance as she called out the names the kids raised their hands and said “here” after their name was read.

“And Tony,” Mrs. Lamb said coming to the end.

“Here,” Tony said raising his hand as the other kids had done.

“Great,” Mrs. Lamb said putting down her paper as she looked at the clock. “Okay its time for specialties and today is library day so everyone grab your library cards and any books you need to return and line up at the door.” Mrs. Lamb instructed, as kids began to move. “And Tony don't worry we'll get you your own card soon enough.” Tony grimaced a little as he went to line up. He didn't like how everyone was talking like he was going to become a permanent member here. The class walked down to the library.

Coming into the room Tony was a little impressed. The room was huge and had a high ceiling. With a large skylight up top. There were many different sections and another room that contained rows of computers. He saw a colorful rug in an area that housed picture books. He cringed thinking he was

going to have to sit there with his legs crossed like a little kid. Thankfully they were lead to an area with tables and chairs. A tall woman with a bird like face was in front with rainbow colored spectacles on a gold chain. Tony pegged her as the librarian, she certainly looked like one. The lady greeted the kids and got them quiet. As things went on Tony found himself to be lucky that he had shown up that day. The librarian was just reading them an excerpt from some book and then leading the kids through a discussion about the time period the book was set in. This was certainly better than gym class or whatever else he might have been subjected too. Tony then felt like he needed to use the bathroom. He got up from his seat and began to walk away.

“Excuse me where are you going?” the librarian asked. Tony stopped looking a little flummoxed.

“I was going to the bathroom,” Tony said. The librarian simply smiled.

“You're the new boy Tony that Mrs. Lamb mentioned, right?”

“Yeah,” Tony mumbled.

“Well Tony if you need the bathroom you need to raise your hand and ask. Lets try it out.” she said motioning towards his chair. Tony took in a breath before sitting back in his chair as the librarian then looked on expectantly. He considered not even complying yet raised his hand. “Oh yes Tony,” she said as if she had just noticed.

“Can I go to the bathroom please,” Tony said,

“Yes you may,” the librarian nodded. “Take the pass on the checkout desk she pointed. Tony got up hurriedly and grabbed the plastic hall pass on his way out. Tony grumbled as he walked the halls. Being made to ask permission to use the bathroom had been humiliating. Tony had forgotten what it was like to be a kid. The other kids didn't think it was weird that just how things were for them. Tony knew better though. As he walked he realized he didn't actually know where the bathrooms were but he found one in short order. He walked in and went up to a urinal. He finished up and pulled his pants up quickly. He didn't really like seeing the reminders of his regression. Even the white cotton briefs he wore made him feel childish. He had brought up the idea of new clothes with Aiden just yesterday. Aiden had agreed saying they could hit up a store that weekend and get Tony things that were more his style. On one hand Tony was excited about it, but on the other hand he was a little disappointed that it was becoming necessary to get more clothes to fit his new body. Tony hurried back to the library, if he took much longer they might send somebody looking for him.

Walking back in Tony saw that the class had been released and were now wandering the library.

“Find it okay?” the librarian asked from behind the desk as Tony returned the hall pass.

“Yeah just fine,” Tony said.

“Its free reading time so explore to your hearts content,” the librarian said. Tony nodded as he began to walk away. “Oh

Tony," the librarian said with a little smirk. "You need to fix your shirt." Tony was confused for a moment he felt the back of his waistband feeling the materiel of his undies sticking up over his pants with a little bit of his shirt tucked into them, which he had done accidentally in his haste. Tony squeaked a little as he pulled his shirt out. He walked away with a red face. He quickly ducked into an aisle. Could he have looked like a bigger dork, he wondered?" As Tony walked around aimlessly he found himself looking at the books. He then stopped seeing a familiar title among them. It was a chapter book from a series he had read when he had been around his current physical age. Henry Gubbins, it was about a middle school boy who would manage to get himself in all sorts of amusing situations in every book. Tony opened it with a sense of nostalgia. He had thought these books were hilarious when he had been a kid. Although he had stopped reading them not long after moving onto more mature selections. He didn't recognize the one he had in his hands. It must have been released after he had stopped.

Tony took the book and found a corner in the library with some bean bag chairs. He sat in one and opened the book. There didn't seem to be anything better to do, so he had to pass the time. As Tony began to read he found the book held his attention. It was almost as if he was nine years old again back in his room back home. Tony found himself smiling as he read about Henry accidentally launching a frog through the air during science class. Tony laughed upon seeing the picture of the teacher getting a dead frog to the face.

“What'cha reading?” Jarret asked as he plopped down in the beanbag chair next to Tony.

“Oh um this,” Tony said holding up the cover of the book.

“I love those books too,” Jarret said as his eyes lit up. “My mom said there's going to be a new one soon, she said she'll get it for me for my birthday. That one is really funny though, did you read about the frog yet?”

“Yeah I just did,” Tony said smiling being happy to talk about a shared interest with the other boy.

“I wish I could do something like that,” Jarret then said.

“You want to throw a frog at Mrs. Lamb?” Tony asked raising an eyebrow.

“No not her, she's nice,” Jarret said. “Mrs. Penders though.”

“Whose that?” Tony asked.

“You know her, she works in the front office, she was who you were talking to at recess.” Jarret explained. Tony nodded his head finally having a name to attach to the woman who had pretty much dragged him into this whole fiasco of a day.

“She would probably scream really loud,” Tony laughed. “And her arms would be all like this,” he said waving his arms through the air. Both of the boys began to laugh loudly unable to control their laughter at the mental image, that is until the librarian came around and gave them shusshing.

“This is a library children,” she tutted. “Now your time is

almost up so if you've made a selection you should take them up to the check out desk.”

“Oh yeah,” Jarret said as he ran off. Tony started to walk off in the opposite direction.

“Tony sweetie, the check out desk is over there,” the librarian said pointing.

“Oh well I don't have a library card, so I was just going to put it back,” Tony said. The librarian smiled as she took the book from his hands.

“Do you like this book?” she asked.

“Uh yeah I guess,” Tony said. “I read some of the other one's too.”

“Its customary for each new student to get a book from the library as a gift,” the librarian said as she removed the bar code sticker on the back. “So this one is all yours,” she said handing the book back to him.

“Really,” Tony said as he looked at the book. He felt a little guilty accepting the gift.

“Of course dear,” the librarian said. “Now why don't you go line up with Mrs. Lamb while the rest of your class finishes checking out.”

“T-thanks,” Tony stammered as he scurried off. He felt a surge of happiness go through him as he looked down at the book. It was the same feeling he had felt during those times when he had been a kid and his Mom somehow managed to

get him a gift that he had been wanting yet always thought his Mom would never be able to get for him – somehow she had always managed. Tony walked up to the smattering of other kids who were already in line, still with a smile on his face.

“Tony there you are,” Mrs. Lamb said. “They need you down at the office.”

“Oh ok,” Tony said as he walked off. As he got into the hall he quickened his pace. Had Jamie finally called? “Jamie,” he exclaimed as he busted through the door. Mrs. Penders was sat behind the desk.

“He's talking with the principal right now, just take a seat they should be finished soon,” the woman said.

“Ok,” Tony said as he took a seat. Tony sat for what seemed like a long time, he wondered what the principal and Jamie were talking about for so long. He heard the door open and a moment later the principal came walking out with Jamie.

“Jamie,” Tony said as he eagerly got up from his seat and ran to his brother hugging him as he buried his face into his stomach.

“Hey bud,” Jamie said sounding a little surprised at the greeting. Tony released his brother stepping back a little. He was unsure of why he had ran to him like that. “Sorry I couldn't get here sooner.”

“Its alright,” Tony mumbled.

“We kept him occupied,” the principal chuckled.

“He slipped right in,” Mrs. Penders said. “Even made some friends.”

“Yeah?” Jamie said looking a little awkward as he looked down at his brother.

“Uh sure,” Tony said as fidgeted with the hem of his shirt.

“Well alright,” Jamie said. “We can go now though.” Tony nodded as he eagerly followed Jamie out of the school happy to finally be released. As the boys walked back along the sidewalk they were silent. Tony kicked a pebble along the ground as they walked. “That was certainly something,” Jamie finally said breaking the silence.

“I can't believe that happened,” Tony said with a groan. “What did they even say to you?”

“The principal was pretty keen to find out why you weren't enrolled in school,” Jamie said. “I told him you had only recently started staying with me and I just hadn't gotten you in school yet. You could have just said you were from out of town visiting you know.”

“It happened so fast that I didn't really have time to come up with an excuse,” Tony grumbled. “That lady just grabbed me and the next thing I knew I was being interrogated.” Tony said with some annoyance. Tony then noticed Jamie had some papers in his hands. “What are those?” he asked hesitantly.

“Oh these,” Jamie said holding up the forms. “Their enrollment forms they said you could start as early as next week.”

“You can't enroll me in elementary school,” Tony gasped looking horrified.

“Pffft, relax,” Jamie said. “I know that.” Tony took a deep breath relieved to hear that. “But you probably shouldn't walk around by yourself anymore.”

“Just great,” Tony said jamming his hands into his pockets. As the brothers continued to walk Tony looked over at Jamie. He felt a little guilty about how he had acted towards him that first night.“Thanks for coming and getting me,” Tony said.

“Of course,” Jamie said smiling. “I wasn't just going to leave you there.”

“You shouldn't have had too though,” Tony said. “I should have been smarter and not gotten into that situation in the first place.” Jamie stopped as he looked at Tony.

“It was no problem, we're brothers we look out for each other like always.” Jamie said. “You've gotten me out of plenty of jams in the past so I'm happy to get you out of one for a change.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Tony said. Maybe that was it. He was so used to being the one to help Jamie that it felt weird to have to ask Jamie for help in the first place.

Jamie walked Tony back to his dorm before departing. Tony

went into the room collapsing onto his bed he stared up at the ceiling for awhile everything about his day rewinding in his head, worries about his future began to sprout. He needed to distract himself, he didn't want to think about it. Tony grabbed his laptop. He opened it up. He surfed around the internet for a bit. He then opened up a streaming app. He turned on a show he had been watching. He quickly grew bored, he wasn't in the mood to watch it. He went to find something else. That's when he saw a cartoon come across his feed. He moved past it, yet something made him go back. He clicked on it hesitantly. He was only going to watch for a moment.

As an episode ended he realized he had been watching for close to two hours. Tony quickly clicked off. He really must be out of sorts he thought. He hadn't even realized that much time had passed. He then switched over to a comedy show he and Aiden often enjoyed together. He just had to reason he was in the mood for something lighter.

Some time later Tony sat up stretching his arms with a yawn he looked over at the clock which read 7:45. He hadn't even realized he had fell asleep. As he rubbed his eyes he found he was still incredibly tired. His limbs feeling like cement. Just then the door opened as Aiden came strolling in.

“Hey dude,” Aiden smiled. “Brought dinner.” Aiden said holding up a bag.

“Oh thanks,” Tony said closing the laptop.

“You didn't eat already did you?” Aiden asked. Tony shook

his head. He joined Aiden on his bed as they began to eat. “So what did you do all day?”

“Nothing much,” Tony said. He certainly wasn't going to tell Aiden he had spent most of his day gallivanting as a third grader.

“So I guess you didn't have a good day at school then?” Aiden asked smirking. Tony's face scrunched. up.

“He told you,” Tony whined as she flopped back.

“I ran into him on my way back here,” Aiden said.

“Just great,” Tony grumbled covering his face with his hands. “Bet you guys had a big laugh about it.”

“Oh come on now,” Aiden said as he patted Tony's knee. “Even you have to admit its kind of funny.”

“Well it wasn't,” Tony said shooting Aiden a scowl as he sat back up.

“Really? Sounds like a pretty easy day,” Aiden said. “There had to be at least one fun thing about getting to be a kid again for a day.”

“I guess there was one thing,” Tony said after a moment. “I played some basketball at recess.”

“Now you're talking my language,” Aiden said with a smile. Aiden's interest seemed to be enough for Tony to dive in describing everything that had happened during the game with a sense of enthusiasm.

“I scored more baskets than anyone,” Tony exclaimed as he stretches his arms out in a wide sweeping gesture. “They were even fighting about whose team I would be on next recess.”

Aiden listened along with a small smile. Tony stopped realizing how he had been acting. His face went a little red. “I just mean to say you know I guess all that time at the park with you must have rubbed off or something.” Tony said.

“Glad it helped,” Aiden said reaching over to muss up Tony's hair a little.

After they had eaten Aiden went to work on homework. Tony was sat on his bed. He had the enrollment forms that Jamie had gotten from the school next to him, which also included a student handbook. Tony had occupied himself by tearing pages out of it before crumpling them up and then shooting them into the wastebasket where Aiden had put up a small plastic hoop on the wall. After some time Aiden turned around in his chair.

“That's really a waste of paper you know,” Aiden said.

“Who cares,” Tony said shooting another paper ball across the room. “Not like I need it.” Aiden got up from his chair and went over to the bed and gathered up the papers nearby Tony and took them before setting them on top of the dresser. “What'd you do that for?” Tony scoffed a little offended.

“Its getting late, you should go to bed soon,” Aiden said.

“Its like nine,” Tony said looking at the clock. He had been

expecting this all day. He wasn't going to let Aiden talk him into going to sleep early again.

“What's this,” Aiden said changing the subject as he picked up the book Tony had been gifted by the librarian.

“They gave it to me at the school,” Tony said looking a little bashful.

“I used to read these when I was a kid,” Aiden said fondly. “Hey we can read it together for a bit. So lets go. Get that shirt and those pants off. Do you want one of the shirts Jamie got you to sleep in?”

“I don't want to listen to you read to me,” Tony said angrily as he stood up. “I'm not going to bed.”

“Fine no story then,” Aiden said putting the book down. “But you're still going to sleep.”

Aiden then moved across the room as he came and stood in front of Tony he grabbed the shirt and pulled it up over Tony's head.

“Hey stop,” Tony squeaked. Yet Aiden wasn't moved one bit. He sat on Tony's bed grabbing him around the waist and pulling him over as he went to undo the button on his jeans. He then pulled the struggling Tony across his lap as he shirked the jeans off of the boy's legs. “Quit it asshole,” Tony screeched.

“Do you need a spanking?” Aiden asked. Tony froze as he looked up at Aiden.

“You wouldn't,” Tony gasped.

“You're right, I wouldn't.” Aiden said as he heaved Tony up so that he was now sitting on his lap.

“Would you quit treating me like a little kid,” Tony said.

“I'm not,” Aiden said shaking his head. “But I'm not going to let you keep doing this to yourself.”

“You're acting like you know better than me,” Tony protested. Aiden let out a groan as he rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Maybe I do,” Aiden said. “Look I've sat by and watched you practically work yourself to the bone, I mean you barely even went home over Christmas break before you were back here. I also know you barely sleep and keep yourself propped up with coffee and energy drinks. You're literally killing yourself dude, and I can't stay silent. Even now when you're supposed to be relaxing you're just going around here pacing around like some feral animal in a cage.”

“What else am I supposed to do?” Tony asked furrowing his brow.

“Re-lax,” Aiden said over enunciating every syllable. “You may have a lot of book smarts up in that noggin of yours but when it comes to taking care of your body you're absolutely clueless. But I know how to do it because I've had to do just that for a long time. I know the importance of a good diet and a good nights sleep. So just this one time maybe trust me.”

Tony sat as he let his shoulders slump. Aiden then wrapped

Tony up into a hug.

“Please let me help you out this one time,” Aiden said. Tony let out a huff of air before bring his arms around Aiden's neck. Maybe that was true. He had spent so much time thinking about making things easy on his Mom and helping Jamie out that he had neglected himself. Having someone take care of him felt unnatural. Yet with Aiden there was a certain comfort.

“Okay,” Tony whispered as Aiden squeezed him a little.

“Great, now under the covers,” Aiden said as he released Tony. He smiled a little watching his tiny boyfriend crawl up to the head of the bed in nothing but his white cotton undies.

“I'm not going to bed until at least ten tomorrow,” Tony said as he got under the covers.

“That should be okay,” Aiden said. “As long as I see that you are taking it easy during the day.”

Tony sat for a moment as he played with the top of the covers for a moment. He had something on his mind but the thought of asking about it made him nervous. “Something on your mind?” Aiden asked knowing the look all too well.

“Um its just if you really wanted to read that book together I guess I would be okay with it,” Tony said.

“Sure,” Aiden said getting up from the bed and grabbing the book. “I think it will be fun.” Aiden then laid next to Tony. He put an around him leading Tony's head so that it was on

his chest.

“Ummm Aiden,” Tony said feeling a little awkward with the arrangement.

“Shhhh,” Aiden said as he used his hand to stroke the side of Tony's head. “I feel like we've been keeping each other at an arms length lately. I know it was my idea but I've gotten used to seeing you like this, and I guess I'm a little more comfortable now that I can see that you're still in there. I've really missed cuddling, you don't mind do you?”

“I guess not,” Tony said bringing an arm to rest across Aiden's chest. It felt nice to be close to him.

“Cool,” Aiden said as he began to read. “My name is Henry Gubbins I'm a sixth grader at Turner middle and you wouldn't believe what happened in science class today.”

After Aiden had read through three of the short chapters he looked down to see that Tony was fast asleep breathing softly. He closed the book. He then looked back at Tony again. At that moment he vowed to do what he could to take care of him in his time of need. He loved him too much not to.

Chapter 4

Adventures in Genetics: Part Four - Chapter 4

The Last Stop

Tony awoke to white. He groaned a little pulling the covers off over his head. He did not lift his head off his pillow as he looked over to see Aiden's bed was empty. The covers were disheveled. Aiden must have already left for the day. Tony rolled over before freezing. Something was off. His bed was wet. He sat up taking note that his skin felt sticky. He placed a hand on his chest. He was covered in sweat. That's when he noticed his hand placed on his chest. He removed it looking at it. His hand was unfamiliar, small and dainty. Tony then looked at his chest. It was also smaller and his tummy stuck out a little with some baby fat. Tony felt the breath catch in his throat as tumbled out of his bed. Getting to the mirror he practically shrieked. He looked at a little boy undies around his ankles. He had gotten younger again. Just then the door opened and Aiden came in with a towel over his head still drying his hair.

“Aiden,” Tony squeaked his voice a high falsetto. Aiden came to a standstill as he looked at the small naked boy before him.

“Oh Jesus,” Aiden said quickly shutting the door behind himself. “Tony.” The small boy stood for a a moment before his face crumpled and he began to cry. Aiden scooped him up off the ground holding him against his chest. “It'll be okay,

there there," Aiden repeated bouncing Tony up and down slightly while rubbing his back trying to calm him down.

"No it won't. I'm tiny." Tony wailed unable to control his emotions. After a while Tony finally stopped crying as Aiden continued to hold him. "Um Aiden can you put me down?" Tony asked in a voice so small it could have belonged to a mouse. Aiden set him on the ground.

"What happened?" Aiden asked.

"I don't know I woke up like this," Tony said looking at his hands. "How did you not notice?"

"You were under the covers," Aiden said. Tony then looked down noticing he was completely naked. He yipped a little as he ran and grabbed a blanket wrapping himself up in it. Aiden then called Jamie letting him know what had happened. Aiden then sat down on the ground next to Tony. He put an arm around him as Tony let himself rest up against Aiden. "Jamie's on his way," Aiden said. Tony nodded.

"I don't get it," Tony said. "I didn't shrink at all for three days, why now?"

"Who knows," Aiden said running a hand through Tony's hair which was down to his shoulders and caked with sweat making it all stringy. "Ugh, dude you are like drenched in sweat."

"Yeah, I noticed." Tony said furrowing his brow. "I feel gross."

“While we wait for Jamie maybe you should take a shower.” Aiden suggested.

“I can't go out there like this,” Tony exclaimed.

“I'll go with you,” Aiden reassured.

“I don't have any clothes, I don't want you see me naked,” Tony whined.

“I think we are well past that point,” Aiden chuckled. “I just held you in my arms for like five minutes. Besides we've seen each other naked plenty of times.”

“But other people are out there,” Tony pointed out.

“We'll do this then,” Aiden said as he gathered Tony, blanket and all off the ground cradling his small body in his arms. He then took some of the blanket and covered Tony's head. “There now you look like dirty laundry,” Aiden laughed. Tony was then carried down the hall to the shower room. It was thankfully empty as Aiden set him down taking the blanket away. “Alright hop to it,” Aiden said nodding towards one of the stalls. Tony went in pulling the shower curtain closed. He went to turn the handle before realizing it was just out of reach. He tried getting on his tippy toes to no avail. Tony then poked his head out from behind the shower curtain.

“Um I can't reach,” Tony said looking down at the ground.

“I got it,” Aiden smiled. He came into the shower with Tony.

“Wait you're coming in?”

“Sure, you're going need help with the soap too,” Aiden said pulling his shirt off and throwing it over the top. “I'll keep my shorts on though.” Tony frowned. He wasn't sure what was worse him being the only naked one or both of them. He looked down at his body. Smooth hairless and chubby in all the worst spots. The water came on and Tony had to admit it did feel good to get all the grime off of him. Aiden then came in with the soap massaging it into his hair which felt nice, but the assistance was un-needed he could wash his own hair. He decided not to complain.

After the shower Aiden bundled Tony up with some towels before walking back into the room. He set Tony on the bed before he changed out of his wet shorts. There was then a panicked knock at the door. Aiden opened it letting Jamie into the room.

“Oh man,” Jamie said shaking his head as he saw Tony sitting on the bed. “I already called Dr. Pai he's waiting for us to go to the hospital.”

“I can't go to the hospital,” Tony shrieked the word eliciting a greater level of fear in him than it had a few days ago.”

“You gotta get checked out,” Jamie said. They had been through this all before, it was almost as if this had become a normal occurrence.

“I don't even have any clothes,” Tony shot back. Aiden came over with one of his shirts putting it on Tony. Standing up the shirt reached down to his shins.

“That'll have to do,” Aiden said.

“Looks like I'll have to carry you,” Jamie sighed lifting Tony up.

“Jamie put me down,” Tony protested.

“You don't have shoes,” Jamie said, which silenced any further protest from his older brother. “You coming?” Jamie asked Aiden.

“Nah,” Aiden said. “They would just make me sit in the waiting room since I'm not family. I got something else I can help with here.”

Jamie nodded as he walked out. Tony and Jamie were soon sat in Dr. Pai's car. No one spoke. Soon enough Tony was back in an exam room as Dr. Richards the doctor from before did a full exam and they even had Tony go in for a scan in one of the big metal tubes. Afterwards the doctors were gone going over the results as Tony sat with Jamie in the exam room.

“How old do I look?” Tony asked breaking the silence.

“I don't really know, you're young, so I don't really remember you ever looking like this.”

“Check the photos,” Tony said sounding more like a demand than a request. Jamie went through his phone before finally coming to a stop. “Found a match,” he said grimacing.

“How old,” Tony asked, unsure if he really wanted to hear the answer.

“Five,” Jamie said.

“Oh man,” Tony groaned.

“At least you're not a baby,” Jamie said being the only consolation he could offer. The doctors then came back in their faces looking graven. Tony knew it wasn't good.

“The serum has worked its way through,” Dr. Pai began. “The cells are no longer reacting and have stabilized meaning Tony will not get any younger than he currently is.”

“That's great,” Jamie said sounding hopeful. “So now we just need to get a cure and then this will all be over.”

“I don't think that can happen,” Dr. Pai said. Jamie's face fell as Tony continued to stare at the ground. “Getting a cell to go back to what it once was is one thing, but making it go forward is a completely different thing.”

“Even if we could,” Dr. Richardson then continued on. “There is no way we could possibly put Tony back to how he was.”

“Wait a minute,” Jamie said. “You can't possibly think I would buy that. I mean c'mon you just have to reverse what happened. I understand it would take time, but it sounds like you all are giving up.”

“Jamie stop,” Tony said. “Their right. Our bodies are exposed to so much as we age that it would be impossible to make sure the cells aged in exactly the same way. Even if we did have something to do that there is no guarantee I would be

the same.” Tony didn't want to believe it himself. Yet he knew what he knew. He had tried to keep the doubt away. Trying to believe Dr. Pai, being as brilliant as he was would come up with something, but he knew the chances were slim. There was no reason now to doubt. This was it.

“Oh man,” Jamie exhaled as his shoulders slumped.

“There is also the brain scans,” Dr. Richardson said. Tony looked up with an alarmed expression on his face.

“No,” he said his voice filled with dread. Dr. Pai nodded slowly.

“Your brain has also changed although its going slower than the rest of your body it will catch up soon though. Your behaviors are going to shift, you will be behaving and thinking like a child of your age.” Dr. Pai said. “I'm so sorry.”

Tony wanted to scream that it wasn't true, that he still was the same old person he always was yet he couldn't. It all made sense now. Why yesterday he had so much trouble with the schoolwork. Why had been content to sit and read a book he had liked when he had been nine and joke around so jovially with Jarret. It had already started.

“We'll need to discuss plans going forward,” Dr. Richardson said. Tony got up from his seat causing the doctor to pause.

“I need some air,” he said walking out of the room. He found a bench in the hall. He climbed up it. There had to be something he could do, but what? Jamie came out after him as he took a seat on the bench next to Tony.

“I don't even know what to say,” Jamie said in a somber tone. Tony looked at his brother for a moment. It hit him how much bigger his brother was now.

“Jamie I...” Tony began before he started sniffling. Jamie looked up before putting an arm around Tony. “I don't want to be a little kid.” he cried burying his face into Jamie's chest. Jamie didn't say anything he just held Tony letting him cry. After awhile Tony sat back wiping the stray tears from his eyes.

“Feel better?” Jamie asked. Tony nodded. “Good, we got some things to figure out now. First things first I think we gotta tell Mom.” Tony looked up fearfully at the suggestion. He still couldn't bring himself to face her. What would she say?

“I can't,” Tony said turning his head away.

“We have to tell her sometime,” Jamie reasoned. “What is she going to say when she does eventually see you. You can't just show up like this.” Tony knew that Jamie was right. He was going to be stuck like this for the foreseeable future. What was he going to do, avoid seeing his Mom until he was twenty one again? Even that wouldn't work.

“Okay,” Tony said. “But I can't talk to her yet, I don't know what to say. You'll have to explain it to her.”

“Okay,” Jamie nodded. “I'll call her in the exam room. She'll probably want to talk to the doctors as well.” Jamie then got up going back to the door. “Do you want to come back in?”

“No,” Tony said. “I need time to process this before I can even begin to talk about the future.”

“Yeah, okay,” Jamie said looking a little sullen. He looked at Tony for a moment longer. Part of him was a little put off with how his brother was acting. He just wanted him to get up and take charge. This was more Tony's problem than Jamie's and yet to Jamie it felt like a lot of the weight was being put on him. Still as Jamie looked at Tony seeming so small it made him reconsider. Tony had a lot on his plate so if he needed Jamie to take some of it of his shoulders than he would do just that. He was going to help him no matter what.

As Tony sat on the bench alone he stared straight ahead. There was not a single though in his head. If he did let one in that only invited more until it was all too overwhelming. Tony then looked to the door. He wondered how long it had been. It seemed like a long time had passed. He found himself wishing that Jamie would come out.

“I want a hug,” Tony whimpered feeling lonely and a little nervous being alone. Tony's hands then went and covered his mouth as if he had just said something forbidden. He shook his head, why did he say that? Tony grimaced. He wasn't going to become a little kid, he had to fight back. Could he? Tony wasn't sure. He was just going to have to hold on as long as possible. The door then opened as Jamie came out. Tony stood up feeling his legs begin moving toward his little brother yet Tony stopped himself.

“Okay,” Jamie said. “So I called Mom and I think she took it

well and also Aiden texted me and told me he's got clothes for you back at your room."

"Sounds good," Tony said looking melancholic as if the words weren't even registering with him. On the car ride back nobody really spoke as the air was tense. Tony could tell Dr. Pai was at a loss for words. He knew the man blamed himself. Yet Tony didn't. He was the one to blame. He felt ashamed as if he had let Dr. Pai down.

Jamie carried Tony back to his dorm since Tony did not have shoes. Getting back in the room Aiden was at the dresser seemingly putting clothes in before pushing the drawer closed.

"There he is," Aiden said mussing up Tony's hair as Jamie set him on the ground.

"I'm gonna go take a shower," Jamie said. "I sort of rushed out before I had a chance to."

"Sounds good, I do have class in an hour though," Aiden said.

"I'll be back before then," Jamie said.

"Hey," Tony yelped. "I don't need someone watching me." Aiden and Jamie gave Tony small smiles.

"I thought we could go get something to eat," Jamie said. "You're hungry aren't you."

"Oh well I guess," Tony said. He calmed down a bit seeing that Jamie hadn't been treating him like a total little kid. Jamie then departed.

“You said you had something for me to wear?” Tony asked.

“Yep I got you lots of stuff,” Aiden beamed.

“At the thrift store?” Tony said as his top lip curled up.

“Nah,” Aiden said opening a drawer as he began to gather clothes. “I went to the store and bought new stuff.”

“Why, that was more expensive.” Tony said starting to feel a little uncomfortable as always when Aiden bought stuff for him.

“They don't sell everything I needed at the thrift store,” Aiden said. “Plus Jamie already filled me in with whats going on, so I figured you were going to need a new wardrobe.”

“You shouldn't have spent all that money, but I'll pay you back,” Tony said.

“I don't want to hear it Tony,” Aiden said dismissing Tony's apprehension at once. “So first things first lets get you some undies. Aiden then held two packages up for Tony to see. They were briefs and even more distressing is that they had all sorts of designs on them. One was Mickey Mouse themed while the other was Toy Story.

“Why didn't you get boxers?” Tony mewled.

“Because these were cheaper,” Aiden said. “And you were the one complaining about me spending money. So which ones?”

“I don't want them,” Tony grumbled. Aiden tore open the Toy Story ones and pulled out a pair with a red waistband with

Woody and Buzz prominently displayed on the butt. He knelt down holding them out for Tony to step into. “Not those,” Tony said scrunching his face up in disgust.

“If you want to pick out your own undies then don't complain next time,” Aiden said. “Now lets go.”

Tony pursed his lips grabbing them out of Aiden's hands before he put them on himself. Aiden then grabbed Tony's shirt and pulled it off of him.

“Aiden stop,” Tony protested as he put his arms around himself feeling a slight chill now that he was standing in the room in just a pair of undies. Aiden gave him a sympathetic smile before he knelt down in front of Tony putting a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, I know its been a lot this morning and you're still coming to terms with it, I am too. But I think the best thing to do is just try our best to get used to it. Being upset and mad about everything is just going to make things that much harder.” Aiden said.

“But I'm not a little kid,” Tony said. Aiden went to say something before stopping as he shook his head.

“I know, but these are the clothes that fit you, and those undies make you look absolutely adorable you know,” Aiden said with a smirk.

“Eugghh,” Tony groaned turning his back to Aiden.

“Even cuter from behind,” Aiden laughed.

“Aiden stop,” Tony said turning back around as he stomped his foot.

“Ready for pants then?” Aiden asked.

“Yes please,” Tony said huffily as he grabbed at the sweatpants Aiden had in his hands. Tony went to put them on yet tripped backwards as he tried to get his leg through them. Aiden caught him and gently sat him on the ground.

“Just stay seated,” Aiden said going back to the dresser. Tony pulled the sweatpants on while sitting. He stood up. They were certainly more snug than he was used too. They were gray and plain except for the “01” that was on the hip. Aiden then handed Tony a shirt. After Tony had gotten it on he looked down to see it was a long sleeve sweater that was grey with red stripes. It wasn't the worst shirt in the world in fact it actually looked like something Tony would have picked out himself.

“I knew that would suit you,” Aiden said nodding. Tony nodded in agreement. Maybe the underwear was just a matter of saving money. “I got you some shoes too.” Aiden said as he grabbed a box pulling out some shoes. They were blue and had sonic the hedgehog on the side with velcro straps.

“Why didn't you just get normal shoes?” Tony grumbled.

“These were on clearance, plus they light up,” Aiden said clicking them together so that the lights along the sides of the bottom lit up. “I think they're cool.”

“Whatever,” Tony said as he took the shoes and some socks.

When Jamie came back he looked a little surprised to see Tony dressed.

“You look good,” Jamie said.

“Doesn't he though?” Aiden gushed from behind Tony as he had his hands on his shoulders as if Tony was some piece of artwork. “Nothing but the best for my little dude.”

“Can we just go,” Tony said taking the lead as he walked out of the room. Tony walked in front of Jamie not being up to talk.

“Tony this way,” Jamie said pointing as they came to an intersection.

“The cafeteria is this way though,” Tony questioned.

“Lets eat off campus,” Jamie said. Tony. That seemed like the better idea. You didn't see many kids on campus in the first place. They walked past the school that Tony had been pulled into yesterday. He walked close to Jamie as to not be confused again. As they walked past Tony did look to see if he could see Jarret. Although it seemed he wasn't among the kids playing at the moment. The brothers made their way down to a diner. Sliding into a booth across from one another a server came and gave Jamie a glass of water yet didn't give one to Tony. She looked at the two of them smiling a little at Tony before looking at Jamie.

“How old is he?” she asked. Jamie looked at Tony with some apprehension. Tony just nodded silently giving Jamie permission.

“He's five,” Jamie answered.

“Oh a big boy huh,” the lady chuckled. “Here you go sweetie,” she said giving him a paper place mat that served as the children's menu along with a small pack of crayons.

“He can order off the adult menu,” Jamie said.

“Sorry,” the server said. “We have a policy that kids five and under have to order off the kids menu. The owner is pretty uptight about food waste. Now I'll give you two a chance to look through the menu.”

“Sorry,” Jamie said looking at Tony. “Guess I should have said six.”

“Its fine,” Tony said. “Not much of reason to get mad.”

“You seem to be taking this well,” Jamie noted.

“Aiden said it was easier too,” Tony sighed. “He's right, its probably best just to let it happen, I just gotta act like a little kid since that's what I am now.” Jamie's mouth twisted up a little.

“Tony just be yourself,” Jamie said. “I don't want you to just be putting on an act, especially in front of me”

Yeah okay,” Tony said shooting Jamie a quick smile. Tony then looked down at the menu. He pushed some of the hair out of his eyes before it fell back down again. His hair was long probably a side effect of the regression. It was actually bothering him a little as he was constantly having to push it out of his face. Tony looked at some of the options. He

became a little worried as he looked at the words. He could still read them but they didn't seem to come to him as fast. The server then came back asking if they were ready.

“I'll have the pancakes,” Tony said. The server nodded with a look that seemed to show she was impressed that Tony was ordering for himself.

“And your drink?” she asked.

“A coke,” Tony said.

“Sweetie did you see your options,” the server said she then pointed to the bottom of the menu.

“Kids meals come with a choice between milk, apple juice, or lemonade.” Tony pursed his lips. Jamie stayed silent wanting to see how Tony would handle this.

“Apple juice then,” Tony said frowning.

“Bring him the coke,” Jamie interjected.

“Oh looks like Daddy is being nice,” the server said. Both of the brothers looked at one another as Tony's face went red. When the server left Jamie shook his head.

“I don't look that old,” Jamie muttered.

“She probably thinks you're a teen pregnancy,” Tony smirked. Jamie smiled, happy that Tony was taking the comment in stride.

“Just don't tell my girlfriend,” Jamie replied off-handedly.

“Girlfriend?” Tony asked raising an eyebrow.

“Oh yeah, guess I never told you that,” Jamie said. “We've been dating since September.”

“So its a serious relationship?” Tony asked.

“I guess,” Jamie said. “Honestly I think she's the one or rather it just feels totally different with her. I just can't imagine not being with her, you know?”

“Yeah I know the feeling,” Tony said as his expression turned sad. Jamie realized that Tony probably felt the same about Aiden. He regretted saying anything in the first place now – it felt like he was rubbing Tony's face in it.

“Um have you and Aiden talked about...” Jamie said unsure if this was something he wanted to ask.

“Well you know.”

“Not really,” Tony said. “I just think neither one of us really wanted to talk about it.” Jamie nodded. “I'm sure he knows, so we'll have to talk about it sometime, but I'm sure he already knows...probably why he's acting so weird.”

“Weird?” Jamie questioned.

“He just keeps acting like he has to take care of me, honestly its getting a little annoying.”

The server came back with the food and drinks. Tony got a jungle themed plastic cup with a cap and straw. He took a sip thankful that it was at least soda. If Aiden had been there he

probably would have made Tony get the juice. His food wasn't much better. It was a single pancake with some bacon and whip cream arranged to make it look like a face.

“Whats the matter?” Jamie asked noticing Tony's less than pleased expression.

“Its small,” Tony mumbled.

“Eat that and I'll share some of mine with you,” Jamie said.

“Okay,” Tony smiled happy at the offer. However after Tony had finished he didn't make any mention of wanting more. Afterwards Jamie lead Tony over to a park that had a large pond. He reasoned that they were already out and there was no reason to rush back just so Tony could sit and do a whole lotta nothing in his dorm room.

“I like your shoes,” Jamie said noticing Tony's light up shoes as they walked along the path near the pond.

“Yeah they light up,” Tony enthused as he jumped up and down to make the shoes flash.

“We always wanted the light up shoes but Mom always said no,” Jamie laughed as he took a seat on the bench as Tony occupied himself running back and forth looking at his shoes as they blinked. Jamie watched for a moment. Tony had slipped so quickly after they had eaten. He was really acting like a kid. Jamie decided not too mention it and decided to let Tony have his fun. He needed it.

“Hey Jamie,” a young girl said coming up to the bench.

“Didn't expect to see you here.”

Tony looked at the girl. She had long black hair and wore a light knit sweater and a was carrying a bread bag.

“Clair, hey,” Jamie said standing up. “What are you doing here?”

“Feeding the ducks,” she smiled holding up the bag. She then noticed Tony who was now standing still next to Jamie. “Whose this?”

“Oh this is my brother Tony,” Jamie said.

“Are you Jamie's girlfriend?” Tony blurted out. Clair laughed.

“Yeah I am, did he tell you about me?” she asked as she got on Tony's level.

“Not really,” Tony said.

“Tony,” Jamie exclaimed. “I did tell you about her.”

“I see,” Clair said giving Jamie a smirk. “He didn't really tell me about you either, Jamie seems to have lots of secrets. Its nice to meet you Tony I'm Clair.” she said extending her hand to Tony who shook it. Just then Jamie's phone rang he looked at it before grimacing.

“I gotta take this,” Jamie said walking a few paces away.

“So Tony how old are you?” Clair then asked.

“F-Five,” Tony stuttered a little. He had almost said twenty one.

“Wow that's so big,” Clair enthused.

“Not really,” Tony said as he could only take her comment as condescending even if she hadn't meant it as such.

“Well Tony think you're big enough to come and feed the ducks with me,” Clair said offering some breadcrumbs from her bag towards him. “We could get to know one another since we can't count on Jamie for that.”

“Sure,” Tony nodded. For some reason he seemed excited by the prospect. As they stood by the pond Tony was throwing breadcrumbs into the water and he did find it amusing to see all the ducks swim up. Clair had a hand resting on the small part of his back as if he might fall in and she would need to catch him at a moments notice. Tony thought about saying that he wasn't going to fall in yet it was sort of comforting that her hand was there. The only real problem he was having was with his hair. It absolutely would not stop getting in his eyes which made it so he had to push it out in between each handful.

“This stupid hair,” he muttered as he pushed it away for the umpteenth time.

“Whats the matter with your hair?” Clair asked.

“It keeps getting in my eyes,” Tony vented sounding more than a little frustrated. Clair examined him

for a moment.

“Wait right here,” she said as she went to the bench and

grabbed her purse before sitting down next to Tony in the grass. She took out a brush and a plain black hair band.

“Lets brush out your hair first,” she said. As she brushed his hair Tony found that it felt good. She was being very gentle. “Your hair is so soft,” Clair mused. She then brushed it back before using the hair band to tie his hair back. “There now you have a man bun,” Clair said showing him with her phone. Tony smiled. It wasn't really his style but it did keep it out of his eyes.

“Can we feed more ducks?” Tony asked standing up.

“Sure go get the bag,” Clair said. Tony took a step back before coming to a stop. He turned around to see he had bumped into a woman. She was older and had curly black hair and had sunglasses on. She looked down at him her face stony.

“Oh sorry,” Claire said addressing the woman. “Tony say excuse me.” The lady let her sunglasses slip down her nose so that she was staring Tony down with her eyes.

“Well,” she said a tight smile on her lips.

“Um hi Mom,” Tony squeaked.

Chapter 5

Adventures in Genetics: Part Five - Chapter 5

Back and Forth

Tony stood upright as he stared up at his Mom. She looked down at him with a gaze that seemed to bore into the very center of him. It was the same way she had stared at him whenever he had been in trouble back when he was kid.

“You're his Mom?” Clair asked which seemed to break the tense atmosphere between them.

“I am,” Mom smiled as she looked at Clair. “And you are?”

“Oh I'm Clair, I'm Jamie's girlfriend, so its really nice to meet you,” she said as she shook Mom's hand.

“Well isn't this a day of surprises,” Mom chuckled as Jamie walked up to join the group.

“I'm guessing he hasn't told you about me,” Clair laughed awkwardly.

“It seems both of my boys don't feel the need to keep me up to date on whats going on in their lives.”

“I uh sorta wanted to wait, you know I was planning on bringing her over for Easter,” Jamie said nervously.

“That would be lovely, we would love to have you dear,” Mom said beaming at Clair.

“Oh yeah I could totally do that, just let me know if I can bring anything,” Clair enthused.

“Great,” Jamie said clapping his hands before he grabbed Clair by the arm to lead her away hurriedly.

“Lets go my Mom and Tony need to have a talk.”

As Clair and Jamie walked Clair seemed to have something on her mind.

“Jamie are you ashamed of me?” she asked.

“What no of course not,” Jamie exclaimed.

“Then why didn't you tell your family about us, and why did you lie to me?” she asked.

“Look, I swear I was going too. I was just cautious. You're like the best girl I've ever been with and I didn't want to mess it up by putting too much on you.”

Clair gave a sad smile. “I guess I understand that, but still the lying thing is concerning.”

“Lying?” Jamie questioned.

“You may not have told your brother about me, but you told me about him. Except you said he was your older brother.” Jamie smacked his head. He now remembered briefly mentioning Tony to Clair back when they had first started dating. “Looks like your Mom was kind of mad at him or something, hope he is okay?” Clair then said as she stared off in the direction where Tony and his Mom were.

“Yeah, he is kind of in a little trouble at the moment,” Jamie said.

“Oh he seemed really sweet with me, hard to imagine him being naughty,” she chuckled.

“Listen Clair, I want to be upfront with you.” Jamie said sounding nervous. “There is something you should know about Tony,”

Meanwhile Tony stood in front of his Mom. She turned around and walked over to the bench and took a seat as she patted the spot next to her. Tony with his head hung low followed and climbed onto the bench next to her.

“Well anything to say?” she asked. Tony bit his lower lip.

“I don't really know where to start,” Tony said.

“An apology would be nice,” his Mom said. “I don't really think you handled telling me about this well. Not too mention its been going on for three days yet I'm only hearing about this for the first time two hours ago.”

“I'm sorry,” Tony said. “I just didn't know what to say. I was kind of hoping this could be fixed.” His Mom reached over stroking his cheek a little.

“Tony, why on earth would you feel the need to even do something so dangerous?” she finally asked.

“It wasn't supposed to be like this. Everything was finally working out for once. I would have had my name on published research and Dr. Pai had even promised me

royalties so I would have had money. I could have gone anywhere to continue my education."

"You took this risk for some money and a your name on some research?" Mom said sounding as if she was shocked. "Tony that is so unlike you."

"It wasn't just about me," Tony yelled before he continued on in a softer voice. "I was thinking about you and Jamie. With that money I would have been able to make sure you were comfortable. I know your new job has a good pension and everything but you still would have been living on a fixed income. I didn't want you to worry about that. Also I would have been able to pay off Jamie's student loans."

"Oh Tony," Mom sighed. "When will you learn that it isn't your job to take care of us."

"I know," Tony said in whimper. "But it was all just right there. The answer to everything."

Mom was silent for a moment.

"No use in focusing on what was. Lets get a look at you then," Mom said. "Front and center." There was no use in brow beating him. Tony hopped off the bench standing in front of his Mom. "Where did you get the clothes?"

"Oh, Aiden bought them for me," Tony mumbled. "I guess he bought me a whole new wardrobe."

"I see," Mom said nodding. "Its nice to hear he is being supportive."

“He is taking it oddly well,” Tony said.

“Hmmm,” Mom said rubbing her chin a little. “I'd say you're four years old.”

“What no way,” Tony exclaimed. “I'm five, me and Jamie looked at photos.”

“You're four dear,” Mom said shaking her head.

“How would you even know?” Tony asked cocking his head.

“For one I'm your mother,” she said in an oh so certain tone. “Plus you're missing a tooth.” Tony felt his tongue immediately go to the hole in his bottom set of teeth. He had noticed it before but with everything else it had fallen to the wayside of concerns. But it was true, he was missing a bottom incisor. “That was the first tooth you lost, right before your fifth birthday which as I recall is next week. So you are four going on five.”

“Wonderful, I'm getting younger by the minute,” Tony said as he frowned.

“This will certainly be a birthday to remember,” Mom chuckled. “But before all that I guess we'll have to go back to your dorm to pack.”

“Pack?” Tony questioned. “For what?”

“Honey from what has happened and what the doctors told me, there is just no way you can stay here. You're going to have to come back home with me.”

“I don't want too,” Tony protested.

“I'm sorry,” Mom said sympathetically. “But you don't have a choice.”

“Mom no,” Tony pleaded. “I can't live you with you again.”

“Hey now,” Mom said sounding a tad offended. “I know things weren't always easy back then but its different now. I have a nice job and I'll be able to support us just fine.”

“But you're in your fifties.” Tony countered.

“I'm not that old,” Mom tutted. “I still have plenty of gas left in the tank to raise a kid. Besides you never stop being a parent.”

“That's not what I meant,” Tony said. “You were going to be able to retire early and if you have to support me then that means you'll have to keep working. I don't want to mess that up,” Tony said. His Mom had spent a long time working thankless jobs for little pay. Right around the time Tony had graduated high school she had managed to get a job that finally payed more. Thanks to some government program or something she was also eligible to retire earlier than usual with a fat pension to boot. Tony also knew that kids were expensive. It didn't matter how good of a pension she had. It wouldn't be enough, she would have no choice but to keep working to support the both of them. He couldn't let himself be the reason that all got messed up. His Mom deserved more than spending what was supposed to be her retirement chasing after him.

“Tony I don't care about any of that.” His Mom said. “All I care about is that you and Jamie are safe and healthy. But you know you're making it sound like it would be the worst thing in the world to have to live with me again. Was I really that bad of a Mom?”

“No,” Tony said kicking the ground a little. “You were the best Mom ever.” he said looking at her with big round eyes. All of this was becoming a little too overwhelming. The idea that he was going to become a burden to her and there was nothing he could do to stop it, it was gut wrenching. The only thing he was thinking of now was how much he just wanted to hug her. To feel her comforting embrace that would always keep him safe when he had been younger. To Tony's surprise his Mom lifted him up onto her lap with little effort before pulling him into a tight hug. Tony couldn't help himself as he wrapped his own arms around her snuggling a little into her shoulder.

“Thanks I sort of wanted this,” Tony whispered.

“I know,” Mom cooed. “You were giving me that same look you gave me when you were a little boy.”

“Mommy I'm sorry, really.” Tony said. His Mom smiled hearing the childish moniker coming from his mouth in that same syrupy voice that she hadn't heard in years. She wondered if Tony had said it on purpose. He hadn't though. It had come out with zero thought or hesitation.

“No apologies,” Mom said rocking him back and forth lightly. “It feels good to get a hug from you after all. Its been

awhile,”

“I hug you still,” Tony said straightening up so he could look at his Mom with a skeptical look.

“Oh sure I get one hug on my birthday if I'm lucky,” his Mom laughed. Tony smiled before hugging her again.

“I'll hug you more then,” he said sounding all the more like a little kid making a promise.

“Wonderful,” Mom said releasing him before giving him a kiss on the nose. “Tell Jamie he has too as well.”

“Aye aye,” Tony said with a salute, something he had often done when his Mom had told him to do something yet with much more sarcasm.

“Are you ready to go pack up now?” Mom then asked.

“Mom no, I told you I don't want to move back,” Tony said breaking out of whatever childish mindset he had slipped into.

“Tony, there is no other option.” Mom said. Tony shifted off his Mom's lap to sit next to her.

“I can't leave yet,” Tony said. “There is a meeting with the college next week. I have to go to that. So can't we wait until then?” Mom was quiet for a moment.

“I guess we'll have to.” she finally said. Tony let out a breath of relief, he had delayed what was becoming quickly inevitable. “I suppose Jamie will just have to look out for you a little longer.”

“I don't need anyone looking after me,” Tony grumbled. Jamie returned with Clair. Tony could sense something had changed. She was looking at him a little more intensely. Mom began to make plans to spend time together with her sons seeing as she was in town for the day. She asked Clair if she wanted to join.

“Oh I gotta go to work actually,” Clair laughed. She said goodbye to Mom before kneeling down to Tony. “It was nice to meet you, lets feed the ducks again sometime.” she said. Tony gave her a little smile as he waved back. Afterwards Mom wanted to be shown around campus since she had never been. Tony felt a little awkward as people seemed to look at him all throughout campus, probably wondering what a little kid was doing there. Jamie was taking his Mom through a particularly crowded hallway and out of instinct Tony grabbed his Mom's hand. His Mom looked down at him smiling. Tony went to withdraw his hand yet his Mom squeezed it.

“Hold my hand a little longer sweetie,” Mom said. “Wouldn't want you to get carried away.” Tony groaned a little only having his hand released when they were back outside. Soon enough it was starting get near dinner time so the group went to a restaurant down the street from campus.

“Looks like you'll be needing two adult menus and a kids menu?” the hostess asked.

“That should be just fine,” Mom said. Getting seated at the table Tony immediately went to protest.

“Why did you say that?” he said with a cross look.

“The meals are cheaper,” Mom said shrugging. “You didn't have a very big appetite when you were this age anyways.”

“Mommy,” Tony yipped before covering his mouth as his face went red. Jamie who was sitting next to Tony put a calming hand on his shoulder.

“It'll be fine,” he said. “You ordered off the kids menu at the diner and you were fine.”

Tony shook his head, that had been completely different.

“Well I'm not going to eat if I have to order off the stinkin kids menu,” Tony said pushing the activity paper away from himself. When the server came around Jamie ordered first getting himself some stuffed shells. Mom ordered the carbonara and a glass of wine.

“And for him,” she continued. “We'll take the kids spaghetti and meatball with a lemonade.” Once the server had walked away Tony frowned looking more like he was pouting. Once the food came Tony sat with his arms crossed staring at the food in front of himself with a glare.

“Tony, eat your food,” Mom chided.

“Don't wanna,” Tony grumbled.

“Someone is awfully cranky right now,” Mom said as she looked at Jamie. “You'll have to start making him take a nap during the day if he is going to be like this.”

“I'll let Aiden know,” Jamie chuckled. Tony scowled at Jamie feeling just a little betrayed.

“I'm not a little kid,” Tony said.

“Then stop acting like one,” Mom said with nod. Tony let out a huff of air sitting up as he grabbed his fork stabbing into the meatball on his plate. Once he started eating his apprehension about the food began to disappear. It actually tasted really good. After a little bit he had completely cleaned his plate.

“Was it good?” Jamie asked smiling at Tony who had some sauce on his face. Tony nodded smiling a little. “Wipe your face,” Jamie said seeing that Tony was in fact in a better mood. Tony used the napkin Jamie handed to him to wipe his face although there were a few spots stained from the red sauce.

“Almost,” Mom chuckled taking her own napkin and dabbing her tongue before she reached across the table to wipe Tony's face for him.

“Euggh Mommy stop,” Tony fussed breaking free from her hold.

“You missed some,” Mom said sitting back.

“I don't want your spit on my face,” Tony said looking disgusted. Even Jamie looked a little put off. It wasn't because his Mom had wiped his face it just seemed like she was pushing him in a way. Jamie was starting to understand Tony's fluctuating moods. One moment he was the adult Tony and then he would slip into a younger mindset but doing

things that upset him seemed to push him out of it. Jamie didn't necessarily think it was great idea for Tony to be pushed to and fro between the different mindsets.

“Mom lay off of him,” Jamie said coming to his brother's defense.

“I was just cleaning his face,” Mom said looking a little annoyed that her parenting was being called into question.

“He's not a little kid, you can't treat him like that,” Jamie said holding his ground. His Mom looked at him before putting her hands up a little with a dismissive look. The server came back to clear the plates.

“Looks like someone cleaned their plate,” she said noting Tony's bowl. “We do offer a free scoop of ice cream to any kiddo that shows what good eater they are.”

“I can have ice cream!?” Tony inquired as his eyes lit up.

“If your Mommy says its okay,” the server said. Tony looked at his Mom with an eager expression. His Mom was a little surprised to see him deferring to her so readily. She then smirked.

“Oh I don't know Tony, she said that was for kids,” Mom said in a leading tone. “Jamie seems to think we shouldn't let you do stuff like that,” she said with a shrug.

“Jamie,” Tony said looking at his brother as if Jamie had double crossed him.

“Hey don't put this on me,” Jamie said through clenched teeth

towards his Mom keeping his voice quiet.

“Mommy please, please can I have ice cream?” Tony pleaded with his little hands clasped together.

“Of course you can,” Mom smiled. “Tell her what flavor you want.”

“Strawberry!” Tony exclaimed looking a the server who gave a smile and said she would be back in a minute. Tony got his ice cream soon enough and was digging in. Mom looked at Jamie with her arms crossed as she motioned with her head towards Tony with an all knowing smirk. Jamie just shook his head. He did watch Tony for a moment. He seemed to be enjoying his ice cream which was strange. Jamie couldn't remember the last time he had seen Tony eat anything sweet. Tony soon finished and the three began the walk back to campus. Mom and Jamie walked a little behind as Tony lead the way running ahead. He certainly had a lot of energy at the moment.

“Tony not too far,” Mom called after him. Tony didn't acknowledge that he had heard but listened all the same as he jumped up on a bench before jumping off before running ahead again as Mom and Jamie caught up.

“That was pretty low at the restaurant,” Jamie said giving his Mom look.

“Jamie I was only treating him how he was acting,” she said.

“Tony isn't a little kid,” Jamie repeated.

“Really,” she said pointing forward at Tony who was now near a metal trashcan drumming the sides of it with a big smile on his face.

“I meant not all of the time,” Jamie admitted. “He still thinks like an adult most of the time.”

“He's been calling me Mommy pretty much all day,” Mom said as she came to a pause. She placed a hand on Jamies shoulder giving him a sympathetic look. “I know this is going to be an adjustment, but if what those doctors said to me on the phone is true this is how you are going to have to treat him. We are all going to have to get used to it.”

“I know that,” Jamie said wearily. “I just don't want to push Tony one way or another. I just want him to be able to feel like he can let things happen naturally. We need to let him lead and make his own decisions. We owe him at least that.”

“You're right,” Mom said after a moment of contemplation. “If he has the were withal to think like a an adult then I can to respect that. Although there are things he is not going to like, but need to happen. I said I wouldn't, but after spending the day with him I think I'm going to have to take him back home with me tonight.”

“Oh so you're going to take him back home,” Jamie said sounding a little surprised.

“Of course I am,” Mom said smirking. “I'm his mother he is going to be my responsibility. He is completely against it at this point but its something that he will just have to get used

too.”

“Yeah I know,” Jamie nodded.

“He wants to stay at least until the meeting next week. But I don't know if that will be possible. He might not be able to make it until then.”

“I'll take care of him,” Jamie then blurted out.

“Jamie honey you can't you've got classes and work –“

“Aiden will help too, he already has been.” Jamie said quickly. Mom was silent for a moment as she nodded a little, mulling the idea over in her head.

“Okay,” she said. “If you and Aiden both agree then Tony can stay until the meeting. But if he wants me to come and get him any time before that I want a phone call, day or night.” Mom said issuing a warning.

“You got it,” Jamie said smiling. Tony then came running over pulling on the hem of his Mom's shirt.

“What is it sweetie?” she asked.

“I gotta go potty,” Tony said looking desperate.

“Lets hurry then,” Mom said as she took Tony into a nearby store. Tony was so focused on his overwhelming need for the bathroom that he didn't notice at first that his Mom had pulled him into the women bathroom.

“Wait a minute,” Tony said stopping in his tracks as his adult senses kicked in. “I can't be in here its the lady's room.” His

Mom gave him a patient look.

“Better hurry up,” she said. “Don't want an accident.” Tony didn't have time to ruminate on the situation as he made for a stall. “Need help?” Mom asked. Tony was quick to refuse shutting the stall door quickly. He went up to the toilet pulling his pants and undies down quickly to relieve himself. He was grateful to have made it and at having kept his Mom out of the stall. What would she say to seeing her twenty one year old son wearing Toy Story briefs? As he came out his Mom was stood by the sink.

“You made it great job,” she said with a smile. “Don't forget to wash those hands.”

“Mom stop,” Tony said annoyed at her cloying. His Mom put up her hands as if to defend herself yet didn't say anything more. Clearly Tony wasn't in the sort of head space any longer where he was fine with his Mom taking charge. Coming out and getting back with Jamie, Tony became quiet, no longer possessing a boundless sense of energy as he just had. They walked all the way back to Tony's dorm room. Tony came in with his Mom and brother in tow. Aiden was at his desk, he was surprised to see the entourage Tony had shown up with.

“Oh hey Mrs. Mcallister I didn't know you were here,” Aiden said politely.

“Aiden, its Evelyn, you don't need to be so formal,” Mom said with a smile.

“Oh sure,” Aiden nodded.

“I must say I'm impressed,” Mom said looking around. “You boys keep this room tidy.”

“Me and Tony like a nice space,” Aiden chuckled. There was some more small talk before Mom then turned to Tony.

“I suppose I'll be going now,” she said kneeling down to give him a hug which Tony returned. “I'll be back soon for the meeting,” she said adopting a tone as is she were comforting a small child upon having to separate from their parent.

“Yeah okay,” Tony said letting his Mom give him a kiss to the cheek.

“Jamie can you walk me to my car?” she asked.

“Sure,” Jamie said. They walked out into the night air eventually making it to the visitors parking lot.

“Maybe I should just get a hotel room nearby,” Mom mused. “Just in case.”

“He'll be fine,” Jamie said noting the worry in his Mom's voice. “Me and Aiden will keep an eye on him.”

“I suppose,” Mom said. “And I guess I should go get his room ready for him back home. I got some boxes in there I've been storing.” Mom got into her car starting the ignition. Jamie stood at her door. The idea that Tony would be going back with her seemingly becoming more real. He thought about how weird it would be to not have Tony on campus anymore. Maybe it was for the best though. Jamie had certainly seen

enough to know that Tony was becoming a little kid. The way he had started deferring to their Mom so readily was evidence enough of that. Still Jamie somehow had doubts. Tony was against the idea of moving back home for whatever reason. Even if he became that little kid Jamie had gotten glimpses of, was it really okay just to dismiss the wishes of the adult Tony here and now? That didn't seem right. Jamie knocked on his Mom's window.

“What's up?” Mom asked rolling down her window.

“I'll take care of Tony,” Jamie said. Mom furrowed her eyebrows in confusion.

“I'm sure you will, and I know he'll appreciate it.”

“That's not what I mean,” Jamie said shaking his head. “I don't mean just until the meeting I mean from now on.”

“Jamie I...” Mom paused before sighing. “We'll talk about it later, now get back quickly I don't like the idea of you walking around at night by yourself,” she said. Jamie nodded stepping away from the car waving as his Mom drove off. As Jamie walked back to his dorm, he knew it had been a spur of the moment declaration. It had been silly. There were so many problems with it. But the more he thought about the more it seemed like a solution. He had to do something to help Tony, not the little boy he was becoming but the remains of the adult he was.

Meanwhile back in the dorm Tony went and sat on his bed. It had been a long day and he was wiped out.

“So have a good day with your Mom?” Aiden asked.

“She wants to take me back home,” Tony groaned not able to stop himself from letting the biggest problem in his world come tumbling out of his mouth. Aiden came and sat down on his own bed across the room from Tony, he had a pained look on his face.

“Yeah, I guess that's how it was going to happen,” Aiden said softly. Tony swallowed a little. It was time to have a conversation he never wanted to have.

“Aiden I think we're going to have to break up,” Tony said keeping his eyes on the ground. He couldn't bear having to look at Aiden. Tony sat with the silence bearing down heavily on him as Aiden didn't respond. Tony couldn't take it any longer he looked up seeing Aiden was already staring at him.

“I know,” Aiden said. “There's nothing we can really do about that.”

“But I still love you, I just want to make sure you know that,” Tony added. Aiden nodded in agreement. “I'm so sorry,” Tony continued on. “I really messed up everything. I just don't know how this happened. A couple of days ago I had everything. A promising future, a great boyfriend and now I have to move back home.”

“Yeah I know,” Aiden said. “But is there really a point in beating yourself up? Lets try to look at the bright side,” Aiden said adopting his habit of trying to spin things optimistically which was counter to the the more pessimistic

view Tony naturally adopted. It was one of the reasons they worked so well together. They truly balanced one another out.

“What could be good about this?” Tony grumbled not in the mood for positive thinking at the moment.

“For one I have no intention of cutting you out of my life,” Aiden said. “You won't be that far away. I can still come hang out right?”

“I won't even be the same person,” Tony said. “You really want to hang out with a little kid?”

“Sure,” Aiden shrugged. “I think you're totally adorable anyways. It would be kind of like having a little brother. We could do all sorts of fun things.”

“Well I'm glad you're so happy,” Tony said crossing his arms. “But its not just that. I don't really want to live with my Mom.”

“How come,” Aiden asked. “I know you had some rough times but you always talk about how great your Mom was when you were growing up.”

“Thats the thing,” Tony said. “She already did so much for me, she worked hard to give me and Jamie a good childhood. If I go back its going to be a burden on her. She won't be able to retire anymore. It would be like I'm stealing her life.” Aiden sat for long time. Tony could almost see gears turning in his head.

“Hey Tony,” he finally piped up. “If there was a way that you

didn't have to go back to your Mom would you do it?”

“Well yeah I guess,” Tony said. “What did you have in mind?”

Aiden shook his head. “It was just an idea, and I would have to talk to some people first so...”

“Just tell me,” Tony said. If Aiden had any sort of ideas Tony was game to hear it.

“Just let me think on things first,” Aiden said before he checked his phone standing up. “Besides its getting late, somebody needs to go to bed. So lets save it for another time.”

“Hey, that's not fair,” Tony said. He then looked at the clock in the room. It was like 7:45. It was not even late. Was Aiden trying to avoid the topic? Then why had he brought it up?

“I know its earlier than usual,” Aiden said moving over to the dresser. “But you are younger now, its only makes sense to have an earlier bedtime.”

“Aiden, stop I don't have a bedtime,” Tony whined.

“You had a long day,” Aiden said. “Its clearly painted on your face, besides I already told your Mom I would take care of you.” Tony stood up from the bed giving Aiden a huffy look. “I bought some jammies for you at the store too, so can you handle getting your clothes off. I'll even time you,” Aiden said smiling. “I bet you can get down to your undies real fast.”

“I'm not doing that,” Tony growled.

“So I need to help you like a little baby then?” Aiden said

putting a hand on his hip.

“I'm not a baby,” Tony spat.

“Then show me,” Aiden said. “1..2...3” Aiden began counting. Tony rolled his eyes as he pulled off his sweater. Its not as if he had been convinced but he knew Aiden was more than capable of getting his clothes off of him. By the time Aiden reached fifteen Tony was standing in just his undies. He could have done it faster, but he had made a point of going slow.

“Great,” Aiden said as he dug through a bag that Tony couldn't see. “Now I have a serious question for you and I want you to be honest. Man to man alright.”

“What?” Tony cocked his head. Although he was happy that Aiden was talking to him more in a more adult manner having dropped the little boy act. Aiden turned around with a blue plastic package in his hands. As Tony looked at it his eyes bulged when he realized what it was.

“You don't wet the bed do you?” Aiden asked.

“What, No!” Tony practically screeched. Aiden put the package of pull-ups on top of the dresser giving Tony a calm look.

“Alright don't freak out, I was just making sure we were prepared for anything.” Aiden said.

“Well I don't wet the bed,” Tony said just to make the point as clear as possible. He didn't even remember ever wearing

anything like that. So it must be true.

“Then lets get your jammies on,” Aiden said kneeling down as he lifted up Tony's arm threading it through a short sleeve and then the other.

“Can you not call them that?” Tony groaned as Aiden began buttoning up the shirt. “And quit dressing me,” Tony huffed as he took a step back.

“Hang on,” Aiden chuckled as he pulled Tony back to finish buttoning the last two buttons. “Here, you can put on your shorts,” Aiden said handing them to Tony who put them on before looking down at himself. He was wearing a navy button up pajama shirt and matching shorts with mini white dots all over. It wasn't horribly kiddy but it didn't exactly inspire a mature image. Aiden then swept Tony up into his arms.

“Aiden you said I could stay up till ten,” Tony whined as Aiden tucked him into bed. It was only a moment later he realized he was arguing for permission. Tony sat up. He didn't need Aiden's permission to do anything. Aiden came back over to the bed laying down next to him and grabbing Tony to hold him close to his chest.

“I know bud, but that was yesterday, you were bigger, plus you had a big day already, so relax and we can read more of this book together,” Aiden said opening up the book Tony had been gifted yesterday.

“Aiden,” Tony said with some protest, yet Aiden just began to

stroke his head.

“Its time for T.T to settle down,” Aiden said.

“T.T?” Tony questioned.

“Yeah,” Aiden chuckled. “It stands for Tiny Tony.”

“That's stupid,” Tony mumbled. “It sounds like you're calling me titty.” Aiden let out a laugh.

“Alright I admit, it needs some work,” Aiden said opening up the book. “Now where did we leave off?” Tony didn't answer. It had sort of dawned on him how powerless he was. Aiden was so much bigger than him now. Tony decided to change up his tactics. He wasn't going to drift off to sleep no matter what. He was going to let Aiden read until he was blue in the face and still be awake. That would show Aiden how ridiculous he was being. It wasn't half an hour later that Aiden closed the book gently shifting Tony so he could get out from under him without disturbing the tiny boy as he slept. Aiden walked over to his desk grabbing his phone. He had a call to make. He turned off the light before he stepped out into the hallway closing the door gently behind himself.

Chapter 6

Adventures in Genetics: Part Six - Chapter 6

The Bad Kid

Tony whined a little as Aiden brought over the blue pull-up with Mickey Mouse on the front.

“No whining now Tony,” Aiden said holding the pull-up out for the tiny boy to step into.

“But its...” Tony began to protest.

“Better than a wet bed,” Aiden said finishing his sentence for him. “Even you have to admit it was better this morning waking up in dry bed than a wet one.”

Tony's mouth twisted up a little before he placed his hands on Aiden's shoulders to step into the papery undergarment as Aiden pulled it up to his waist before pulling out some basketball themed pajamas that looked beyond kiddie. Tony knew he didn't have a leg to stand on. The previous day after having sworn he didn't need them he had woken up in a wet bed. Tony just groaned as he let Aiden finish dressing him. Wearing the pull-ups was one thing, Tony couldn't deny that he needed them. But everything else was beginning to be too much. As Tony laid in bed he began to question what he was even still doing here. Maybe it would be better just to cut his losses and go back with his Mom. What other option did he have? As things stood now he couldn't even really call Aiden

his boyfriend anymore. It felt like Aiden was more of a babysitter now than anything. Jamie too. They didn't even let Tony stay on his own anymore. Mainly because of one incident when Aiden had left to go to practice. Tony had become bored in the room. He didn't know why he did it but he had spotted a towel and the idea had gotten in his head. It was something he had often done as a kid. He took the towel tying it around his neck like a cape. Suddenly he felt like a superhero. He zoomed around the room holding his hands out. Tony quickly lost himself in his game, it was simply too much fun. Before long he was on his bed jumping up and down laughing jovially. For the first time all his cares were gone. He wasn't thinking about what people would say if they saw him, he was in his own world of fun.

That was until he got to close to the edge and slipped off the bed backwards landing on the ground with a large thud, just in time for Aiden to come into the room. Tony wasn't hurt thankfully, but found himself feeling a little nervous as Aiden interrogated as to what he had been doing. Tony felt like he was in trouble, a moment later he pushed the feeling away. Aiden was not in charge of him. He could do what he wanted. Still it had been decided between Aiden and Jamie that Tony could no longer be left on his own, especially if he wasn't going to be thinking things through like an adult. A charge Tony vehemently denied. He had just slipped it hadn't been a big deal. Its not like Tony had even told what he had been doing, although Aiden probably had a few ideas upon seeing the towel tied around Tony's neck.

Tony awoke as he was lifted out of the bed.

“Up and at em sunshine we gotta go,” Aiden cheered. Tony stood groggily as Aiden quickly stripped him of his pajamas and pull-ups. Tony hadn't even been aware that he had fallen asleep and it was now morning. Until he was naked and shivering.

“What are you doing?” Tony said sounding so much like a grumpy little kid who had just been roused from sleep.

“Getting you dressed so we can go,” Aiden said already having a pair of mickey mouse undies held out for Tony to step into. Tony didn't hesitate to balance himself on Aiden's shoulders to step into the clothes.

“Go where?” Tony questioned as Aiden presented a green sleeved Lego Jurassic World shirt to him with a raptor on the front and a pair of green shorts to go along with it.

“I gotta go to class today,” Aiden simply said throwing some extra clothes into a backpack before slinging it across his shoulder. “Here you can eat this for breakfast on the way,” Aiden said offering Tony an already unwrapped granola bar.

“On the way,” Tony said confused before his eyes went wide. “Wait you're taking me with you!?”

“I can't leave you alone,” Aiden said as got his shoes on.

“But I can't go to class with you,” Tony stammered. The very idea causing him to bubble with anxiety. Everyone would surely wonder why a kid was in their lecture.

“Don't worry about that,” Aiden said. “I got everything taken care of.”

“No,” Tony said. He didn't want to have to sit in a lecture hall with everyone staring at him, it was too much.

“I'm sorry Tony,” Aiden said with some sympathy. “I was going to to tell you about this sooner but I woke up late and now we're in a rush, so we really need to go now.”

Tony stood still overcome with nerves. Aiden seeing that he was not going to move sighed before picking him up into his arms. Tony let out a groan as they walked out into the hall. Aiden pushed the hand that was holding the granola bar towards Tony's mouth. He took a bite and chewed while Aiden carried him across campus. Every time Tony tried to question Aiden further he would simply tap Tony's hand to remind him to take another bite.

“You gotta finish that before we get there,” Aiden remarked. It was starting to feel like Aiden was using it to keep Tony's mouth full so he didn't keep asking questions. Aiden walked into a building that Tony had never been in, they were after all in completely different programs. Tony found the butterfly's in his stomach fluttering. His mind was racked with all the scenarios that could possibly take place. What if the professor questioned why he was there, what would the other students do? That is until Tony heard the sound of other kids as Aiden walked through a door. Tony craned his head to see a room that looked out of place on a college campus. They were in a room that had brightly covered walls. There

were few small circle tables set up. There was a large area with a colorful carpet with the alphabet displayed on it, along with shelves that held all sorts of craft supplies and toys. In front of it all was a large desk acting as a barrier between the area and the entryway.

“Wwat is bis,” Tony asked with the last bit of granola bar still half chewed in his mouth.

“Don't talk with your mouth full,” Aiden chuckled as he set Tony on the ground in front of the desk before grabbing his hand. Tony couldn't see over the top but heard a woman's voice ask how she should help. “I got a little guy to drop off for a few hours,” Aiden said. The woman then handed him a clipboard as Aiden took Tony over to some chairs as he lifted him up to sit next to him so Aiden could fill out the paperwork.

“Aiden what is this place?” Tony asked again.

“Its the campus daycare,” Aiden said.

“Daycare,” Tony exclaimed as he looked around.

“Yeah I did'nt even know we had one,” Aiden said. “I guess they have the early childhood education students run it so they can get there hours in.

“You can't seriously be considering leaving me here,” Tony hissed.

“Well where else am I supposed to put you?” Aiden laughed. “Hey whats your middle name again.”

“Aiden I can't stay here,” Tony said trying to grab the clipboard away.

“Tony stop,” Aiden said brushing away Tony's feeble attempt to snatch away the clipboard. “I have to go to class and Jamie is at work.”

“B..but,” Tony stuttered.

“Tony you know you're starting to act more like a kid,” Aiden said with some patience. “Its not safe to leave you alone anymore.” Tony shook his head in dis-belief. How could Aiden even think about doing this too him. “Alright who should we put down on your list of people that can pick you up?” Aiden asked. “Me of course, and Jamie too, and I guess your Mommy as well, that sounds good.” Aiden said continuing to write. As he finished he stood back up scooping up Tony onto his hip and carrying him back to the counter. “You'll have fun here trust me.”

The woman took the paper from Aiden and looked it over before opening a up a door in the large desk as Aiden ushered Tony through.

“Alright Tony,” Aiden said kneeling down next to Tony. “I gotta get going or I'll be late, I'll be back in a few hours to pick you up.” Aiden gave Tony a hug before leaving. Tony stood still flabbergasted that this was happening.

“Here's a name tag,” the woman said drawing Tony back to the present, as she affixed a sticker to his shirt. “I'm Miss Brynn, now lets see what we can get you doing,” she said

standing up and taking Tony's hand in hers. She showed him all the toys and crafts yet Tony showed no interest.

“I just want to sit,” Tony said plopping on his butt in a corner. Miss Brynn looked on with sympathy.

“Its okay to be nervous hon,” the woman said as she rubbed Tony's shoulder a little.

“I'm not nervous, just tired,” Tony lied. More than anything he wanted to be left alone.

“Okay sweetie,” Miss Brynn said. “You just let me know if you need anything.” Tony was then left alone. He took a deep breath taking a look around. There were only two other kids in the room. Two little girls sat a at a table with another woman that looked like she was a college student making some macaroni art. Tony then looked at some of the toys that were on the ground nearby. There was a large yellow dump truck and some toy tractors. For a moment he looked at them with interest. Tony then shook his head. He couldn't let himself think like that. It was that type of thinking that had gotten him here in the first place. If he hadn't been so stupid and gotten caught up playing in the room yesterday Aiden wouldn't have thought this was necessary. Even so Tony found himself beyond angry at the moment with Aiden. Tony was doing everything he could to hold back the encroaching child brain that was taking over, and it felt like Aiden was doing nothing but encouraging it. Miss Brynn then appeared again this time with another little red haired boy in tow.

“Hey Tony this is Cayden its his first day here too,” she said

with a smile. “You boys happen to be the same age as well so maybe you guys could play together.”

Cayden gave a shy wave at Tony who returned with just a shrug. Cayden came and sat down next to him. Miss Brynn left the boys alone as she went to check on the other group.

“Wanna play?” Cayden asked sheepishly picking up one of the cars. Tony was about to refuse but could see the kid was nervous. Not wanting to make him feel bad Tony picked up another car. They both started rolling them around a little, neither one of them talking much as if they were feeling one another out. Cayden's nervousness seemed to subside a little as he pulled over some of the tractors. Tony watched for a moment as he saw a small smile appear on Cayden's lips. Tony thought that this was okay. If this little bit of play helped out the nervous little boy then there was no harm in it. “Lets get more toys,” Cayden then enthused going over to the bins. He came back a moment later with a bin containing a farm and many little plastic animals. “We can make a farm,” Cayden suggested. Tony seemed to be pulled into the other boys excitement.

“I want to be the horse,” Tony said grabbing up one of the figures. Tony fell deeper into the game thinking nothing of his determination not to be a little kid. The boys played for sometime laughing and making animal sounds as they made the figures plodd across the carpet.

“Time for food,” Cayden said driving the tractor over to the fence and pushing the plastic hay bale on top of the tractor

into the pen. Tony made the pig figure go and eat making an oinking sound. Just then he stopped. He stood up and ran over to Miss Brynn tugging on her shirt.

“What is it sweetie?” she asked.

“Potty,” Tony said with some urgency with a hand on his crotch. Miss Brynn just smiled as she lead him over to a door near the back.

“Do you need some help in there?” she asked. Tony shook his head before closing the door. He found himself in a small bathroom that even had a mini toilet in it. He quickly got his pants down before relieving himself feeling proud of himself for not having an accident. Tony then froze. What was he thinking? Why did he think he might have had an accident? Tony groaned realizing that it had happened again, he had lost himself. He went to the sink to wash his hands and splash a little water on his face. It had become abundantly clear just how dangerous this place was for his psyche. Being around all this little kid stuff was just too much temptation for him. He had to figure out a way out of here and fast. Tony looked at the toilet. Could he fake sick? If he made himself throw up that would be enough for them to have to call Aiden to come and pick him up, but that would be for just today. Tony knew Aiden had plans to bring him here more often in the future. Tony needed to find a way so that he never came back, and the only way to do that was to make it so he couldn't come back – he was going to have to get himself kicked out of daycare.

Tony walked out of the bathroom having fully convinced himself of his plan. He just needed to figure out what he was going to do now. Tony felt some apprehension looking out over the room. He was going to have to play the part of the bad kid, something that was completely unnatural to him. He had always been a goody two shoes fearing the conflict that could arise for misbehaving as a child not too mention it would cause problems for his Mom. Given what was at stake now though he was going to have push himself out of his comfort zone. Cayden came running up to Tony with a large monster truck in his hands.

“Look what I found,” Cayden said with a big smile. “We can play with these, don't you think they the coolest?”

“I don't want to play with that,” Tony said gruffly. Cayden looked back at him with a confused look.

“But they are fun, c'mon,” Cayden said as he shoved the truck into Tony's arms.

“I said no,” Tony shouted letting the monster truck drop to the ground with a clatter. Tony gritted his teeth as he looked at Cayden's face turning a little sad. He really did feel a little guilty that Cayden was getting dragged into this, but there was no other option. Miss Brynn, having heard the commotion came over.

“Tony we don't shout, we use our inside voices,” she said in a soft reminding tone. “Is there a problem here?”

“I just wanted to play monster trucks,” Cayden said sounding

a little choked up. “Then he yelled at me,” the boy said turning his face away.

“Tony we don't yell at our friends,” Miss Brynn said. “Do you not like monster trucks?” she asked to prod Tony to talk about his feelings rather than shouting them.

“I don't want to play with them,” Tony said crossing his arms.

“I see you are upset,” Miss Brynn said not losing her calm demeanor. She went over and picked up one of the tractors coming back over to the boys. “I saw you two having fun with these,” she said holding the tractor out towards Tony as if to offer it to him. “Are you upset because you wanted to keep playing farm?

“I don't want to play with any of these toys,” Tony said grabbing the tractor and chucking it away. He saw Miss Brynn raise and eyebrow but he knew he wasn't going to get kicked out for throwing one measly little toy, he needed something more. Tony stomped over to the farm play set. He began kicking his feet destroying the fence and sending the building and the little farm animals scattering. “All these toys are stupid, this place is stupid,” he had really done it now and there was no stopping as he continued to turn into Godzilla ready to stomp across the city.

“That is quite enough,” Miss Brynn said sternly dropping her pleasant attitude and morphing into a stern authority figure as she marched over grabbing Tony by the wrist and holding it up above his head as she lead him to a corner of the room. They came to a stop in front of a red plastic chair facing the

wall. “Sit,” she said pointing to the red chair.

“Why?” Tony said with a growl ready to show that the teachers show of firmness would not sway him.

“Because this is the quiet corner where young men who act like naughty little boys go for a time out,”

“Yeah right,” Tony smirked. He wasn't going to comply, not now, not ever.

“You have til the count of three,” Miss Brynn said.

“I'm not having a time out,” Tony roared grabbing the chair and knocking it over. Suddenly Tony felt himself be lifted up. He shrieked as he struggled against Miss Brynn.

“Tina the room is yours,” Miss Brynn said to the other woman who nodded as she went over to a sniffling Cayden putting an arm around him as she lead him over to the table where the other two little girls were. Miss Brynn then carried Tony off to another room. She shut the door behind her before sitting in an office chair behind a desk. Tony was still struggling against her as he yelled demanding to be let go. Miss Brynn had her arms wrapped around him pinning his arms to his sides as she had him sat secure in her lap.

“Let me go,” Tony squealed pushing against the woman's hold.

“Just as soon as you calm down,” Miss Brynn said sounding dis-interested as if this was all some sort of gambit for attention she was not going to be drawn into. Tony kept up

for a few more minutes but his tiny body betrayed him as his energy was depleted. As Tony sat breathing heavily Miss Brynn picked up a paper on her desk that was what Aiden had filled out. “So Aiden is your brother hmm,” she said looking it over. Tony was about to correct her before stopping himself. Questions about who Aiden was to him were not something Tony wanted to field.

“Yeah,” Tony mumbled before he looked at the phone on the desk. “Are you going to call him?”

“Nope,” Miss Brynn said setting down the paper as she lifted Tony off of her lap. She then took his hand as she stood up. “It looks like you've calmed down now, so you can do your time out.”

Tony was taken out of the office and lead back to the red chair. As he sat Miss Brynn set a timer nearby for ten minutes and told him he needed to sit for the whole time. Sitting in the chair, Tony certainly felt like a naughty little boy. For one he hadn't got what he wanted. He realized that to get kicked out he was going to have to go further than he was comfortable with. He also felt stupid that he had even hatched such a hare-brained scheme in the first place. He could see now how dumb the idea had really been. His solution had been one that a little kid would come up, not the adult he was. The timer finally dinged a little while later as Miss Brynn returned.

“Now Tony,” Miss Brynn said kneeling down next to him. “You were having some very big feelings back there, what do

you think made you feel that way?”

“I don't know,” Tony mumbled. Miss Brynn sighed as she rubbed his back.

“Do you get upset like that a lot?” she asked. Tony shook his head. He had never acted like that before, even when he had been a little kid. Miss Brynn then went on to lecture him about how when he felt upset he couldn't throw a temper tantrum before she took him through some deep breathing exercises. “Now I will need to be having a talk with Aiden when he comes to pick you up and also I think that for the rest of the day you are not allowed to play with the toys anymore.” Tony whinged a little at hearing that she was going to tell Aiden what happened. How would Aiden even react ? “There are plenty of other fun things you can do here,” Miss Brynn said ushering Tony over to one of the small tables where the other kids sat coloring with crayons. “Here why don't you do a nice calm activity like coloring a picture.”

Tony took a seat next to Cayden who gave him a cursory glance before going back to his own picture. Tony's shoulders slumped a little. He really did feel terrible about how he had treated the kid, especially since it had all been for nothing.

“Here hon,” the other woman named Tina said setting a picture in front of Tony. “You can color this.” Tony nodded pulling the picture towards himself. He sat for a moment looking at the paper that had cutsey little forest animals on it doing ring around the rosie with one another.

“Are you going to color?” Cayden then asked.

“Um yeah,” Tony said meekly. Cayden then gave him a smile before pushing a small pile of crayons towards Tony. “Thanks,” Tony said picking up a green crayon to get started. After awhile the kids were on the floor crawling around on a huge piece of paper that they were allowed to draw on. Tony and Cayden were drawing a castle with knights and dragons. Although it was certainly a little on the abstract side. Tony wasn't too bothered that his artistic abilities were that of a five year old as art had never been a particularly strong point of his in the first place.

“Tony,” Miss Brynn called out taking his attention away from the picture of the fire breathing dragon.

“Time to go dear.” Tony saw Aiden standing on the other side of the desk. Tony smiled as he scrambled up to go and meet Aiden whom he was excited to see. Miss Brynn opened the door as Tony ran and was scooped up by Aiden into a big hug.

“Did you have fun today?” Aiden beamed.

“Yeah,” Tony answered nodding his head.

“Told ya,” Aiden said bopping his nose. “I guess it went well,” Aiden said turning his attention towards Miss Brynn.

“Well not exactly,” she said. Tony then felt a pit in his stomach. He had forgotten all about it. Once again he had gotten wrapped up that he had forgotten about his adult worries. Miss Brynn went on to divulge what Tony had done. Aiden seemed to listen on with some concern. Aiden then set Tony on the ground taking his hand.

“I assure you we will have a long talk about his behavior today and it won't happen again,” Aiden said. Tony had his head down feeling an immense wave of humiliation. He gritted his teeth a little at the insinuation that Aiden planned on lecturing him about this. They left soon after as Aiden kept Tony's hand in his own. Tony looked up at Aiden wondering if he was mad. Although Aiden didn't really seem to look very bothered. Still not a word passed between them. Getting into the dorm room Aiden finally released Tony who went to his bed taking a seat as he flopped back absolutely exhausted.

“Alright take off your pants and undies and come and put on a pull-up,” Aiden said. Tony sat up with a confused look as he stared at Aiden who already had one of the blue mickey mouse pull-ups in hand.

“Why would I do that?” Tony asked shaking his head a little.

“Because you're going down for a nap right now, and we don't want you having an accident,” Aiden said as if this was a completely normal conversation.

“I don't need a nap,” Tony said.

“Yes you do,” Aiden said standing in front of Tony as he pushed him onto his back and pulling his pants off.

“Quit it,” Tony said kicking his legs out. “I told you I don't need a nap.”

“After your behavior at the daycare I think you do,” Aiden said easily removing Tony undies before grabbing one of his

flailing ankles and working it through the leg hole of the training pants.

“No, no no,” Tony welped, yet Aiden easily got the the pull-ups moved up his legs before lifting Tony off the bed so that he could pull the training pants up to his waist.

“Now into bed,” Aiden said.

“You're out of line,” Tony accused.

“The only one out of line here is you,” Aiden countered. “I'm absolutely shocked to come and pick you up only to hear about you kicking and throwing toys around. That isn't how big boys act.”

“I'm not a big boy,” Tony growled clenching his fist.

“I'll say,” Aiden scoffed.

“I'm an adult you can't treat me like this you jerk.”

Aiden put his hands on his hips shaking his head a little. “An adult wouldn't be throwing a fit,” Aiden said. “Now get into bed boys who act like this have to take a nap whether they want to or not.”

Tony stood with a mixture of anger and shame. Here he was being punished like a small child by his former boyfriend. Little tears came to his eyes as he spun around diving under the covers of his bed.

“Just leave me alone,” Tony said pulling the covers up over his head. Tony laid under his covers whimpering a little.

There was nothing he could do. The idea that Aiden was completely in charge cemented in his mind. The idea of defying his authority never crossing Tony's mind. The intricacies of their relationship never seemed to occur to Tony. He could only see Aiden as an authority figure much like the ladies at the daycare were or the teachers at the school he had attened only a few days ago. He had no choice but to listen to them because he was not in charge, in that moment it was beyond him to even fathom such a thing. Tony eventually succumbed to his exhaustion and fell asleep.

Waking up some time later Tony sat up stretching out his arms with a big yawn. He looked over to see Aiden on his own bed as he scrolled on his phone. Aiden looked over and gave Tony a smile as he motioned him over. Tony got out of his bed and walked over to Aiden. Any anger he had towards the man had dissipated, in fact he didn't even remember being mad at him. Aiden lifted Tony up and set him down in between his outstretched legs on his bed as Tony laid back on his chest.

“Have a good nap?” Aiden asked.

“Uh huh,” Tony said still coming out of his sleep, although he almost felt like he could fall right back asleep against Aiden's chest.

“Thats good,” Aiden said patting Tony's tummy before he lifted up the hem of the shirt to see the fade when wet design on Tony's pull-up was slightly faded.

“Don't,” Tony said pulling his shirt down a little as he

realized he was a little wet. “I didn't mean to.”

“Its alright,” Aiden said. “That's why you were wearing it.”

“Its still embarrassing,” Tony mumbled.

“Anyways Tony we still need to have a talk,” Aiden then mentioned.

“Can you just drop it,” Tony groaned not wanting to think anymore about the events of the day.

“Buddy you can't be doing stuff like that, what are we going to do if they kick you out?” Tony let out a huff of air. He wasn't about to admit to Aiden that had been the plan all along.

“I was just upset okay,” Tony said. “Everything is just happening so fast.” Aiden wrapped his arms around Tony from behind.

“I know buddy,” Aiden said softly. “But Tony you are going to be a kid and things like this are going to become more necessary. It might be a good idea to just accept it and get used to it. You would be happier if you just let it happen rather than fighting it.”

“But I can't,” Tony mewled. It wasn't as easy as Aiden was making it sound nor as simple. “Plus I still have so many things to figure out, like what am I going to do in the future and about my Mom and stuff.”

“I know you don't want to move back with your Mom,” Aiden said. “But you know it might be the best thing for you

and pretty soon that's what you're probably going to want anyways."

"I know that," Tony said separating himself from Aiden as he went to sit across from him. "I know the little kid version of me will be happy enough living with my Mom again, but I'm going to grow up. One day I'll realize what happened, I'll know what my Mom sacrificed for me..." Tony reasoned before falling a silent. "Once I know it, I'll have to live with that guilt for the rest of my life." Aiden looked at Tony's saddened and anxious face. Maybe now was a good time.

"So lets say there was a way you wouldn't have to go back to your Mom would you take it?" Aiden asked.

"Well yeah I guess," Tony said although he couldn't really think of a scenario where that would be possible. Aiden then smiled.

"What if I adopted you?" Aiden then asked.

Chapter 7

Adventures in Genetics Part 7 - Chapter 7

Offers on the Table

Tony sat in the room of the college daycare. Once again he was playing with Cayden whom he had struck up a friendship with over the past couple of days of attending. It seemed their schedules worked out so that they were often there at the same time. However Tony was being half-hearted in their activity of tower building with the large chunky blocks. He after all had a lot on his mind. It mostly had to do with Aiden and his offer to adopt Tony.

At first Tony had laughed it off as a joke, but Aiden had been serious. Aiden had told Tony about how it would work. Being that he was still in college Aiden's parents would adopt Tony, an idea that Aiden had already talked over with his parents. Tony had been a little flummoxed that Aiden had told them, after all this wasn't something that people should know about. As Aiden explained the plan further to Tony it dawned on him that Aiden was way more serious about this than he could have ever expected.

“It really solves all your problems,” Aiden had said. “My parents have money so its not like it would be a hardship for them. After I graduate I figured I would take you with me wherever I end up. We'd be living together and I would take care of you, we would really be a family you know.”

“You would be like my Dad?” Tony asked, the idea causing some awkwardness at the very thought of calling Aiden by that title.

“I suppose I would,” Aiden said smiling. “But we don't really have to get all proper with labels or nothing.” Aiden went on to clarify that he would not be taking Tony away from his own family and he would be able to see them whenever he needed to. Tony had not reacted with outright glee at the offer. It just seemed too weird. Aiden had been understanding, telling him he could think on it a little.

As Tony did think on it though he started to see how it really did solve a lot of his problems. He wouldn't need to move back with his Mom and he wouldn't be a burden on Aiden's parents. Still the idea of living with them did cause some apprehension. He had of course met Aiden's parents, and they seemed like nice enough people and had certainly made Tony feel welcome, but to actually have to depend on them as if they were his parents did not sit well with Tony. He still loved Aiden a great deal, and Tony would be lying if he tried to deny that Aiden was starting to become a source of comfort to him, a parental figure that he deferred to. He didn't really think about it anymore when Aiden told him to do something like getting ready for bed or using the potty. In fact it was starting to become a little too natural.

“Okay boys and girls,” Miss Brynn announced to the room. “Lets take a seat at the table.”

The handful of kids got up and assembled at the table. Miss

Brynn had paper for them all that had the days of the week printed out on it. In fact it was a whole calendar for that month. Miss Brynn then took the kids through a lesson about the days of the week. “Now who knows what comes after Monday?” Miss Brynn asked. Tony's hand shot into the air and he was called on.

“Wednesday,” Tony said confidently.

“Sorry dear,” Miss Brynn said. “Its actually Tuesday.”

“I knew that,” Tony frowned.

“But do you know what comes after Wednesday?” Miss Brynn then asked giving the boy another shot. Tony thought for a moment.

“Thursday,” he answered with a little hesitation.

“Exactly,” Miss Brynn smiled. “Great job.” Tony smiled feeling proud he had known the answer. The kids were then given crayons to color in all the little pictures that dotted their calendars. As Tony colored in the sun on Friday he heard a familiar voice.

“Well if it isn't Tony,” Tony looked over to see Claire knelt down next to him.

“Claire,” Tony stammered. “You work here?”

“No,” Claire said shaking her head. “I do come here to get my hours though, I just don't do daycare things. I'm in school to be a child psychologist."

“Oh,” Tony said. “So what do you do here then?”

“I come down here sometimes and do exercises with the kids, you know little activities for my coursework,” she explained. “This is a great place to find my helpers.”

“If you need help I could do it,” Tony blurted out. Claire was Jamie's girlfriend after all, so if she needed volunteers he could be helpful. Claire looked back with a skeptical look.

“I don't know if you would be really right for it,” she said.

“Why not?” Tony questioned, he was good at lots of things, surely if other kids here could do it, then

why not him.

“Well,” Claire said with a grimace. “You're not really like the other boys and girls, maybe a little too advanced for this stuff.” Claire had heard from Jamie about how Tony often got upset when he got treated like a little kid, so she thought it would probably be a good idea to treat him as normally as possible. Tony however looked back at her with wide eyes.

“D-did he tell you,” Tony hissed in a whisper as his face went red. He was overcome with embarrassment. What did she think of him, seeing him here in the daycare coloring with all the other little kids knowing how old he really was.

“He did,” Claire said apprehensively not realizing that Tony would react badly.

“Nooo,” Tony whimpered as he put his face down on the the table in his hands.

“Oh I'm sorry,” Claire said leaning over and rubbing Tony's back. “Was I not supposed to know?”

Tony peeked an eye at her before sitting up.

“He really shouldn't be telling people,” Tony sighed. First Aiden had told his parents and now Jamie was telling people too. They were starting to become the loose lips duo. “This is already hard enough with out the whole world knowing.”

“Just so you know,” Claire said. “You can trust me, I'm not a blabber mouth like Jamie.”

Tony nodded with thanks. Claire then gave him a look as if an idea had come to her.

“Hey Tony are you currently seeing a therapist of any sort?” she asked. She could see that he had some distress in him about everything that was happening. Tony looked at her before shaking his head no.” “Really,” Claire said looking a little surprised. “I would have thought...” she said before trailing off.

“I can't see anyone like that,” Tony said. “The more people know the worse.” Claire gave him a sympathetic look. She was a little surprised. Tony was in the middle of a life altering change surely he would need some professional help. She could understand why he would probably refuse though.

“Hmmm it seems like a lot for you to handle on your own, but I suppose you have people you can talk to, like Jamie.”

“Not really,” Tony said. “I haven't seen Jamie in awhile,”

Tony said. Jamie seemed to be swamped with work and school at the moment. “Then there's Aiden, but he isn't really good to talk to,” Tony said. Aiden seemed to be of the opinion that Tony shouldn't worry about things like this, it wasn't good for him.

“Whose Aiden?” Claire asked.

“Oh he's my boy...” Tony then paused. “Well I don't really know what he is. He takes care of me I guess.”

“I see,” Claire said. “Well if you ever did need someone to talk to I'd be happy to listen.”

“Why want to psychoanalyze me?” Tony asked narrowing his eyes. Claire chuckled hearing the six dollar word come out of the image of a little boy in front of her.

“I can't see you as a professional since I'm not licensed, but I could talk to you as a friend.”

Tony looked at Claire. Her smile was warm and inviting.

“Maybe there is some stuff I'd like to get off my chest,” Tony said hesitant to agree.

“Sounds good,” Claire said standing up. She looked over to the teacher “Ms. Brynn do you think it would be okay if I took Tony aside for a little bit?” The teacher nodded before going back to helping the little boy who was asking for her help unaware of the conversation that had been taking place. “Lets go somewhere quiet,” Claire said. Tony followed her over to a corner where there were some beanbag chairs. They

each took a seat next to one another.

“So like how do you do this?” Tony asked.

“You said you had some stuff to get off your chest,” Claire nodded. “Seems like a good spot to start?”

Tony began rather guarded at first, Claire seemed receptive and Tony found it rather easy to talk to her. Before long he was practically spilling his guts to her. He was telling her everything. From his concerns about his future to how if felt like Aiden was pushing him further and further into the life of a little kid and even about Aiden's offer to adopt him. He went on to talk about how he felt about it, how on one hand it actually made a lot of sense and solved his problems but on the other hand how it seemed like the most outlandish idea of all. Tony got a little choked up as he continued on, saying that if he accepted then it would feel like he was turning his back on his family, abandoning them on the idea that they simply weren't good enough and he would be better off with a rich family.

“Mommy would be so mad at me,” Tony whimpered.

“Oh Tony I don't think –“ Claire began.

“Yes she would,” Tony yelped curling up into a ball. Claire looked on with a concerned look. She realized what was happening. She had heard from Jamie how Tony would fluctuate between his adult self and kid self and how fast it could happen. She had just seen it happen in front of her. She pulled Tony off of his beanbag onto her lap placing his head

onto her chest as she stroked his hair a little. She didn't know how he would react to her affection but she couldn't bear just to let him whimper and sniffle all alone. Tony laid against her. It was true he barely knew her, but that didn't seem to matter at the moment. It didn't seem to strike him as too forward of her to embrace him. She was Jamie's girlfriend and therefore was someone of importance, someone he could trust. They had also fed the ducks together and that seemed all he needed to have forged a close bond. He sat listening to the rhythm of her heartbeat which helped him calm his breathing. Her hand going softly through his hair comforted him, lulling him further into her warm embrace.

“It's hard to talk about all of this, isn't it?” Claire asked. Tony nodded.

“What should I do?” Tony asked looking up at Claire who could only shake her head.

“I can't really give you an answer,” she said.

“Yeah I know,” Tony said. “Its just hard.”

“I know,” Claire sympathized. “But you'll figure it out. The McCallister boys are tough, aren't they,” she said with a smile.

“Yeah we are,” Tony said with a proud look sitting up a little to puff out his chest. “I'm tougher than Jamie though.”

“I'm sure you are,” Claire laughed.

“He cried on his first day of school,” Tony then said enthusiastically before diving into the story of how Tony had

to walk Jamie to his first day of kindergarten. Claire found the story sweet and wondered if Tony had switched back into his adult mindset recalling a story of his own childhood.

“Um could I go finish my calendar?” Tony then asked surprising Claire a little.

“Sure,” she said, apparently Tony had not reverted. She went over to the table with him and then sat for awhile visiting with him and Cayden as they colored and told her all about the days of the week, proud of their new knowledge.

“After Friday comes Saturday,” Cayden said as he colored.

“That's right,” Claire said. “Do you two know what today is though, like the number.”

Both boys looked over their calendars with clueless looks. “It's this one,” Claire said pointing to the day.

“The two seven,” Cayden asked.

“Twenty seventh,” Claire corrected. Tony then stopped.

“Its the twenty seventh,” he asked.

“Yep,” Tony's eyes bulged as he looked at Claire.

“What time is it?” he asked. Claire looked back with some surprise that this news had seemingly startled him.

“I think its about 2:30.” Claire answered.

“2:30!” Tony exclaimed shooting to his feet. “I gotta get outta here.” he looked around with a harried look. He ran around

the table to where Miss Brynn was.

“Miss Brynn, Miss Brynn,” he said in a panic. “I need to go, I need to go.”

“You know where the potty is,” Miss Brynn said. Tony shook his head.

“No I need to leave right now!” Tony exclaimed.

“Honey you know you can't leave until someone picks you up,” Miss Brynn said.

“But I gotta go now,” Tony said sounding as if he was on the verge of a meltdown.

“We've been over this Tony,” Miss Brynn said with some patience. “Aiden will be here to pick you up soon he usually comes in about an hour on Thursday's.”

“But I'll be late,” Tony said putting his hands at the side of his head. He ran back to Claire seeing the teacher was a dead end.

“Claire you gotta get me outta here, please.”

“Tony I can't take you out of here,” she said with a reassuring smile. “I'm sure if you have somewhere to be Aiden will come and get you”

“I don't think he knows,” Tony said with worry. “We haven't really talked about it.” Claire was about to ask him more about where he needed to be but Tony wouldn't let her get a word in edgewise. “Call Jamie,” Tony said pleading. “He'll come.” Tony wasn't exactly enthused by the idea. He had

talked to Jamie yesterday on the phone but he had kept the conversation short. He hadn't told him about daycare or the pull-ups or any of the other measures Aiden had decided upon. But Tony had to do something.

“I can call him,” Claire said taking out her phone. “But you know he is busy at work right now he might not pick up.” Tony bit his lower lip as he began to breath in an out heavily working himself into a level of greater panic. Just then he heard Miss Brynn call out his name from the front desk.

“Someone is here to pick you up,” she said in a sing song voice as she flipped up a section of the desk. Tony dashed off. He raced through to the other side of the desk before he came to a stop.

“Mommy what are you doing here?” he gasped. His Mom stood at the desk smiling down at him.

“What else,” she chuckled. “I'm here to pick you up goober.”

“H-how did you know I was here,” Tony said immediately becoming embarrassed for his Mom to find him at a daycare of all places.

“Aiden told me of course, are you ready to go?” she said.

“Yeah,” Tony nodded meekly. He wondered if Aiden had been telling his Mom about everything.

“First you need to change,” his Mom said pulling a plastic bag off of the counter and setting it on the ground as she began to pull out clothes.

“Change?” Tony asked taking a step back.

“You can't show up in that,” Mom said noting his monster truck themed clothes. “I brought you a nice outfit, so lets get you looking proper,” she said as she grabbed his shirt pulling it off of him.

“I don't want to change out here,” Tony said with an indignant look.

“There is a bathroom in the back if you prefer,” Miss Brynn said talking to Tony's Mom.

“I guess we should,” Mom smiled. Tony was not having any of it though as he grabbed the bag.

“I can get dressed myself,” he grumbled as he walked off towards the bathroom. Getting into the bathroom he got off his shorts and began to put on the clothes his Mom had brought. She had brought a light plaid checkered button up shirt with short sleeves and a pair of tan pants. Tony pulled the pants on and then went to work on the shirt. He was in a hurry though as he tried to get the buttons on. He worked quickly before running out of the bathroom. As he came back to his Mom she gave him an amused look.

“You missed a few,” Mom chuckled as she knelt down to re do the buttons on his shirt that in his haste had put a few in the wrong spot and missed two completely. As his Mom finished buttoning up the shirt she surprised him by unsnapping the button on his pants and pulling them down a little.

“Mommy,” Tony yelped.

“We need to tuck your shirt in,” his Mom said. “Those are cute, did you pick them out,” she then said noting the top of his undies with a bright yellow waistband and were blue and white striped with two yellow mickey emblems on either side.

“N-no,” Tony stammered as his Mom tucked in the shirt before redoing the button. “Aiden got them,”

“He takes good care of you doesn't he,” she said.

“Yeah I guess,” Tony mumbled.

She then fished a belt out of the bag which Tony hadn't realized was even in the bag. She threaded it thought the belt loops before pulling it tight, which Tony felt was unneeded since the pants already had an elastic band keeping them secure around his waist.

“And a tie,” Mom said as she put a black clip on tie on his collar. “You really need a haircut,” his Mom said lifting up a strand of his hair that was now longer than it ever had been reaching down past his ears. “I suppose we'll just give it a quick brush.” She said grabbing a brush from her bag as Tony whined a little. “There,” Mom said standing up. “Now you look presentable.”

“Mommy,” Tony mewled a little, completely put off by her fussing over him.

“Tony you look very handsome,” Miss Brynn said. Tony grumbled a little.

“Tony,” Mom said with stern note. “Someone gave you a compliment what do you say?”

“Thank you Miss Brynn,” Tony said feeling all the more like a chastised little boy.

“Very good,” Mom said taking his hand as they began to leave. “We better hurry or we'll be late.”

“Whose fault is that,” Tony mumbled under his breath. As they walked across campus Tony began to get nervous. He wondered what was going to be discussed at the meeting. They came before the doors of the administrative building as Tony's Mom leaned down to his level.

“Now Tony this is a very important meeting and its important to remember that we have to be careful with what we say, there are going to be lawyers in there.”

“Lawyers!” Tony exclaimed. “Are we getting sued?”

“No honey not at all,” his Mom said. “There are legal issues to discuss though so it would be best just to let our lawyer do most of the talking. So only answer a question if asked.”

“We have a lawyer?” Tony questioned. He immediately felt guilty knowing what a huge expense that would be for his Mom.

“Aiden called a few days ago and said his father would send someone from his team to help us out.” Mom smiled. The idea that once again Aiden was providing for him monetarily did not help Tony's guilt. Mom took Tony's hand as she

opened the heavy oaken door. The administrative building was quiet unlike the buildings that were usually populated with students and professors. Mom turned down a hallway as Tony saw Aiden up ahead talking to a woman. She was dressed in black skirt and jacket. Her hair was up in a bun and she had on a pair of smart looking black rimmed glasses. As Aiden saw them approaching he nodded to the woman who turned around to see Tony and his Mom approach. The woman introduced herself to Mom first as Ruth Evans, but told Mom just to call her Ruth. She then looked at Tony for a moment with a slightly intrigued look before she took Mom aside pulling some paper out of her bag. Tony felt a little offended that she seemed to only be talking to his Mom. She had to know what was going on here, right? Shouldn't he be included.

“Nice clothes,” Aiden said squatting down next to Tony.

“Yeah I guess,” Tony mumbled. “Does, does she know?” Tony then asked Aiden looking at Ruth.

“Yeah she does,” Aiden said. “I know you don't want me telling people but she kinda needs to know.”

“Yeah I get it,” Tony mumbled. He fiddled with his tie for a moment. He was starting to get anxious. Aiden seemed to pick up on this always being able to read Tony's thoughts, especially these days.

“You worried?” Aiden asked.

“A little,” Tony admitted. “I don't really know why we needed

lawyers in the first place.

“Ah you know just for protection, Ruth is great as well she is one of the best, you'll be in good hands,” Aiden reassured. A woman then opened the door telling them that they were ready for them. Ruth then came and stood in front of the door.

“Okay, so I just want to remind everybody that the college is on the defensive here, please if you have any questions run them through me first.” Ruth said as she looked down at Tony with an expectant look. Tony nodded his head as his Mom took his hand and they began to walk in.

“You're not coming?” Tony asked noticing Aiden was not following.

“They won't let me, but I'll see you later,” Aiden said giving a wave. Tony was brought into a large room with a big table. Sitting at the head of the table was an older man in a suit. Tony didn't know what the chancellor looked like but figured this must be him. Tony's Mom pulled out a chair for him which he sat in before she pushed it in. She then took a seat next to him with Ruth next to her. Across the table was another man with a briefcase set to his side no doubt another lawyer and then there was Dr. Pai who gave Tony a smile and a nod. Tony nodded back and gave a small wave. Ruth seemed to clear her throat giving Mom an expression raising her eyebrow. Mom quickly grabbed Tony's hand and held it for a little bit as introductions were made.

“Mrs. McCallister and Mr. McCallister,” the chancellor spoke nodding to each of them. “I am pleased to meet the both of

you although I wish it were under happier circumstances. It is unfortunate what has occurred we are having this meeting to clarify the responsibility of the school."

"I have read over the case," Ruth began. "I can certainly see that there is some liability here."

"The school does acknowledge that while Tony was injured in doing work for the school we do not accept fault for that," the other man who had introduced himself as Mr. Stevens said. "It is our position that Tony knowingly ingested the substance of his own free will and against protocol." There was some more back and forth between the two lawyers as they argued whether or not Tony had been coerced by promises from the school. The atmosphere was becoming tense. Tony squirmed a little in his seat. He was never good with these types of high stress situations and it seemed to do nothing except make his little kid feelings flare up. He wanted to nuzzle into his Mom's side, and hide himself away from these intimidating people that were arguing about him. Yet he relented. He didn't want to be seen acting like a little kid in front of the lawyers, the chancellor, and most of all Dr. Pai.

"We have a case here," Ruth said self-assuredly. "And we are fully prepared to go to trial."

"It is my hope that will not be necessary," the chancellor said. "A trial would be long and would garner unwanted attention that would not benefit either side. Mr. Steven please," the old man said motioning the lawyer to proceed.

“As the chancellor said a trial is unnecessary,” Mr. Steven said pulling a paper out of his briefcase. “The school would like to settle this matter right here and now if possible. This is what we feel is a fair and generous settlement.” The man said sliding the paper across the table. Ruth picked it up looking it over before she showed it to Mom as the two discussed it in hushed tones. Ruth then nodded.

“I appreciate the generosity,” Mom said with a smile. “However I cannot accept this without one caveat.”

“Yes Mrs. McCallister please proceed.” The chancellor said.

“I understand my son did act recklessly but I also feel he is not the only one to blame,” Mom said pausing for a moment to clear her throat. “I will accept this settlement on the grounds that Dr. Pai is also terminated from his position at this school.” Tony's eyes went wide as his mouth dropped. The Chancellor and lawyer looked on a little wearily yet Dr. Pai made no reaction as he sat stone faced.

“Wait a minute!” Tony yelped looking at his Mom with a look of shock. “You can't – ”

Tony's Mom put a finger up to his lips.

“Tony please be quiet, the adults are talking.” his Mom said. Tony's head went back a little as he screwed up his face. Was she serious right now?

“What?” Tony said looking as if he had just been slapped across the face. “You can't just –“.

“Sweetie not now, please be quiet or you are going to have to go sit in the hallway.” Mom said with a look of warning.

“Stop that,” Tony said as his face twisted up. He couldn't believe his Mom was treating him in such a way. This meeting was about him. He had every right to speak. However his Mom stood going behind him as she lifted him up out of the chair and gathering him up into her arms.

“I'm so sorry,” Mom said with an apologetic look at the others in the room. “He missed his nap today so he is a little out of sorts,” she said carrying him out of the room as Tony protested. Out in the hall Mom plopped him onto the bench. “You're going to have to sit out here for the rest of the meeting,” she said.

“What is the matter with you?” Tony said gritting his teeth in anger. “You can't treat me like this, and you can't try to get Dr. Pai fired.”

“I know its not what you want,” Mom said kneeling down and placing a hand on Tony's knee. “I don't have time to explain this to you, this is one of those times you need to trust me.” she said getting back up and walking back towards the door.

“Mommy stop,” Tony said getting up from the bench.

“Tony back on the bench,” Mom said sternly pointing at the seat. Tony stopped in his tracks as he looked at his Mom with a disbelieving stare. He took a step back before falling back onto the bench. “Stay there and don't get back up or there will

be consequences," she said talking to him in a way she hadn't in years. Tony didn't respond. "Do you understand?" Mom asked raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," Tony said in defeated tone as his gaze fell to the floor. His Mom gave a pained look before returning to the room leaving him alone. Tony sat in silence. Never before had he felt this hopeless. He had no control anymore, he had just been put in his place. He was no longer seen as an adult. To everyone in that room he was nothing more than a little boy whose opinion no longer mattered. It was the adults place to decide what was best for him. Tony flopped to his side curling up into a ball. He wanted to cry but he would not allow himself too. He had to hold onto some shred of dignity.

How could his Mom demand that Dr. Pai be fired? This wasn't his fault, the only one to blame was Tony. He became wracked with guilt over the growing list of people who had now been hurt because of him. Mom's retirement plans had been threatened, Aiden and him had to break up, and now Dr. Pai was about to be sacked. Tony laid for a long time curled up into his cocoon of misery. He heard the wood creak on the bench sensing that someone had taken a seat.

"Phew, those meetings can be intense." Tony shot up seeing that Dr. Pai was now sitting next to him.

"Dr. Pai," Tony said breathlessly. The Doctor gave him a kindly smile. "I'm sorry about my Mom I had no idea she was going to do that. If I had I would have done something."

"There is nothing to worry about," the doctor said waving his

hand. “I'm the one who told her to say that.” Tony cocked his head. Had he heard Dr. Pai correctly?

“I knew the school was going to try and low ball you.” Dr. Pai said. “So we just had to make them sweat a little. They took the bait”

“So you aren't fired?” Tony asked with a hopeful tone.

“They would never fire me,” Dr. Pai said. “I know where I stand with the school.”

“That's good,” Tony said with some relief. “I would hate for you to be fired because of me.”

“Its not enough though,” Dr. Pai said. “Even if you don't think so, I do have some responsibility to bear.” Tony shook his head.

“You don't. This is my fault,” Tony replied. Dr. Pai sat back with a sigh.

“I just hope this is enough to give you some comfort as you grow back up, its a real shame though losing my best research assistant.”

Tony looked over at the doctor with a surprised look. He didn't know that Dr. Pai had considered him in such high regard.

“That's not true,” Tony laughed a little.

“It is so,” Dr. Pai said. “You have a brilliant mind and I'm sure that won't change. Do me a favor though when you reach

high school look me up. There are lots of programs around that I could get you into. They could give you a great upper hand. I'm looking forward to your future endeavors."

"Um yeah that would be great," Tony said taken off guard by the man's optimism towards his future. Dr. Pai then placed a hand on top of Tony's head.

"I suppose I should get going, it would look bad if those lawyers saw us talking but I'm sure this isn't good bye."

"Yeah not goodbye," Tony nodded as Dr. Pai stood up.

"Keep up the good work Mr. McCallister," Dr. Pai said as he walked off with a wave. Tony sat on the bench as a warm feeling of pride came up in his chest. He had been touched to hear how highly Dr. Pai had regarded him, that and he still believed that he had the capacity to do great things. The door opened as the rest of the people in the meeting began filing out. Tony got up from the bench running up to his Mom.

"Mommy guess what Dr. Pai said," Tony said hopping up and down as he pulled on his Mom's arm unable to contain the excitement, he had to tell her.

"Shh," Mom said putting a hand on his head. "You can tell me in a minute," she said shooting a look at the chancellor and Mr. Stevens as they departed. Tony frowned remembering how she had treated him in the meeting. Mom and Ruth talked for another minuted as Tony's Mom held onto his hand. Afterwards Mom and Ruth said their farewells.

"Now is there something you wanted to tell me?" Mom asked

as they exited the building. Tony looked up at his Mom for a moment before he shook his head turning his head away. “Still mad at me?” she asked as she squeezed his hand. “Maybe we should talk.” Tony was lead over to a bench in a quiet area of the campus. As they sat next to one another his Mom placed a hand on his back. “I know you were upset about what I said about Dr. Pai.”

“That's not it,” Tony said quietly. “He already explained it to me so I get it. But I'm still mad about how you treated me.”

“I'm sorry about that,” Mom said as she gently rubbed his back. “But you were about to say things that would have been bad for us. It was in our favor to not show that you hadn't completely regressed. They could have used that as grounds to show that you were not as effected as you were.” Tony groaned a little. He could certainly see that, but still it didn't necessarily sit well with him to be passed off as a complete little kid even if that was how things were going to end up.

“So how much money did we get?” Tony asked moving closer to his Mom.

“Oh interested are you?” Mom asked with a chuckle. “We got a generous settlement.”

“Like a million dollars?”

“Not that much,” Mom laughed. Tony slumped a little. “We got enough though, it will be a nice little bit of buffer.”

Tony knew that whatever they got wasn't enough, even a million dollars would not have made his problems go away.

Raising kids was expensive.

“I suppose we need to start talking about what happens next, now that the meeting is over I think its time for you to come back home.”

“But I can't,” Tony said getting to his feet. “Even with that money you would probably still have to work, right?”

“I suppose I would,” Mom said. “But I can probably do part time for awhile, this money will make things a lot easier, we will be able to live comfortably.”

“That's the thing though,” Tony said. “I don't want you to work anymore. I want you to be able to stop and you can't if I'm around.”

“I understand how you feel sweetie,” Mom said. “But I don't think we have any other option.”

“About that,” Tony said a twinge of nervousness lacing his words. “Its just that Aiden said something that might work out better.” Tony's Mom sat back a little as she nodded. “Its just well he offered to adopt me,” Tony then said. He went on to explain the offer in more detail looking like a employee explaining the quarterly earnings report to their boss in a boardroom. His Mom listened on with her brow a little furrowed. “So you see,” Tony said finishing. “It would really solve everything, it would take the burden off of you and his parents are rich and everything so it wouldn't be a huge deal to them.”

“That's a very generous offer,” his Mom said after a moment.

“Is that something you would want?”

“I don't know,” Tony said kicking the ground a little. “I guess it wouldn't be so bad.”

“You don't sound completely sure,” Mom said.

“Maybe,” Tony said as he went and sat back on the bench. “But maybe its the best offer I got.” There was a moment of silence. Tony began to worry. Now that he had said it he started to feel that same guilt bubble up. His Mom was probably feeling betrayed that he would even consider picking Aiden over her.

“You're certainly popular,” Mom chuckled. “It seems everyone wants you all to themselves.” Tony looked at his Mom who gave him a smile. “You know Jamie said something similar,” his Mom said.

“Wha?” Tony questioned cocking his head to the side.

“Sure,” Mom said. “He said he would take care of you and I shouldn't worry. Although I must say I don't care for this idea that I'm such an old woman that I couldn't possibly keep up with another child.”

“Jamie said that?” Tony said absolutely shocked that his brother had similar ideas. “Still that wouldn't work,” Tony said as he looked back at the ground. Jamie was his little brother he wasn't supposed to be taking on such a burden. He was still in school after all. He had his whole life ahead of him, why would he want to saddle himself with Tony? After some more silence Tony felt his Mom grab him and pull him

onto her lap.

“C'mere you,” Mom cooed as she wrapped her arms around him.

“Mommy stop,” Tony whined a little although not out of disagreement.

“Hush now,” Mom said. “You can't turn yourself back into a little kid and then expect me not to want to cuddle you, remember your promise?”

“Yeah,” Tony grinned. “Lots of hugs,” he said wrapping his arms around her as he nuzzled into her chest.

“And kisses too,” she said giving him a kiss to the cheek. Tony giggled before he shifted up to give his Mom three big kisses to the cheek.

“Thank you,” Mom said in a syrupy voice. “Now how about the other cheek?”

“I'm all out of kisses right now, and I never promised kisses” Tony giggled as he used his hand to push his Mom's cheek away playfully.

“Consider it interest,” Mom chuckled. “And I will be collecting in full, you got lots of hugs and kisses to go young man.” she said tickling him a little which elicited some more giggles out of Tony. They sat like that for awhile. The stress and nervousness had left Tony. Cuddled against his Mom only made him feel like he was wrapped up in the worlds softest fuzziest blanket.

“Tony honey,” Mom said breaking the silence. “I want you to know that whatever you decide is up to you, okay?”

“You won't be mad if I don't come back with you?” Tony asked.

“No I wont,” Mom said. “You know what my opinion is. But I care about what makes you happiest, this is your life, so its your decision, and I will support it, as long as you do what you feel will be the best for you and not what anyone else wants.

“Thanks Mommy,” Tony said. His Mom then sat him up as she got up from the bench looking at her watch.

“Well Aiden told me he has practice till six and Jamie is working a double shift so it looks like I have to take you back to the daycare now.”

“Oh I guess,” Tony said saddened that his Mom was leaving.

“That is unless a certain little boy would rather go to the park and then get dinner with his Mommy,” Mom said with a coy smile. Tony immediately perked up.

“Park,” he shouted jumping up from the bench.

“Lets go then,” Mom beamed outstretching her hand. Tony took it and excitedly walked with her to spend the rest of the day as a happy little boy where no thoughts of his problems could intrude.

Chapter 8

Adventures in Genetics: Part 8 - Chapter 8

A Different Life

Tony picked at fried rice on his plate. He looked across the table at Jamie and Claire who were talking about something or another. Tony hadn't been really paying attention. They had come by and taken him out to dinner, which was all well and good. Yet Tony had been quiet throughout most of the meal. He wanted to ask Jamie about what Jamie had said to their Mom, about being the one to take care of him. Tony just couldn't seem to find a way to naturally bring it up, and some part of him didn't really want to. How does one even do that? Just say hey little bro heard you want to be the one to raise me? Tony shook his head. He had three options in front of him. Either go back to his Mom, let his little brother take him in, or have Aiden's parents adopt him. None of those options were particularly pleasing to Tony. Even though his Mom and Jamie were family he knew he would be a burden to them, and going with Aiden made him feel awkward, could he ever get used to that?

“Hey bud, don't you like your food?” Jamie asked noticing how peckish Tony was being.

“Oh um yeah its fine,” Tony said putting a spoonful into his mouth.

“Well hurry up,” Jamie said. “We gotta leave soon. Aiden said to make sure we had you back by 5:30 apparently he's got a big surprise for you or something.

“Oh a surprise that sounds fun,” Claire said looking at Tony with an enthusiastic look.

“Sure,” Tony said with a shrug.

“Plus we gotta movie to get too,” Jamie said looking at Claire. Tony frowned a little. Had this been there date night? Suddenly he felt like a third wheel. “Tony did you want to come to the movie?” Jamie asked noticing Tony's frown.

“Oh uh no,” he said quickly. “I got a surprise waiting for me.” he said forcing a smile. Some part of him did want to say yes if only to avoid the surprise. Aiden's surprises lately hadn't been the type to enthuse Tony. At the same time he had no intention of encroaching on Jamie and Claire.

“Aiden sounded pretty excited about it,” Claire noted.

“I'm sure whatever it is will be ton of fun, right Tony?”

“Yeah, tons,” Tony said. They finished their meal and then went out to the sidewalk to begin walking back.

“Tony why don't you hold my hand?” Claire said offering her hand to him.

“Um could I not?” Tony asked taking a step back. “I mean I'm not a little kid, at least right now.”

“We know that bud,” Jamie said with a sympathetic smile.

“But we don't know when you'll switch, so it might just be safer in the long run.”

Tony grimaced before grabbing Claire's hand. Jamie was right after all. It could happen at anytime. Although these days it felt like he was more in his little kid mind space than his adult one. It did give Tony some worry. He remembered what his Mom had told him on the phone last night. She had requested that Tony call her every night at bedtime so she could say goodnight. Now it was part of his bedtime routine. Every night at seven thirty Aiden would get him dressed in his pull-ups and pajamas and then call Mom. She usually just asked him how his day had went. Last night however she been a little more serious with him. She had reminded him that he needed to be thinking carefully about the future. He needed an answer soon. If it got to the point where he was no longer capable of doing so she was going to take him back. Tony had completely written that off as an option but it would happen if he took too long. Getting back to the dorm Tony decided it was now or never.

“Um Claire is it okay if I talk to Jamie alone?” he asked.

“Sure I'll wait outside while he takes you up to your room,” she said letting go of his hand. Tony and Jamie walked side by side as Tony remained silent. Halfway up to the room Jamie finally broke the silence.

“You said you had something you wanted to talk about?” Jamie questioned. Tony sighed a little.

“Did you tell Mom you were going to take care of me?”

“I did,” Jamie said keeping his eyes forward.

“And you really think that would work?” Tony asked sounding as skeptical as one could.

“Sure why not?” Jamie said looking down at Tony.

“You say that like it's nothing,” Tony said shaking his head. It was so typical of Jamie. He never thought things through all the way, it was always up to Tony to get him out of trouble. “What about money, or school, your job? Have you even thought about that stuff?” The two of them came to a stop as they were now in front of the door to Aiden and Tony's room.

“What about all that?” Jamie asked looking clueless. “We would just have to make it work.”

Having heard Jamie's reasoning only seemed to turn Tony sour. It was clear to him now that Jamie was in no way a viable option for him. His options were shrinking and he could feel the walls close in on him. Its not as if he had been happy to hear Jamie had ideas of taking him in, which had felt so unnatural. Tony was the one that had taken care of Jamie.

“You never think things through,” Tony grumbled.

“Would it really be so bad,” Jamie said putting a hand on his hip. “Look I know you're my older brother and everything, but well...we're brothers we look out for one another it doesn't matter who is older.”

Tony pursed his lips. Now was not the time for empty

platitudes or ideals. Tony didn't have time. Jamie had no plan or idea of what he was doing, of what he was thinking about taking on. There was no way Tony could let him entertain such fanciful ideas.

“Its not a good idea,” Tony said.

“And why not, as far as I see it I'm the best you got, since you don't want to go back with mom.”

“I have other plans...” Tony began before stopping himself. He didn't want to say what Aiden had proposed. Even though he had told his Mom about it. Somehow saying it to Jamie as a way to counter his argument almost felt like Tony was accepting it, he still didn't know how he felt.

“Lets not talk about this now,” Tony mumbled.

“Sure, we can pick this back up when I see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Tony questioned. He hadn't made any plans to see Jamie the next day.

“Did you forget,” Jamie said with a smirk. Tony could only look back with a blank expression. “Yeah I'm going to see you tomorrow,” Jamie said standing up. He gave Tony a wave before he walked off. Tony shook his head. He was sure he hadn't made plans, then again these days his plans were seemingly made for him more often than not. As Tony walked in the room he saw Aiden dressed up in his suit that he wore on game days for when the team walked into the stadiums.

“Hey bud just in time,” Aiden smiled. “Was dinner good?”

“Um yeah,” Tony said giving Aiden a side-eyed look remembering the threat of a surprise.

“Good, good,” Aiden nodded. “Then I need you to take off your clothes so you can change.”

“Change?” Tony questioned.

“That's right,” Aiden said. “Its game night and you're coming with.” Tony made no reaction. Was this the surprise? It seemed kind of weird, he had of course gone to Aiden's games before when they played at home.

“Why do I need to change for that?” Tony asked.

“Because I got a special outfit for you. So you can show off your school spirit.”

“I don't know if I have a lot of that right now,” Tony said with some melancholy. “Actually I think I'm kicked out.” They hadn't said that at the meeting, nobody probably thought they needed to state the obvious. Aiden gave Tony a sympathetic smile.

“Well you can wear it to support me right?” Aiden asked. “It looks cool.” Aiden said as he held up a jersey that looked exactly like the ones the basketball team wore. Tony scrunched up his face a little. Of course he would be supportive of Aiden, but looking at the red mini jersey seemed to give him a weird feeling. “Actually my Mom got this for you, she even got it personalized.” Aiden said turning

it around to show that the name on the back said McCallister-Banks. Aiden's last name joined with Tony's.

“McCallister- Banks,” Tony said with an awkward look.

“Sure,” Aiden said. “My Dad said that when they adopt you it would be better if you took our last name as well, he said it would make legal paperwork easier or something.” Tony immediately felt his stomach twist up a little. Aiden was talking as if it was already a done deal.

“I never said yes,” Tony yelped. Aiden cocked his head a little with a smirk.

“I know you're still hesitant. But maybe this is a good opportunity,” he said putting the jersey down on the bed. “For tonight maybe you should pretend that you did, you know get a feel for it.”

“I don't see how me wearing that will help,” Tony mumbled still not completely comfortable with the idea.

“If you don't want to wear it that's fine,” Aiden said. “You can wear what you got on.” Tony looked down at the black shirt with a big firetruck on it that he was currently wearing.

“I'll wear it,” Tony said. It didn't look kiddie after all.

“Great,” Aiden said wasting no time in pulling Tony's shirt off. Tony gave a disgruntle hum. Aiden seemed to have no apprehension these days in dressing Tony despite the fact that he and Tony both knew he was plenty capable of dressing himself in t-shirts and pants. Aiden then pulled a white long

sleeved turtleneck over Tony's head before getting the jersey on him. “She got you shorts too,” Aiden said holding up a pair of small red athletic shorts. “We're going to match,” he chuckled. Tony didn't wait for Aiden to try and take off his jeans as he got them off before he went to grab the shorts. “Hang on, take off your undies too.”

“Whyyy,” Tony asked his voice rising a little as if he could sense he wasn't going to like the answer.

“Because I want you to wear a pull-up,” Aiden said grabbing one out of the drawer.

“B-b-but,” Tony stammered.

“I don't want you running to the potty,” Aiden said holding up a hand.

“I can use the potty by myself,” Tony protested not for a minute realizing he had defaulted to the childish word. “I don't even wear those to daycare.”

“I know, but I don't want you running to the bathroom on your own and your only other option will be asking my Mom or Dad to take you,” Aiden said. “Would you rather do that?”

“Your parents,” Tony said with surprise.

“Yep you'll be sitting with them. They're going to keep an eye on you.” Aiden said as he pulled down Tony's undies already knowing what the boys answer would be. Tony went to say something yet Aiden cut him off. “No you cannot sit by yourself, someone has to watch you.”

Tony gave a little whine but let Aiden put the pull-up on him before he got the shorts on as well.

Tony felt a little nervous as they walked over to the arena on the campus where the game would be taking place. Tony wondered how Aiden's parents would react. How much did they know about what was going on? Coming into the arena Tony and Aiden found themselves immediately in a sea of people. Aiden picked up Tony before moving through. Tony mewled a little to be put down yet Aiden seemed to ignore him as he was searching around. Finally he put his hand up in a wave.

“Found them,” Aiden said as he brought Tony over to a side near the entrance to the court. Aiden put Tony on his feet in front of his parents. Aiden's Mom smiled upon seeing Tony. She was a slightly plump lady with short blond hair. Aiden's Dad was tall like his son. He had short buzzed hair that was one step away from bald.

“Cutting it pretty close there,” Aiden's Dad, Greg laughed giving his son's shoulder a shake.

“Someone took a little long getting ready,” Aiden chuckled mussing up Tony's hair which Tony responded by grumbling and steeping away to smooth out his hair.

“I always love seeing you in a suit,” Aiden's Mom, Lisa said dusting off Aiden's shoulders.

“Yeah yeah,” Aiden said rolling his eyes. Lisa then turned her attention on Tony. “And I see someone was happy about their

new jersey.”

“Um yeah thanks,” Tony said fidgeting with the bottom hem of the jersey a little.

“You look so cute,” Lisa cooed. “Doesn't he Greg?” she asked turning to her husband. “Remember when I used to dress Aiden just like that when you would take him to games when he was little.” Tony's face went a little red.

“Well what else would you wear to a basketball game,” Greg said.

“Anyways I gotta get going,” Aiden said as he knelt down to Tony's level. “You promise to be good?” Tony furrowed his brow at being asked such a question. As Tony looked at Aiden's smile he felt his head nod a little before Aiden gave him a hug before standing up. “Alright, he promised to be good.”

“We'll be fine,” Lisa said. “Tony has always been a perfect gentleman around us.” she said as she went over placing a hand on Tony's shoulder. Aiden then departed giving one last wave. “Lets go to our seats then,” Lisa said grabbing Tony's hand. He instinctively pulled away yet Lisa squeezed his hand saying they didn't want him getting lost in the crowd. Tony's hand was finally released as they got to their seats. Tony found himself sat in between both of Aiden's parents. Plopping in his seat he felt the cushioning of the padding he was wearing. Tony felt the butterfly's erupt in his tummy. He had gotten used to wearing it to bed, but that was just in his room with Aiden. Being out in public seemed to only

heighten how aware of it he was. Sitting in between Aiden's parents only made Tony feel all the more like a little kid, in fact right now he was wishing he had gone with Jamie and Claire instead. This was too awkward. He had never been alone with Aiden's parents before. Lisa and Greg then engaged in some small talk with Tony. Neither one of them brought up the regression only asking him general questions about how things were going. Tony kept his responses vague at best.

“Oh yeah,” Greg then said. “How was Ruth did she help you and your Mom out?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Thank you for doing that, it was a big help.” Greg smiled before turning his attention back to the court as the visiting team was making their way to the court. As the players names were listed off Tony found his eyes wandering over to the student section. It was where he usually sat when he would come to Aiden's games. He remembered the first time he had come, he had been so nervous that he had brought Jamie along for support. Jamie had of course agreed straight away perhaps to show his support to Tony who had only come out to him and his Mom a few months earlier. Tony let out sigh remembering how Jamie at one point had told him he had good taste in guys. Tony had laughed at the time. He had kept his feelings under wraps from both of them for so long fearing they wouldn't accept them. Yet upon coming out both his Mom and Jamie had reacted un-surprised. Tony had the sneaking suspicion that his Mom had somehow known but he had never asked

her – at that point it really hadn't mattered.

Tony's thoughts drifted to how anxious he had been about it the realization that he was going to have to go through all that again. He was going to have to go through a lot of things again. School for one which seemed like a gut punch having been so close to being done and then there was all the other milestones and minutae of life – not too mention puberty. Tony could only inwardly groan. He hadn't really thought about it before, but reality was setting in.

“Tony dear did you hear me?” Lisa said causing Tony to snap from his thoughts. He looked at her with a clueless look which was met with a smile. “Greg is going to go get some snacks do you want any?”

“No thanks,” Tony said shaking his head. Lisa prodded a little further. “I ate before I came,” Tony said. That seemed to finally make her drop it. As they sat Tony noticed that the home team was already out and the game had started.

“You know we are really going to have to think of a better name for you to call us when you come to live with us,” Lisa then mentioned. Tony pursed his lips a little.

“What do you mean?” he said cringing a little.

“I just mean it would be a little weird for you to call us by our first names,” Lisa said giving Tony a smile. With the way she was talking it sounded as if she was under the assumption that it was a done and signed deal. “Mom and Dad would be too much, and you already have a Mom,” Lisa continued on.

“Maybe Aunty and Uncle, what do you think of that?”

“Um sure I guess,” Tony said in a quiet voice. The whole conversation only making him feel more awkward by the minute. Greg returned soon after. The game proceeded on. Tony put aside the feelings he had been having trying to enjoy the game. He did genuinely enjoy watching Aiden play. Tonight he was playing well. It was an important game, if they won this they would be in the playoffs. Aiden scored a basket soon after. Tony let out a cheer getting to his feet, overcome by a feeling of excitement.

“He is playing good tonight,” Greg said as he tossed a piece of popcorn into his mouth.

“He is,” Tony agreed with a smile. “I haven't seen him like this in awhile.”

“He certainly is something,” Lisa agreed.

“A lot of time spent practicing,” Greg said sagely, a faint whiff of reminiscences in his eyes of all the time he spent with Aiden over the years.

“He's talented,” Tony said gushed. “I could never be that amazing.”

“You could if you tried,” Lisa chuckled a little. “Just takes lots of practice like Greg said.”

“I don't know,” Tony said with some skepticism. “I've practiced with him before and I don't think I could ever be that good.”

“Do you like playing with Aiden?” Greg then asked.

“Oh sure, I wasn't much into sports growing up, we didn't really have time. But its pretty fun.” Tony said nodding along.

“Then its settled,” Lisa said. “We're going to sign you up for the pee-wee league at the rec center.”

“The pee-wee league,” Greg chuckled. “Those were fun times.” Tony's mouth hung open a little. If he had any doubts before they were now gone, Aiden's parents were under the impression that he was going to be living with them and now plans were being made.

“Doesn't that sound fun?” Lisa asked with a big smile. Tony mustered up a tiny smile in reply. He didn't want to be appear rude or having some outburst in front of them, that would just make them think he really was a little kid who couldn't control his emotions. Tony went back to concentrating on the game. Now was not the place to have a serious conversation with Aiden's parents – not that he even wanted to talk to them about it. Halfway through the game another problem arose, he needed the bathroom. Tony squirmed in his seat. This did not go unnoticed by Lisa, a mother herself who was well accustomed to the signs. She leaned over close to Tony.

“Sweetie do you need the potty?” she whispered. Tony looked back with big eyes. He quickly shook his head turning away. “Its alright if you do, I can take you or if you prefer Greg.”

“I'm fine,” Tony said shaking his reddened face vehemently.

“Okay,” Lisa said sitting back. “Just don't want you to have an accident.”

“I won't,” Tony yelped. Lisa patted him on the head as she turned her attention back to the game. Tony was relieved he had sidestepped the potentially embarrassing situation yet his original problem still persisted. What was he supposed to do? He was not going to be allowed to leave on his own. He shifted in his seat feeling the bulk of the padding in between his legs. In a strange way he could see that Aiden had done him a favor. There was nothing left to do. Sooner or later it was going to happen, the least he could do is have it happen on his terms. Tony relaxed finding that his body seemed to let loose a little too easily. Tony felt the warm liquid fill up the pull-up. He worried that it might actually leak. After a minute though he could tell the pull-up had absorbed everything leaving him to now have to sit in it. He looked down but saw that even with how swollen and poofy it felt it still wasn't noticeable under his shorts. As Tony tried to not think about it he couldn't seem to take his mind off of it. He wondered if perhaps he should have just bit the bullet and asked for someone to take him to the bathroom. He was then reminded of what Aiden had told him. For tonight just to try and pretend that he had chosen for Aiden's parents to adopt him, to see what that would be like. If Tony did end up choosing that, this situation would become something that would happen. Being brought along to watch Aiden play. Tony looked at Lisa imagining what it would be like to have her be a mother like figure to him. He thought about how he had cuddled with his Mom, not feeling a sense of embarrassment.

Could he be like that with Lisa? He then looked at Greg and wondered how the man would react when Tony got excited and couldn't stop himself from talking about the things he did at daycare like he did with Jamie. The thought caused a shiver to run down Tony's spine. No, he could never do that. It just felt weird unlike how natural it felt with his Mom and Jamie and even Aiden.

The game was coming down to the final moments as the score was tied. The crowd was on its feet as they cheered. Tony stood not being able to see anything.

“Can't see?” Greg asked noticing Tony next to him.

“I can't find a hole,” Tony said sounding frustrated as he tried to get a peek through the small slits of space between the people in front of him. He wanted to see what was happening, the score was so close and there was a lot on the line.

“No problem,” Greg said. In an instant Tony felt himself lifted high off the ground. “Up you go,” Greg said plopping Tony on top of his shoulders. Tony instinctively went to move back and felt himself begin to fall back before Lisa put a hand on his back pushing him forward. Tony grabbed the top of Greg's head feeling as if he was going to fall forward. “Don't wiggle too much or you'll fall,” Greg laughed as his grip increased around the tops of Tony's thighs. Greg was not a broad shouldered man and Tony found his butt slumping a little off the back. He was thankful that his jersey was long, no doubt anyone behind him would get a full view of his pull-up up over his waistband. Tony wanted to get down but at the

same time he could now see, and he really wanted to watch. The final seconds counted down and Aiden came screaming up the court blowing past a defender for a last minute dunk ending the game decisively in victory. The crowd erupted as the student section invaded onto the court to celebrate with the team. Tony was so proud at that moment that he wanted to go and give Aiden a big hug.

“Can we go?” Tony asked looking down at Greg.

“Sure can,” Greg said lifting Tony off his shoulders and setting him on his feet. Without a word Greg had Tony's hand as they made their way down into the crowd they finally got through to where Aiden was. Upon noticing them Aiden came up getting a hug from both of his parents.

“Someone was really excited to see you,” Lisa then said looking back at Tony. Aiden smiled and picked Tony up into his arms.

“How did I do?” Aiden asked. Despite the fact that Aiden was dripping with sweat Tony wrapped his arms around his neck.

“Congratulations, you did real good,” Tony said.

“Thanks bud,” Aiden said whispering into Tony's ear. “Knowing you were there cheering me on really helped.” Tony smiled as he continued to hug Aiden. In fact part of him didn't ever want to let go. It made him feel like a million bucks knowing he had all of Aiden's attention.

“Aiden Banks,” a voice called out breaking the boys hug apart

as Tony looked over to see a girl with a microphone and another man with a camera. “Can we get an interview for Channel 4?”

“Sure,” Aiden enthused. As the red light on the camera clicked on and the interview started Tony could only stare into the lens. The idea that he was being broadcast out on the airwaves made him instantly become self conscious. The reporter then took a break in talking with Aiden about the game looking at Tony with a smile.

“And who is this you got with you?” she asked.

“Just my number one fan,” Aiden said. “My little brother.” Tony's head snapped to look at Aiden. Little brother? Why would Aiden say that, and on tv no less? He could've have just stopped at fan.

“I see,” the reporter cooed. “Anything you want to say about your awesome big brother to everyone watching at home?” she asked sticking the microphone up to Tony. He stuttered a little becoming tongue tied before he hid his face into Aiden's shoulder which was met with some coo's from the reporter. Tony felt Aiden put a reassuring hand on his back which did little to lessen his embarrassment. He knew everyone would see him as nothing more than a shy little boy.

Afterwards Tony was sat on a bench in between Aiden's parents to wait for him to finish up in the locker room. As Tony sat he began to feel a little upset with Aiden. Not just for the whole thing with the reporter but for everything tonight. If Aiden's plan had been to show Tony how great life

would be if he chose him then it certainly hadn't worked. Tony had felt nothing but awkward and embarrassed the whole night, and the stress of it all was starting to wear on him.

“Looking a little sleepy there honey,” Lisa said noticing Tony's ever increasing droopy eyes. “Its pretty late, why don't you rest your head on my lap and take a rest, Aiden will be awhile.”

“I'm fine,” Tony said making a point to open his eyes wide. Lisa did not push the issue any further. Tony put his head back against the wall. He was tired, but he wasn't about to cuddle up to Aiden's mom. He did wonder what time it was, most definitely past his bedtime. Tony then shook his head, no he couldn't think like that. He didn't need a bedtime, that was just something stupid Aiden insisted on. He decided just to rest his eyes for a moment.

The next thing Tony knew he was being carried. He could feel the cold night air against his back. But he felt a warmth on his front. He opened his eyes a little to see that it was Aiden who had him.

“Aiden,” Tony said softly not even lifting his head up off Aiden's shoulder.

“Yeah its me, I got you,” Aiden said softly. “We're almost back to the room and then you'll be nice and warm in your bed so just wait a little bit.” Tony closed his eyes again. He opened them upon getting into the room thanks to the sudden illumination of the bright lights. Aiden laid Tony on his bed.

The boy curled up feeling the squish of his now cold pull-up. Ever since he had used it he had wanted it off, but right now the only thing he wanted was sleep. He could hear Aiden rummaging through the dresser drawer.

“Hey bud can you wake up enough to get your jammies on” Aiden laughed yet Tony only responded with a sleepy murmur. He felt Aiden sit on the bed before he pulled Tony's shorts off. “Looks like you used that thing,” Aiden noted, Tony gave a little mewl of protest. “That's alright, you were wearing it for a reason.” Aiden, seeing that Tony was too tired pulled his legs so that they were behind Aiden and Tony's butt was slightly raised off the bed. Aiden then ripped the sides of the pull-up off and removed it off like a diaper. He then took a wet wipe to Tony's groin.

If Tony had been more awake he would have protested such a thing. Aiden never did this, he always let Tony wipe himself.

“Stooop,” Tony whined a little yet that is all he could muster up at the moment.

“Shhh,” Aiden said gently. “Almost done.” Aiden then got a new pull-up on Tony before taking off the jersey and shirt. He decided that it was too much work to get Tony into pajamas and decided just to send him to bed as is. Tony felt Aiden slide him up to the top of the bed.

“Aiden,” Tony said blearily.

“Hush now Tony just go back to sleep,” Aiden said gently.

“But I need to talk to you,” Tony said. He wanted to confront

Aiden about that night. What had he told his parents? How Tony wasn't exactly comfortable with Aiden calling him his little brother. How he was unsure about the whole idea of Aiden's family adopting him.

“Plenty of time to talk in the morning,” Aiden said as Tony felt the blankets get pulled up over him. Tony didn't protest. Now being in a dry pull-up and under the warm blankets was too much for Tony to resist sleep. Aiden was right. Whatever Tony had to say could wait. He would tell Aiden everything tomorrow. Now was the time for sleep.

Chapter 9

Adventures in Genetics : Part 9 - Chapter 9

A Break

Tony awoke in his bed, he hadn't even opened his eyes yet but could hear that Aiden was up moving around. Tony sat up rubbing his eyes.

“Good morning,” Aiden said cheerfully as he looked at Tony from his desk. “Time to get up I guess.” Tony grumbled a little laying back on his bed. “Don't go back to sleep now,” Aiden said laughing a little.

“Why not,” Tony said pulling the blankets closer to himself. “Its Saturday.”

“Because you're going out,” Aiden said.

“Going where?” Tony asked sitting up.

“If you don't already know then I guess its a surprise,” Aiden said with a sly smile. The word surprise seem to kick Tony out of his sleeping daze. That's right he had things to talk to Aiden about.

“I don't like surprises,” Tony said sitting up again. Aiden gave Tony a ponderous look.

“Someone's crabby this morning.” Aiden said. “Guess that's what happens when you stay up too late.”

“Hey,” Tony said beyond offended shooting to his feet. As he stood with the blankets around his ankles he felt the cold air hit his chest and legs. He looked down to see he was only wearing the training pants, very wet and saggy training pants at that. Tony's face reddened as he covered the front of the pull-ups with his hands, yet Aiden was already making his way to the dresser not seeming to see anything weird. Then again there was nothing weird. Tony was a bedwetter now, this was how he awoke every morning.

“Lets get you dressed,” Aiden said grabbing some clothes before walking over to Tony putting his thumbs on the waistband of the pull-up to pull them down.

“Stop,” Tony said taking a step back.

“C'mon Tony I know you don't want to stay in that thing.” Aiden said.

“You're right, I don't,” Tony said. “But I can dress myself.”

“I'm just helping,” Aiden said as his hand went towards Tony.

“I said stop,” Tony yelped putting his hands on Aiden's chest. It worked, as Aiden paused. “I need to talk to you, for real,” Tony said. Aiden nodded before stepping back.

“Okay, what do you need to say?” Aiden said. Tony plopped down onto his bed. Where to start was the real question.

“I'm having second thoughts about this whole adoption thing,” Tony said. Aiden sat across from Tony on his own bed.

“Okay, I'm listening,” Aiden said.

“Its just you know, I kind of thought that maybe I could use to it or whatever, but after last night I don't think I can,” Tony said.

“Did my parents do something to make you uncomfortable?” Aiden then asked with a slight look of concern. Tony shook his head. Lisa and Greg hadn't necessarily done anything wrong, it was the whole situation itself, if anyone had done something to make him uncomfortable it had been Aiden. “Its was just one night,” Aiden said. “You'll get used to it, I know you will.”

“But you don't,” Tony said. “You keep saying you know whats best for me but you can't know that.”

“Tony, we work together okay, so If we're together then it will be alright,” Aiden said. Tony was silent. Sure he and Aiden had worked well together, they had balanced one another out, as boyfriends, two adults. Could the same be said with their relationship dynamic now so thoroughly changed? Was Aiden the person Tony really needed now? Just then there was a knock at the door. “I think that's for you,” Aiden said. Tony looked at the door cocking his head. For him? He then remembered what Jamie had said yesterday. Tony got up and strode towards the door, his mind having been put on a single track of finding out what Jamie could possibly want, especially early in the morning like this. Tony opened the door only to be surprised to see his Mom standing in the hall.

“Mommy?” he said.

“There's the birthday boy,” she said as she plucked him off

the ground without a moments hesitation as she carried him back into the room.

“B-birthday?” Tony stuttered.

“Guess Jamie was right,” Mom chuckled. “You totally forgot.”

“It's my birthday,” Tony said more as a realization than an actual statement. It was true, with everything going on he had completely forgotten.

“We got a full day ahead of us, so get ready,” Mom said. It dawned on Tony now what her plan was. Growing up it had been tradition in their family that the birthday boy would spend a full day with Mom doing fun things. If the boys had school Mom would get them excused and would take the day off of work. It was a special day for Mom to give one-on one attention to her sons. Tony and Jamie had both enjoyed the tradition growing up, getting a full day with their Mom all to the themselves yet they had stopped when the boys had graduated high school. Now that Tony was back to being a kid it seemed Mom was ready to re-ignite the tradition. Tony noticed his Mom was already at his dresser having procured and outfit for him. She took a seat on his bed with the clothes in her lap.

“C'mon Tony we're going to have lots of fun today,” she said. If anything she seemed to be excited by the prospect of bringing back the birthday ritual. That's when Tony saw the fresh pull-up on top of the clothes in his Mom's lap. He then took in a sharp breath realizing he was standing in front of her in nothing but a very wet pull-up. Tony grabbed the pull-

up with a yelp looking frazzled for a moment before he went and shoved it under his pillow before hiding his face down in the blankets of his bed.

“I don't need that,” he said, his muffled voice dripping with humiliation. “I only wear them at night.”

“I know that,” Mom said. “But it might be a good idea just in case for today.”

“But I don't have accidents,” Tony said shooting up. “Aiden tell her,” Tony said looking to Aiden who was watching the scene unfold out with a small smile.

“Well you know yesterday...” Aiden began before stopping as Tony shot him a look. “Tony's been doing really well during the day, he's been completely dry and no near accidents either.”

“Okay then,” Mom said with a knowing smile. “You can wear your undies.” she said getting up and going back to the dresser. Although Tony didn't miss the fact that she did grab a pull-up from the drawer and put it in her purse before rifling through his underwear drawer.

“Could you let me get dressed,” Tony said. “Like by myself?” Mom turned around to look at the small boy with a huffy look. She gave a sort of look to the side that showed she thought he was being a little too modest given his current circumstances but given the complicated nature of the situation and the fact that it was his birthday she decided to humor him.

“Oh okay,” she said heading towards the door. “I'll wait in the hall.” Once alone Tony let out a huff.

“Ugh, can you believe her?” Tony said. “She acted like it was strange for me not to want to get dressed in front of her,” he said turning around and being startled as a pair of underwear hit him in the face. Tony pulled them off being met with the image of Buzz Lightyear running forward aiming his arm laser. Tony saw Aiden standing at the dresser being the one who had thrown them.

“She is just being a good Mom,” Aiden said with a chuckle. “Now hurry up and get yourself dressed since you want to be a big boy today.” Tony twisted up his mouth in a scowl as he turned and grabbed the wet-wipes from the ground next to the dresser. He got himself cleaned up and his undies on before looking at the outfit his Mom had set out for him. He pulled on a pair of brown cargo pants pulling the drawstring on the fabric top tight before grabbing a long sleeved shirt that had yellow sleeves and a plain white body. Tony did give his Mom some credit that if she had indeed picked this outfit out on purpose at least she had given him something approaching a level of maturity. Tony got on his socks and his light up Sonic shoes. Aiden then put a backpack on his back.

“What's this?” Tony asked.

“A change of clothes,” Aiden said.

“I don't need,” Tony began.

“Just take it,” Aiden said. “Plus there is a little something in

there for you.” Tony turned around with a sigh as he looked at Aiden. “Now a how about a hug from the birthday boy?” Tony relented and hugged Aiden before being lifted off his feet. “And lets not forget birthday kisses,” Aiden then said as he gave five kisses alternating between Tony's cheeks as he counted them out. “And one for good luck,” Aiden said giving Tony a final kiss to his forehead.

“Do you have to be so weird?” Tony grimaced.

“Oh would you prefer some birthday spankings?” Aiden said with a mischievous glint.

“Aiden no,” Tony yelped as he began to squirm. Aiden laughed as he set Tony down on the ground.

“Now go on and have a fun day,” Aiden said. Tony all but scurried out of the room. Tony walked with his Mom towards the campus parking lot.

“So what are we doing?” Tony asked.

“I thought we could get you a haircut,” Mom said picking up a long strand of hair off of Tony's head. Tony pursed his lips but didn't protest. He did need one. As they made it to his Mom SUV Tony went to open the front door.

“Tony in the back,” Mom said leading him away from the front door to the back. Tony let out a little grunt but knew there was no protesting. Yet as his Mom opened the back door he couldn't hold back any longer. He saw a car seat no doubt meant for him.

“Mommy nooo,” Tony whined. Mom gave him a small pat to the back knowing this was going to be his reaction.

“There is no way around it dear, this is about safety.” she said firmly if not sympathetically. Tony furrowed his brow, almost feeling like he wanted to cry. He took in a big breath fighting back his tears as he shook his head. He climbed up into the car taking a derisive look at the seat before he climbed into it. Tony grabbed at the straps looking at them a little mystified. “Thank you for being understanding,” Mom said taking the straps and snapping two ends together at his chest before buckling the straps into the buckle at his crotch. His Mom then lifted up his backpack noticing there was something in it other than clothes. She opened it up to investigate as she pulled out a small present wrapped up in bright paper. “Looks like Aiden got you a gift,” she said plopping it onto Tony's lap. The boy only stared at it as if he didn't know what it was. “Well aren't you going to open it?” she asked. Tony tore off the paper a little sheepishly to reveal that it was a toy tractor just like the ones he played with at daycare. “Oh wow that's pretty cool isn't it,” Mom enthused. Yet Tony only frowned.

“Its a stupid baby toy,” Tony said as he tossed the tractor onto the open seat beside him.

“You know I think Aiden put some thought in that gift,” Mom said. “He told me you like playing with them with your friend.”

“I do not,” Tony said as his face went red. “I'm just being nice to him.” Mom sighed a little as she ran a hand through Tony's

hair.

“You don't need to lie,” Mom said. “Especially to me.” Tony pulled his head away a little not in the mood for the affection. Mom didn't want to push him too much and especially didn't want him to be pushed into a tantrum, which would only spoil the day. She closed the door and got into the drivers seat. As she started the car she got her phone placed it into a holder to put in directions to a barber shop. Her finger went to hit the option for “Ken's Barber shop” but she paused upon seeing an option right below it for “Kidz Cutz” as her finger hovered she looked at Tony in the rear view mirror. He was looking out the window with a gloomy look. She hated how Tony felt he always tried to deny the thoughts and feeling that were becoming his new normal. She knew how much pressure he was feeling about his future and she had planned for this to be a day that he could not think about that stuff. The twenty two year old would never allow it though. She then hit the option for “Kidz Cutz” as the navigator then started to show the way. She had to show him. She had to show him that the world wasn't going to end and he was going to be okay. That he could be happy.

They arrived and parked in the strip mall parking lot. Mom got Tony out of the car taking his hand in hers.

“Mommy,” Tony huffed.

“We hold hands in parking lots,” Mom said as they began walking. Halfway there Tony saw where they were going.

“Really?” he said seeing the simple artwork of smiling

children and suns that looked like they were drawn by a toddler adorning the window.

“They specialize in children hair which is what you have,” Mom said squeezing his hand a little. Tony grumbled under his breath. He was happy to see they were the only customers as they entered. A stylist came up to the front desk with a smile asking how she could help.

“I need a haircut for my son Tony here,” Mom said. The stylist typed away on a computer before leading them back. As Tony looked around he could see there wasn't a single normal chair. Instead they were all fashioned to resemble things appealing to children.

“So Tony what are we feeling,” the stylist asked. “Would you like the race-car or maybe the rocket ship?”

“The car is fine,” Tony said keeping his head down.

“Excellent choice,” the stylist said. Tony's Mom then lifted him up and set him into the plastic red racecar as the stylist got a black smock around his neck. She then handed a binder to Mom.

“These are all our styles,” she said. Mom flipped through the book before stopping and showing the stylist her selection. Tony was a little mad that she hadn't even consulted him.

“That will look great on him,” the stylist said. She then picked up a remote flipping on a small screen that was on the wall in front of the racecar. “So Tony what would you like to watch?” Tony shrugged, what was he even supposed to say. “I

had a boy around your age just before this and he was watching this," she said as she clicked on an episode of Paw Patrol. Tony winced as he looked at his Mom who just gave him a small smile back. As the stylist worked Tony kept his head down. Although he found his eyes wandering towards the screen more often than he would like to admit. Although it wasn't like there were many places for him to look. There wasn't even a mirror for him to see what was happening to his hair.

"All done," the stylist then said which seemed to surprise Tony. He had gotten wrapped into the show without even realizing it. Tony was taken out of the racecar and set on his feet as they paid and then left. Getting to the car Tony's Mom lifted him up into his carseat strapping him in.

"Can I see?" Tony finally said. He was curious as to what his hair looked like and he couldn't really get a good idea from just touching it.

"Sure," Mom said taking a compact from her purse and opening it for him. They had cut a lot of it as it now sat neatly on top of his head. It was still longer on the top and the stylist had comb over the bangs a little so that they sat were swept off to the side.

"Well what do you think?" Mom asked.

"I look like a little kid," Tony grumbled.

"There is not a haircut in the world that would change that," Mom said snapping the compact shut.

“You don't have to remind me,” Tony said crossing his arms. “Being four sucks.”

“You're five sweetie,” Mom said. “Remember its your birthday.” Tony rolled his eyes at his Mom its not like her comment had made him feel any better.

“So what stupid thing are we going to do now,” Tony said morosely.

“I don't know,” Mom said ignoring his comment. “You haven't told me yet. What do you want to do?” Tony just gave a shrug, nothing really came to mind.

“Well lets see what did we do on your last fifth birthday?” Mom said putting a finger to her chin. “Oh yeah we went to the zoo. How does that sound?”

“I don't know,” Tony said. Its not like he hated animals or anything in fact he was practically obsessed with them when he had been younger. Everyone was always saying he would end up a zookeeper.

“You had lots of fun last time, so maybe we should just do it again.” Mom said.

“Yeah but I'm not a little kid like last time,” Tony said. Mom saw her opening.

“You could be,” she said. Tony looked at her a little taken aback by her comment. “Listen Tony, I really want this to be a good day for you, one day where you don't have to think about everything that is weighing on you. Now who do you

think would have more fun at the zoo, a twenty two year old Tony or five year old Tony?"

"Well a five year old I guess," Tony said. "But its not like I can just switch it on."

"You don't have to switch on," Mom said. "You need to switch off." Mom then extended a hand cupping his chin as she used her thumb to stroke his cheek. "You just need to let go of that part of you that gets embarrassed when your little kid side comes out. I know you're self conscious about it and worry that people will think of you differently, but you don't need to worry about that today. You don't need to hide it from me. I will always accept you as you are, no judgments from me. So just be yourself."

Tony was silent as he pondered his Mom's words. He hated to admit that his five year old self was becoming the person he was. At the same time though he knew there was truth in what she said. When he was little he didn't think about the future, it was freeing.

"I don't know," Tony said sounding a little unsure.

"I know you still have a big decision to make," Mom said as she removed her hand and instead grabbed his hand. "Have you thought about it anymore?" Tony flinched. It was pretty much what he thought about all the time. Yet still he couldn't muster up an answer.

"I can't figure it out," Tony said shaking his head. "I keep waiting for the right answer to come but it never does."

“Then you need a break,” Mom said. “Just one day where you don't think about it, and then when you come back to it, I bet you just might see something you didn't before and it will make sense.”

Tony thought about the proposal. He had experienced just that in the past. Being so overwhelmed with a problem that trying to muddle through it did nothing. Then he would take a break maybe watch some tv or go to sleep and when he went back to it he found he could think more clear.

“I guess I could try,” Tony said.

“That's all I ask,” Mom said. She then went and got into the drivers seat. “So the zoo it is then?”

“Yeah,” Tony said with a small smile, though he was still unsure of this would even work. During the drive to the zoo Tony's Mom asked him if there were any animals he was looking forward to seeing.

“Well I think I remember a news story about them getting some tigers, so I guess that would be a little cool,” he had said.

“Oh that would be cool, I hope they have some flamingos,” his Mom mentioned.

“Yeah and the crocodiles,” Tony then said. A couple minutes later Tony was still talking about animals he hoped to see. His Mom smiled a little. Tony had always been a quite child but she knew he could be quite the chatterbox around people he knew. It was a good sign he was being so talkative at the

moment. It showed he was relaxed. They arrived at the zoo as his Mom pulled into a parking spot.

She got out and went to his door. She found him struggling to get him self free from the straps of the carseat. The childproof locks being beyond his level of dexterity. She unlocked him and let him get out of the car thankfully not appearing to bothered by it. She then lead him to the back of the car. She opened the trunk where she had stowed away some of his old things that she had brought with her to drop off. What she was looking for was thankfully right on top.

“Ok first things first sunscreen,” Mom said noting that it was a sunny and warm day. Mom got a bottle of sunscreen squeezing a dollop onto her hand before she turned to him and immediately began applying it to his face.

“I hate sunscreen,” Tony said as he fidgeted while his Mom got him covered.

“I'm not letting the birthday boy get burned,” Mom said. Once she was finished she then went and got the red bucket hat she had brought with her putting it on his head.

“Can we go now?” Tony asked sounding impatient. Mom nodded as Tony walked off.

“Tony what did I say about parking lots?” Mom reminded. Tony slumped his shoulders as he walked back to his Mom taking her hand.

“Hold hands,” he said moodily.

“Good job,” Mom said as they began to walk towards the front entrance. As they walked she could see he was moving quickly, his excitement growing. This might actually work his Mom thought. Getting to the ticket desk Mom lifted Tony up setting him on her hip.

“How many tickets,” the man behind the desk asked.

“One adult and one child.” The man looked up seeing Tony.

“How old is the child?” he asked.

“Five years old as of today,” Mom said smiling at Tony.

“Oh a birthday?” the man then asked raising an eyebrow. “Then you'll need this,” he said producing a lanyard with a plastic card attached at the end. He wrote something on it before slipping it over Tony's neck. Tony looked down to see the card had colorful balloons on it with the number five written at the bottom. “With that he get ins free today as well as free entry to any of the paid exhibits, it will also give you a discount on food and some shop items.” the man said.

“They certainly know how to celebrate birthdays here,” Mom said. Once they were paid Tony and his Mom made their way to see their first exhibit. Tony was still looking at the plastic card hanging from his neck. As he looked at it he realized he couldn't read it. He recognized the letters but put together they seemed indecipherable.

“Mommy what does this say?” Tony asked holding up the plastic card. His Mom came to a stop looking down at him.

“You can't read?” she asked looking slightly alarmed.

“I guess not,” Tony said.

“Oh Tony,” his Mom said kneeling down putting her hands on his shoulders as if to comfort him.

“I'm okay,” Tony said. He knew he should be freaking out about it, but at the same time it was going to happen at some point and he felt calm at the moment. “Can you read it for me?” Tony's Mom gave him a small smile. She wasn't sure if he was putting on a brave face or not. But if he wasn't freaking out then she wouldn't either.

“Its say hey ho its my birthday today I'm five years old,” she said. Tony scrunched up his face a little. Part of him wanted to take it off not feeling very comfortable with having something that would announce his age hanging around his neck. Then he remembered that it got them discounts and he thought that having something that saved his Mom some money wasn't such a bad trade off.

“Ok,” Tony said as he took his Mom's hand again. He didn't want to deal with it. He was tired of all the stress and worry. As he walked with his Mom he felt safe, he just needed some time off.

They came upon some flamingos as Tony broke away from his Mom to get closer.

“Mommy look the flamingos like you wanted.” he said pointing at them. His Mom nodded. Tony saw a plaque in front of the enclosure. “Whats that say?” he asked. His Mom

read if off for him filling his head with all sorts of facts about the flamingos. They proceeded on much the same way. Coming up on each new enclosure Tony would have his Mom read the info for him as he let the info wash over him watching the animals with a sense of intrigue. At one point Mom looked at Tony walking next to her with a smile on his face. She gave a smile seeing that her plan was working. He had become so at ease that they had even avoided him having a meltdown about the whole reading thing. She was a little worried with how easily he had accepted it, but at the same time she knew how desperately he needed this.

They then came upon the tiger exhibit which caused Tony to give a little squeal of excitement. He had his face pressed up against the glass as the tiger strode past. Tony was mesmerized by the size of the impressive animal. The tiger then came up to him looking straight at the boy before it got on its hind legs putting its large paws up against the glass. Tony fell back startled onto his butt.

“Oh I think he wants to play,” Mom chuckled as she knelt down putting a hand on his back.

“I can't play with him,” Tony said laughing. “He's a tiger he'd eat me.”

“You'd certainly be a nice little snack,” Mom said. Tony giggled again as he got to his feet.

“It'd be cool to be a tiger though,” Tony said as he watched the animal walked away.

The morning wore on when Mom noticed Tony fidgeting a little while they were looking at some meerkats. She could tell what was happening.

“Tony sweetie lets take a potty break, okay.” she said taking his hand as they walked towards the bathroom. Tony didn't protest. She noticed he had a hand at his crotch as they walked. She decided to pick him up so he didn't end up having an accident while they walked. As they neared the bathroom Tony's eyes went wide.

“Wait you can't take me in there,” he said with some shock. “That's for girls.”

“Nobody will mind,” Mom said as she walked in. Tony could only let out a little squeak in response. His Mom brought him into a stall lifting up the seat on the toilet before standing up looking at him expectantly.

“T-turn around,” Tony stammered. His Mom smirked but did turn her back to him. As Tony went about his business his Mom wondered if she had pushed it too far with him.

“I'm done,” Tony said meekly as his Mom turned around to see him pulling his shorts up. It seemed his small bout of embarrassment hadn't been enough to knock him out of his head space. She helped him wash his hands before suggesting that it was time for some lunch which Tony agreed with. He said he wanted pizza but they did'nt have any on offer instead they got some hotdogs. Upon asking Tony what he wanted on his he opted for just ketchup. His Mom knew that he usually liked them piled high with all the fixings, however this was

how he had preferred them when he had been younger. Lunch went by without incident except for at the end when Tony inadvertently wiped ketchup on his shirt marring it with a large stain.

“Oh no your shirt,” Mom said as she tried to wipe it off.

“S-s-sorry,” Tony stammered.

“Its alright,” Mom said as she opened up the backpack he had brought pulling out the extra shirt. She the pulled the stained shirt off over his head.

“Mommy,” he said looking around embarrassed to be exposed like this in public. His Mom then got the new one on him quickly. Tony looked down frowning at the bright orange shirt that had a sun with shades on and the words “Sunny Fun” written on it. Mom got packed up quickly sensing that Tony's mood was shifting, she needed to get him back to having fun fast. Mom checked the map to pick up where they had left off before lunch. She took Tony's hand as they began walking. She looked down at him to see he had an upset look on his face.

“That's quite the look,” Mom said. Tony scowled a little.

“I'm hot,” he said. Mom did notice his cheeks were a little red. It was an unseasonably warm spring day. She looked around spotting a little kiosk that had spray bottles with fans attached.

“Lets get a fan,” Mom suggested as she walked up to the kiosk. She got a green one and went to pay.

“Mommy look,” Tony said pointing. She followed his finger to see him pointing at several plastic animal masks. “Its a tiger,” Tony said.

“You want that?” his Mom asked.

“I can get it?” Tony questioned.

“The birthday boy gets whatever he wants,” Mom chuckled. The clerk went over and pulled down the tiger mask. “How much,” Mom asked.

“Ten dollars,” the clerk said. Tony balked a little as he realized what he was asking for. It was a stupid little plastic mask and ten dollars was a lot of money for something like that. He couldn't ask his Mom to spend that kind of money on something so rinky dinky. Tony then looked down.

“What about this?” he asked holding the plastic card up over his head.

“Oh well with the birthday discount its now five dollars,” the clerk said smiling. Tony furrowed his brow. Even with the discount he felt it was overpriced, yet his Mom was already paying. She then knelt down putting the mask on him.

“Do you like it?” Mom asked with a smile. Tony gave an indecisive moan.

“It was expensive,” Tony said.

“It wasn't,” Mom chuckled as she stood up. “And you're not to worry about stuff like that today.” Tony pursed his lips. He had been having a good time so far. Maybe he should let

himself just go with it.

“It's great,” Tony said as he felt the mask on his face with his hands. “Thanks.”

“Lets go to the Aviary and get out of this heat for a little bit,” Mom then said holding her hand out. Tony took it and they began to walk. He smiled a little behind his mask. He liked wearing it. Hiding his face made him feel like he was disguised.

In the aviary the air was cool and was refreshing. Tony was going from widow to window looking at the birds as his Mom didn't see a need for them to hold hands since it was a smaller area. Tony came upon a cage where a large macaw parrot sat perched. He caught his reflection with the tiger mask on his face. He wondered what a tiger would do. Probably something similar as to what the tiger had done to him. He looked at the bird pretending for a moment he was a big ferocious tiger. He put up his hands and let out a loud roar which seemed to startle the parrot as its feather ruffled up. Tony let out a little giggle.

“Excuse me,” Tony looked over to see a zookeeper looking at him with a slightly disapproving look. “I would appreciate if you didn't scare the birds, its very rude.”

“Oh sorry,” Tony said as he took a step back. The zookeeper gave a click of her tongue before walking off. Tony saw his Mom a little ways off as he walked over to her.

“Look at these birds,” she said noticing him. “Aren't they

pretty?” Tony lifted his mask letting it rest on top of his head. He then went up to his Mom smooshing his face into her stomach as he hugged her.

“Oh honey whats the matter?” Mom said as she put her hands on his back.

“I did something bad,” Tony said. He felt a deep sense of shame over what he had done and a little intimidated by the fact that he had been reprimanded by a stranger. He couldn't help but let out some sniffles brought on by perhaps by a certain sense that his words had a deeper meaning to them.

“Why don't you tell me about it then?” Mom said as she knelt down.

“I was pretending to be a tiger and I scared a bird and one of the keepers got mad at me,” Tony said, his guilt making his voice shiver.

“I see,” Mom said with an understanding look. “Are you sorry that you did that?”

“Yeah, I mean I didn't mean to scare the bird,” Tony said nodding his head. “I messed up again.”

“We all make mistakes,” Mom said. “As long as you understand what you did wrong then its okay, its how we learn.” Tony nodded going in for another hug from his Mom.

“Excuse me,” Tony turned around to see the zookeeper standing in front of him. He gulped thinking she was here to tell his Mom what he had done. “I couldn't help but overhear

how bad you felt so I thought maybe you would like to apologize.” She said kneeling down. It was then that Tony noticed she had the parrot he had given a fright perched on her hand. “His name is Paddy, he is very nice.” she said smiling. Tony looked at the parrot that seemed to look at him as if it was expecting something.

“I'm really sorry I scared you,” Tony said to Paddy. “I'm not really a tiger.” The parrots head cocked a little.

“Go ahead and pet him,” the zookeeper said as she ran a hand along the birds back. “He's really soft, and he doesn't bite.” Tony reached out his hand petting the parrot just as the keeper had.

“He is soft,” Tony said. “I really like his feathers.”

“Lets put him on your shoulder,” the keeper said as she brought the parrot close to Tony. Paddy took a step moving to perch on Tony's shoulder. “I think he likes you,” the keeper said.

“Look Mommy,” Tony smiled. “I'm like a pirate.”

“Lets get a picture,” Mom said taking out her phone. Tony smiled with the zookepper as Mom snapped a picture. Paddy was then removed from Tony's shoulder.

“Oh its your birthday?” the keeper asked noticing Tony's lanyard. “Wait right there,” she said as she disappeared. When she came back she had a stuffed parrot that looked identical to Paddy. “Now everyone will know what a great friend you are to the birds,” she said. Tony thanked her

feeling happy as he held the parrot close to his chest.

Later on Tony and his Mom were walking after having just seen some polar bears which Tony had enjoyed watching swim. Tony then spotted a trolley parked to the side with cars attached at the back.

“What's that?” Tony asked. He and his Mom walked up to a queue where others were lined up.

“Its says its the storybook train, want to ride?” Mom asked. Tony's mouth twisted up a little in indecision. Storybook train did sound rather babyish, but part of him was curious and he had been having a good enough day already by just going along with things as they came.

“Sure,” Tony said. In line as they waited to get loaded in Tony found his apprehension dissipating. Getting into the trolley Mom had Tony sat on the outer edge. She buckled him in before re situating his hat a little. The trolly then began to move down the path leading into a forest. There were speakers that played out the narration of a story as the trolley came to a stop in front of wooden cut-outs of the scenes being narrated in the story. Tony found himself becoming transfixed by the story as each station captured his attention. It was all fun as he eagerly waited to see the next scene and enjoying the trolley ride as well. Halfway through the ride Tony put his head against his Mom's shoulder. She could see his eyes were getting heavy. She checked her phone noting the time. They had been at the zoo for awhile and he was no doubt in need of a rest. Tony was able to hold out though as

the story concluded and they came back into the station.

“What next?” Tony asked not able to stifle back a yawn but at the same time still excited to keep moving.

“Lets go see the butterfly's,” Mom suggested opting for something that would be quiet. She knew that the five year old would refuse to admit he was tired and the twenty two year old would probably never agree that he needed a nap.

“Oh okay,” Tony said. Butterfly's sounded kind of boring but his Mom seemed interested. The butterfly exhibit was set up as a garden and Mom was pleased to see how nice and peaceful it was. They took a seat on a bench. As Tony sat watching the fluttering butterflys he wondered how long they would have to stay. After sometime Mom looked down to see Tony slumped up against her, his eyes closed. She shifted him down so that his head was in her lap. She took out her phone seeing some text from Jamie as to how the day was going. She called him.

“So is everything going okay?” he asked.

“We're having lots of fun, Tony's been having a good time,” Mom reported.

“That's good,” Jamie said. “What are you thinking for dinner?”

“He mentioned something about pizza earlier,” Mom said.

“Oh I know a nice italian place, they would definitely have pizza,” Jamie said.

“Maybe someplace a little more casual would be better,” Mom said.

“I see,” Jamie said understanding what his Mom was saying. “I'll text you the other place I found, I just wasn't sure how Tony would react. I'll also make that other call we discussed.”

“I think he would like that,” Mom said. A though then occurred to Mom about something she was curious about. “Jamie has Tony told you about what Aiden offered him?”

“Not that I know of,” Jamie said. Mom then proceeded to explain about the offer of adoption that Aiden had floated. Jamie was silent for a moment.

“He can't do that,” Jamie said. “I mean Tony would never agree.”

“I think he is considering it,” Mom said.

“But thats,” Jamie blurted before pausing. “I don't think that is what is best for Tony.”

“At the end of day its not our choice,” Mom said.

“You can't actually be thinking about letting him do that?” Jamie said with some worry.

“I'm not necessarily a fan,” Mom replied. “But I've already told Tony its his choice.”

“I don't like,” Jamie finally said after a moment.

“I knew you wouldn't,” Mom said. “But you were the one who told me I needed to respect Tony's wishes. If that's what

he wants then we will have to abide by it."

"Yeah I get," Jamie said but he didn't sound at all enthused. Mom and Jamie continued to talk for a little longer before their conversation ended.

Sometime later Tony opened his eyes. He sat up with a yawn before he looked over at his Mom.

"Was I asleep?" he asked wondering when that had happened.

"Yep," Mom said. "For about thirty minutes. Tony stretched out as his Mom put an arm around him. They sat for a few minutes letting Tony wake up fully.

"Should we get going?" Mom asked. "Lots more zoo to see."

"Yeah," Tony said jumping onto his feet completely revitalized and ready to continue his fun day at the zoo.

Chapter 10

Adventures in Genetics Part 10 - Chapter 10

The Other Offer

Tony sat in his carseat fiddling with his toy tractor. He and his Mom had just finished spending the whole day at the zoo and it had been great. For the first time in a long time Tony actually felt so relaxed. The idea that he should be in any way embarrassed by how he had acted was not even a thought that could cross his mind. There had been nothing to worry about, no impending uncertain future to contend with. Today had been about having fun and he had achieved that. Now they were headed for dinner, which Tony was looking forward too as he had worked up an appetite. His Mom turned off the car before coming and freeing him from his carseat. Tony looked at the building they were heading towards. He saw a sign on the front of the large square building. It had some words underneath a circus canopy. He was a little bothered that he couldn't read anymore, a sign that his regression to a barely five year old boy becoming closer to its completion, he would freak out about it later.

“Where are we?” Tony asked walking with his Mom.

“Pizza Circus,” Mom replied.

“Their aren't clowns in there are their?” Tony asked. His Mom gave him a reassuring look as she shook her head. Tony

let out a sigh of relief. He didn't care for clowns even as an adult. Walking in Tony was met by a sight. There was a large dining area with booths and tables. Off to the side was a large play place complete with several tube slides and even a ball pit. To his immediate right was another large area filled with arcade games with bright flashing lights.

“You like it?” Mom asked, as Tony looked around with some awe. Part of him could recognize that this was exactly the type of place a five year old would want to celebrate his birthday. Which for today was what he was.

“Yeah,” Tony said a little muted. There was a small part of him that felt a little silly to be here.

“Tony over here,” Jamie's voice called out. Tony saw his brother waving standing next to Claire. Tony felt his heartbeat quicken. For some odd reason he felt really happy seeing Jamie there. Tony broke away from his Mom running up to his brother.

“Jamie, you're here.” Tony said out of breath.

“I told you I was going to see you today,” Jamie said smirking.

“And Claire too,” Tony said looking at her.

“Hope you don't mind,” Claire smiled. “Just wanted to be here to say happy birthday.”

“I'm happy you're here,” Tony said as he let her wrap him up in a big hug. As Tony took a step back he felt a weight hit

him from behind as two arms wrapped around his neck.

“Tony,” a high pitched voice squealed. Tony got himself untangled as he turned around still a little frazzled to see Cayden smiling at him broadly.

“C-Cayden,” Tony stammered beyond shocked to see the boy outside of the confines of the daycare. He looked over to see his Mom was talking to another woman he presumed to be Cayden's Mom.

“I invited him,” Jamie said. “Claire talked to his Mom yesterday.”

“I didn't know it was your birthday,” Cayden said putting a hand on his hip. “My birthday is next month so then we'll be the same age again.” Tony just smiled before he looked around a little.

“Um is Aiden here?” he asked. Jamie's face contorted ever so slightly.

“No he's not,” Jamie said.

“Oh,” was all Tony said looking a little sad. It seemed strange for Aiden not to be here, especially since it seemed like everybody else was.

“You see him all the time,” Jamie then said kneeling down in front of Tony. “You can have plenty of fun without him for once.” Claire sensed that Tony seemed to not react to the news all that well.

“Aiden is really sorry he couldn't be here,” she said softly

putting a hand on Tony's shoulder. “He had some basketball things that he couldn't get out of, but you'll see him tonight afterwards.”

“I guess,” Tony said frowning a little. “He is usually really busy after a game day.”

“Best not to dwell on it,” Jamie then said offering Tony a large plastic cup filled with tokens. “Why don't you and your friend go and play some of the games.”

“This is for me,” Tony said looking down at the cup.

“To share,” Jamie re-iterated.

“Oh wow,” Cayden enthused as both boys looked at the cup as if it was some lost buried treasure.

“Lets go play whack-a-mole.” Tony looked at his friend smiling with a nod as the boys scurried off disappearing into the labyrinth of arcade games. Jamie stood up with a smile thinking he would go and join them in a minute.

“What was that?” Claire said giving Jamie a slap to the shoulder.

“What?” Jamie questioned.

“That stuff you were saying about Aiden,” Claire clarified. “You were making it sound like it was a good thing he wasn't here.”

“Maybe it is,” Jamie said. Claire raised an eyebrow at the comment. “Aiden is putting ideas in Tony's head that I don't

like," Jamie then said. Claire cocked her head. "Come with me," Jamie then said leading Claire away to a more quiet area to tell her about Aiden's offer.

Tony and Cayden emerged some time later with an armful of tickets and Claire had taken them to the prize counter to get them counted and pick out a prize. Both of them had settled on retractable multi-colored light sabers that lit up. They had immediately started a sword fight with one another before their Mom's intervened telling them it was time for pizza. Tony enjoyed the pizza as he and Cayden talked about the animals Tony had seen at the zoo. As Jamie watched Tony act so naturally as a five year old he had to wonder just what was going through his head. They had been there for about an hour and half now and Tony wasn't showing any signs of switching out of his childish mindset, he wondered if Tony had really been like this all day. Even when their Mom used a wet wipe to clean Tony's face of some sauce he didn't seem to get embarrassed as he usually did.

"Mommy, can me and Cayden go play now?" Tony asked as the meal winded down.

"Not quite," she said. Tony gave her a frown. "Its time for presents," his Mom said.

"Presents?" Tony questioned.

"You get presents on your birthday," Cayden said plopping down a wrapped gift in front of Tony.

"Didn't you know that?"

“Oh yeah,” Tony said nodding.

“Open this one first,” Cayden said slapping the gift. “Its mine.” Tony opened it to find a large t-rex figure in a box. “I got one too, so now we can play with them at daycare.”

“Thanks,” Tony said as he looked at the giant dinosaur with big eyes. As Tony opened up Claire's gift of of a sticker book and some markers with a robot toy, Jamie slyly removed the small package of some new ear pods he had brought Tony, seeing as he was not in the right space to receive them. Jamie had actually bought Tony two gifts but saw at the moment Tony would like the large tube of army men better. After presents were opened Tony and Cayden grabbed their swords and were ready to head to the play place.

“Nuh uh,” Cayden's Mom said. “You boys cannot take your swords in there.” Jamie was ready to intervene knowing this was just the sort of thing that would kick Tony right back into his adult mindset. Having their Mom tell Tony to do something was one thing but another person treating him like a little kid was a whole other thing.

“Cayden's Mommy is right,” Mom said. “You boys might hurt another kids swinging those around in there.” Both boys looked upset. Claire got between them putting an around both of them.

“You don't need swords to have fun in the ball pit, right?” she asked. Tony and Cayden looked at one another for a moment before they went and handed the swords over to their respective Moms. Claire then walked off with them to the

shoe cubbie to get their shoes off.

Jamie and his Mom were sitting alone at the table as Cayden's Mom had gone to take a phone call. They had a view of the ball pit which Tony and Cayden were currently in, swimming around in the balls. Even Claire had climbed in and was throwing balls up in the air for them.

“So he's really been like this all day?” Jamie asked his Mom.

“Pretty much,” Mom said. “He was a little hesitant in the morning but I just told him to take a break for a day. I think its really worked.”

“I guess. I'm happy to see him get some time off from all the stress,” Jamie said. “But we really need to talk to him about Aiden.”

“I already told you,” Mom said. “Its Tony's choice.”

“I just feel like Aiden is influencing him,” Jamie said. Mom shook her head.

“I don't think he is,” Mom said. Jamie looked at his Mom with a frustrated look. “Tony still has enough adult sense in him to figure this out.”

“So what I'm just supposed to step aside and let Tony go and join some other family?” Jamie said, a hint of bitterness on his voice.

“I think you are forgetting who Aiden is,” Mom said. “He knows Tony in a way that we never can.”

“Its not like they are dating anymore,” Jamie said. “Besides regardless of if they were in relationship its not like that matters anymore, things have changed.”

“Oh, I guess if suddenly tomorrow you weren't able to be with Claire anymore you'd get over that just like that?” Mom said raising an eyebrow.

“No,” Jamie sputtered. “I didn't mean it like that.” Jamie looked over to the ball pit just in time to see Tony jump on top of Claire as both of them laughed. “I get that, I do. If I couldn't be with Claire I don't know what I would do. There would have to be some chance of closure.” The more Jamie talked the more he was starting to see his Mom's point.

“Tony and Aiden didn't get that chance. Maybe their still figuring out how to say goodbye,” Mom said. “Or perhaps they never were meant to.” Mom's words hit Jamie like a ton of bricks. He knew that feeling, its what he felt for Claire – meant to be together.

“I still want to talk to Tony though,” Jamie said quietly.

“And I think you should. Tony doesn't seem completely comfortable with Aiden's offer. It would be good to let him know that you will support him with whatever his life turns out to be,” Mom said. “But save it for later.” Jamie looked at his Mom questioningly. It seemed like too important of a thing to sit on. Tony didn't have the luxury of time. “I just mean don't push him today,” Mom clarified. “He's been having a good day, why ruin it for him.” Jamie nodded as his attention turned back to his brother who had a big smile on

his face at the moment without nary a care in the world.

The time to leave came soon enough. It was getting late, 7:30 to be exact. Since it was a weekend neither mother seemed all that concerned with getting their little one into bed soon, but that didn't mean that the boys sleepiness wasn't still present, no more observable when Cayden gave a big yawn as his Mom helped him get his shoes. Tony stood next to his own Mom, he wasn't far behind Cayden as he rested his head against his Mom's side. Goodbyes were said as Tony walked out with his Mom, Jamie, and Claire. As they got nearer to his Mom's car Tony remembered the car seat. A pang of embarrassment hit him. He pulled on his Mom's sleeve causing her to stop as he motioned for her to lean down so he could whisper in her ear that he didn't want Jamie to see the car seat. His Mom gave him a sympathetic smile.

“Jamie do you think you could take Tony's gifts back in your car?” she asked already handing over the gifts to her slightly confused son.

“What not enough room in your car,” Jamie said rather sarcastically.

“You're really going to make me carry them up to his dorm room all on my own?” she said.

“Well no, but if you want I could always take Tony back in my car, then you don't have to make the trip.” Jamie offered. Mom shook her head.

“You aren't going to steal my last thirty minutes of birthday

togetherness," Mom chuckled.

"Alright," Jamie nodded. "I guess the student parking is closer so we'll get back before you anyways. I'll come and get Tony after though."

Mom said her thanks as the group separated.

"Thanks," Tony said with a sense of relief.

"Don't mention it," Mom said running a hand through his hair. Getting to the car Mom had kept the sticker book and set it in the back seat in case Tony wanted something to occupy himself with on the ride back. She then turned with a slightly apologetic look on her face.

"Tony I'm really sorry," she said. It was Tony's turn now to look confused. "I forgot to get you a gift," she said throwing up her arms a little.

"You didn't need to get me anything," Tony said as he gave a little hop to hug his Mom around her waist. "Today was really fun, I think I really needed it." Mom smiled as she lifted him up into her arms snuggling him a little, before placing him in his carseat and strapping the buckles together which Tony didn't make any fuss about.

On the drive back Tony looked out the window watching the streetlamps pass by. How could his Mom even of thought he would care about not getting him a gift? It was so silly, especially after taking him out for the day. She had given him one of the best days ever. Somehow she had known just what he needed, more so than he himself had. Sure they had

arguments in the past, what parent and child didn't? But at those moments when they needed her she had always known just the right thing to do. She really was the best Mom, that was solidified fact in his mind. The day had mad him feel complete, like everything was just as it should be. He knew what he had to do to stay like this, to have that form of security and comfort in his life. It would be three words, that's all he would have to say. Take me home, if he said that he knew this would all be over. He wouldn't have to agonize in uncertainty anymore. He also knew it would be fleeting.

The little boy Tony was becoming would be happy growing up back home with his Mommy, but he would grow up – that's when the guilt would come in. Tony busied himself with his sticker book on the way back. The day would soon be over and he decided to capitalize on the time he had left. It would be back to reality tomorrow.

Mom pulled into the visitor parking lot and Tony saw Jamie was already there walking towards the car. He panicked as Jamie was coming right for the backdoor. Mom turned around quickly reaching from the front to get Tony undone from the carseat.

“Hop out quick,” Mom said as Tony heard the locks unclick. He opened the door jumping down to the ground and shutting the door quickly as to not give Jamie a look inside. Tony took in a breath, once again, his Mom had known just what to do.

“Hey dude, I put your gifts up in my room for now, I'll bring them over tomorrow.” Jamie said.

“Oh yeah that sounds good,” Tony said taking a step away from the car not wanting Jamie to get too close. Tony knew it was kind of silly to be like this. He knew Jamie wouldn't make fun of him. But he still didn't want him to know. When Tony was finally a little boy through and through it wouldn't even be issue, but right now it was.

“Can't forget these,” Mom said coming around the other side of the car with Tony's backpack stuffing the toy tractor and sticker book inside before she put it on his back. “And your parrot and mask,” Mom said slipping his tiger mask so that it was on the side of his head and his parrot in his arms.

“Oh are those the ones you got at the zoo?” Jamie asked. Tony nodded. The mask and parrot weren't such a big deal, he had already told Jamie all about them at dinner.

“Now where is my hug and kiss?” Mom asked kneeling down next to Tony who dutifully fulfilled the request. “I'll see you tomorrow for breakfast before I leave,” Mom said standing back up. Part of Tony wanted to ask if he could go back to the hotel room with his Mom for the night. He relented. It might be too much of a good thing. He needed to get back some semblance of his adult side and that was becoming harder to do around his Mom, he still had business to take care of. Mom departed as Jamie walked with Tony back to his dorm room. Tony seemed a little chipper as he walked along.

“Guess you got your second wind,” Jamie laughed.

“I guess so,” Tony said smiling. “There's no way I'll be able to fall asleep when I get back, I'm staying up late,” Tony

declared.

“Aiden will probably put you right to bed,” Jamie said although his comment wasn't without a hint of warning. “Its so late after all.”

“He lets me stay up late sometimes,” Tony said raising an eyebrow. Although the ominous warning did not go unnoticed. Tony certainly wouldn't put it past Aiden. “I'll just tell him about everything I did today, that should buy me at least an hour,” Tony said self-assuredly of his plan.

“Hey Tony,” Jamie then said. “My roommate is out of town for the weekend. If you wanted to you could spend the night with me, instead.”

“I don't know,” Tony said sound unsure. “I mean I haven't really gotten to see Aiden at all today,” Tony did have things he needed to discuss with him.

“Oh c'mon,” Jamie said prodding a little. “He gets to see you everyday and I feel like we've barely spent anytime together. Plus its tradition.”

“Tradition?” Tony questioned.

“Yeah you know,” Jamie said smiling. “Brother sleepover.” Tony nodded. He had honestly forgotten all about that one. On special occasions such as birthdays or Christmas eve the brothers would sleep in the same room. Neither one of them really knew how it started, but they hadn't done that since before middle school. Yet tradition was tradition and besides Jamie was right. It had been awhile since they had spent time

one on one and for more than an hour or so.

“Well okay,” Tony agreed.

“Great,” Jamie smiled as he changed directions towards his dorm.

“Uh wait,” Tony yelped. “What about my jammies... or I mean like a change of clothes.” Jamie raised an eyebrow at Tony's use of the childish name for pajamas.

“You can just sleep in your underwear,” Jamie said waving a hand. Tony's face went red. The thought of sleeping in just his underwear around his brother sort of unnerved him, mostly because he was currently wearing a pair with Buzz Lightyear on them.

“I would prefer having something else,” Tony said meekly.

“Oh alright,” Jamie sighed. “We'll stop by your place first.”

“Yeah,” Tony said feeling as if he had sidestepped a particularly humiliating scenario. “Plus I gotta ask Aiden if its okay.” Jamie's frowned deeply at the comment.

“You mean let him know where you're going to be,” Jamie corrected. “You know you don't have to ask his permission to come and see me, right?”

“Oh yeah of course not,” Tony said. Jamie nodded. Although he did feel a little angry. If Tony chose to go with Aiden it would become a thing. The though of having to run plans through Aiden to see Tony in the future did not sit well with the younger brother, not one bit.

They got up to Tony's room. Tony knocked on the door. It opened revealing Aiden in a t-shirt and sweat pants.

“There's the birthday boy,” Aiden exclaimed wrapping Tony up into hug before carrying him into the room. “Did you have fun?” Aiden asked, plopping Tony down on his bed.

“Yeah,” Tony chirped. “I went to the zoo and then we got pizza and I got gifts.”

“Sorry I missed it bud, I really wanted to be there,” Aiden said mussing up Tony's hair.

“Its okay, you were busy,” Tony said. “But thanks for the tractor.”

“Glad you like it,” Aiden smiled before he looked over noticing Jamie was still standing by the door.

“Why don't you go say bye to Jamie so he can get out of here.”

“Actually –“ Jamie went to say a voice laced with a snarky tone. But Tony was quick enough to cut him off.

“I'm going to have a sleepover with Jamie,” he said. Aiden looked down at him with an interested look. “Its kind of a tradition we have,” Tony said mumbling just a little.

“I see,” Aiden said, it looked almost as if the gears in his head were turning at rapid pace. Some form of anxiety overtook Tony for a moment. Was Aiden going to try and refuse him? Come up with some excuse as to why Tony couldn't go. Aiden then smiled. “Don't let me get in the way of tradition.”

he said taking Tony's backpack off his back as he went to the dresser. “I'll pack you some jammies and then you can be on your way.” Tony slid off his bed and went and stood by Jamie. Aiden came over a moment later handing the backpack to Jamie before kneeling down with the stuffed parrot in his hand. “You want this?” he asked looking at Tony.

“Oh well sure,” Tony said taking his parrot.

“You'll have to tell me about him tomorrow, does he have a name?” Aiden asked. Tony felt a little awkward at the moment. The parrot indeed did have a name. Tony had decided to call him Paddy, just like the real one he had met at the zoo. At that moment though he didn't really feel like revealing it. Aiden then hugged him.

“Have a good night, buddy. Love ya,” Aiden said giving Tony a kiss to the cheek. With that Tony and Jamie left. As they walked towards Jamie's room Tony knew something was up. He wasn't an idiot and Jamie wasn't exactly a master at masking his emotions, Tony knew his brother well enough to know that something was bothering him. He also was well aware it had something to do with Aiden,

Back in the room Jamie had been practically radiating some sort of ire in the direction of Aiden short of actually glaring at him. Tony didn't really know the best way to bring it up though. The other question was how worth it was it at the moment? Tony could feel the tense atmosphere and knew it was like playing with fire if he tried to engage it. He didn't really want to possibly get into a fight with Jamie. Perhaps

the worst part of it all was that Tony was feeling all the more like a little kid at the moment. An adult was angry.

The childish instinct to remain as quiet as possible was keeping him silent, lest he get caught on the reviving end of adult frustrations that had nothing to do with him in the first place was a very real possibility in his mind. Tony shook his head a little at the thought. He was still an adult, he shouldn't be thinking like this. A twinge of embarrassment hit him as he thought at how little he had been acting all day. Once he had let go just a little he had fallen in face first and now that his Mom wasn't around radiating her maternal nature he was finding it harder to maintain such a carefree attitude. Tony was about to say something before realizing they were in front of Jamie's door.

“Ready to continue the fun,” Jamie said. Tony nodded as he followed Jamie into his room. Whatever was bothering Jamie would fade soon, Tony knew his brother.

Jamie's dorm wasn't any different in its set up than Tony's own. Jamie's side of the room was rather spartan. His bed was made neatly and his work uniform was hung up on his closet door. There was also a large dresser with a plastic bin of food on top along with a microwave. The other side of the room had large band poster's decorating the wall and the bed was disheveled.

“My roommate is gone all weekend,” Jamie said. “Although I think it would be best if we don't mess with his side, hope you don't mind bunking with me?”

“That's fine,” Tony said. “They had slept in the same bed on numerous occasions, such as hotel rooms or while visiting relatives, although it had been more than a couple of years since they last shared a bed.

“Okay well,” Jamie said looking at his watch. “Its getting late so I don't think we can really start a big party, a movie and some popcorn sound good?”

“Sure,” Tony said smiling. Whatever had been pricking at Jamie had for the moment seemed to subside.

“Cool,” Jamie said unzipping Tony's backpack. “Probably should get our pajamas on first,” he said dumping out the contents of Tony's bag. On the bed was a pair of yellow pajama pants along with a Cat in the Hat themed pajama top. That didn't bother Tony, what did however was the pull-up that was now on top of them. Tony's eyes widened upon seeing it. Jamie himself looked a little surprise. He hadn't been privy to Tony's night-time issues as Tony had made Aiden swear it to secrecy. Which Aiden had respected except for Tony's Mom of course whom he made fully aware of how Tony was doing without Tony's knowledge. She was his Mom after all and Aiden respected her station. Jamie picked up the pull-up looking at Tony with a raised eyebrow.

“You wear this?” he asked, his question being one of clarification rather than in any way accusatory, a distinction that did not register with Tony at the moment.

“No...I-I, don't” Tony flustered as his face turned three shades of red in quick succession. For some reason his regression

seemed to bother him if anyone knew but it seemed to bother him more if it was in front of Jamie, his little brother.

“Its not like...” Jamie began.

“I don't wear those,” Tony screeched. “Aiden makes me.” A lie, a total lie and Tony knew it more than anyone.

“He what?” Jamie questioned, his face taking a hardened look. “Are you serious?” Tony took in a few sharp breaths. He knew throwing Aiden under the bus like this was wrong. But how else could he save face. Jamie's looked at the pull-up in his hand and then at Tony. As much as he wanted to be mad at Aiden, even he could detect the obvious lies of a panicked little boy.

“Tony I need you to be straight up with me,” Jamie said. Tony knew he was cornered there was nowhere to go. His little kid mind had not totally evaporated yet. Perhaps if he was back in his adult mode he could have come up with something more plausible or actually been mature enough to accept the reality of his situation, but he wasn't, and so he did what came naturally to him. He cried.

Loud shrieking cries as his eyes shut and tears rolled down his face turning red. Jamie's eyes widened as he dropped the pull up and grabbed Tony. Jamie sat on the ground with Tony in his lap facing away from him. A hand went over his mouth. Not to stop his breathing but to muffle the sound. Jamie tried fruitlessly to soothe Tony, but it didn't seem to matter a lick.

“Tony you gotta stop,” Jamie said after a minute. “You're going to get the RA called on me.” Tony managed to quell his sobs enough after a few long moments, yet Jamie's hand remained over his mouth. “Euggh,” Jamie yelped withdrawing his hand. “Don't lick my hand you creep.” Tony only responded with some raspy breathing. Tony got to his feet as Jamie's hold on him was loose enough that he wasn't actually holding Tony down. Tony stood letting the last few stray tears fall off his cheek. His mind was mush. He didn't know how to feel, how to react, what to even say? He turned and looked at Jamie who had his hands behind him to hold himself up. They looked at each other for a long time neither one of them quite knew what to say. Jamie finally straightened up.

“I'm not going to make you wear it,” Jamie said. “I'm not like Aiden you know.”

“Are you mad at him?” Tony finally asked. A slight scowl played across Jamie's face.

“Yeah, I am, especially if he is treating you like this,”

“I need it,” Tony admitted quickly as if tearing off a bandage. Tony's head hung low in shame not even able to look up to see his brother's reaction. Jamie blinked for a moment.

“Well if you need it then whatever,” Jamie said getting up. “Lets just get dressed.” he said making his way over to his closet.

“That's it, that's all you have to say,” Tony yelped as his head

shot up.

“Yeah,” Jamie shrugged. “Whats the big deal?”

“Its embarrassing,” Tony mumbled.

“If you need it then its whatever,” Jamie said unbuttoning his shirt as he got it off and pulled on a loose fitting grey t-shirt. “Its nothing to make a big deal about.”

Tony turned away as his brother took off his pants. He went to the pile of clothes on the bed. He got himself dressed up quickly into his pull-up and pajamas. Jamie's non-plussed reaction made Tony feel a little better, yet it was fleeting as he found himself looking a this brother in a shirt and sweat pants while he was done up in a brightly colored pair of Cat in The Hat pajama with an obvious bulge at his crotch.

“I know I look stupid,” Tony said.

“You look fine,” Jamie said placing a hand on top of Tony's head for a moment as he walked past to sit on his bed cross legged and pulled his laptop on to his lap. Tony didn't move. Maybe this had been a bad idea. He knew Jamie wasn't going to make fun of him, part of Tony wanted him too. If only to confirm that this wasn't normal. “Are you going to stand there all night looking miserable?” Jamie asked. Tony looked over at his brother who was patting a spot on the bed next to him. Tony let out a sigh before crawling into the bed to take a seat next to his brother.

“Oh almost forgot,” Jamie said crawling over Tony to get out of the bed. He went back to his dresser and started to pop

some popcorn in the microwave. After he got it into a bowl he went into the mini-fridge by the foot of the bed and grabbed two cans of some sort of fruit-punch. Which was no surprise to Tony. It was a drink that Jamie favored, his brand as it were. Getting back into his spot in the bed Jamie opened one of the cans and handed it too Tony.

“Try not to spill in the bed,” Jamie said. Tony looked down noticing a red stain on the sheets.

“Like you did?” he asked in ribbing manner.

“Its my bed I can spill if I want,” Jamie laughed. Tony had his drink sitting on the end table near him while Jamie's was leaned precariously on the headboard behind him. No doubt where the can that had left the stain on the bed had been before it fell. “What to watch, what to watch,” Jamie mused to himself as he went through several options on his laptop. Tony wasn't paying much attention. He kept on thinking about how Jamie had been acting. At this point it almost felt like he was overcompensating. Doing everything to make Tony feel like there was nothing but normal stuff going on. In a weird way it was almost as if he was trying to ignore that Tony was a little kid. Sure he had called out Cayden to a birthday dinner and he had also picked out such a spot in the first place. Granted if Tony was still twenty two years old Jamie would have never suggested this in the first place, but had he done it because Tony was for all intents five years old or as Tony suspected there was an ulterior motive. Getting him away from Aiden? Jamie and Aiden weren't friends, more acquaintances given their relationship to Tony, but they

had always been friendly with one another. Tonight had been the first time in ever that Jamie had ever said something that could be viewed as negative about Aiden. Maybe that's the reason why Jamie's dismissing of Aiden not being at the pizza place had seemed bigger than it was. Tony had his suspicions as to why.

“She told you didn't she?” Tony asked staring down at the bedspread he was covering his lower half with. Jamie looked over at Tony before sighing as he pushed the laptop of to the side.

“Yeah, I know all about it,” There wasn't a need for any clarifying questions of any sort. They both knew.

“Are you mad at me? I mean for even considering it,” Tony said. Jamie shook his head.

“I'm not mad at you,” Jamie said. “I'm mad at Aiden for dangling that in front of your face.” Tony's face screwed up.

“Oh because I'm a little boy who can't make his own decisions.” Tony said.

“I didn't mean it like that,” Jamie said taking a large swig from his can before setting it back on the headboard. “Look lets not talk about this right now.”

“No, we need to talk about it,” Tony said firmly using his big brother voice. Jamie rolled his eyes a little.

“Okay,” Jamie said. “I promised Mom I wouldn't until later, so if she asks this was your idea.”

Tony nodded.

“So why exactly are you mad at him?” Tony asked. Did he really want the answer to that? Or was he just some sort of masochist that wanted it confirmed for his very own ears that Tony was indeed playing with the idea of abandoning his family.

“I think you're in a pretty vulnerable spot right now,” Jamie said. “And don't take that like I think you're a little kid or anything. I just mean I think you don't feel like you have a lot of options at the moment and Aiden is doing everything to make you think that he is the best you're going to get.”

“Its not a bad plan,” Tony said quietly. “If you think about it.”

“That's not true,” Jamie said defensively.

“His parents have money, they could take care of me and then Mom wouldn't have to be put on the spot, I can't just intrude on her again, it wouldn't be fair. I know she tries to deny it but its true, It would be a problem for her. This is my only choice where I won't become a bother to her. Aiden is all I got.” Jamie was silent before he turned to Tony looking him dead in they eye.

“You got me,” Jamie said. Tony pursed his lips.

“You couldn't,” Tony said.

“I could too,” Jamie said sounding almost angry. “Whats the problem?”

“You're too young,” Tony said looking away.

“I'm just as old as Aiden.”

“Its different you're...” Tony trailed off. Jamie waited for him to finish his sentence yet Tony had gone silent.

“You're younger brother,” Jamie said finishing what Tony had been about to say. Tony nodded. Both of them understood the significance of it. It explained so much about their relationship and how they had been acting towards one another. The reason why Tony felt more embarrassed about his slips into his little kid mindset around Jamie more than anyone else. On the other side of the coin it showed why Jamie was the most hesitant to treat Tony like a little kid. The way he was never able to commit to it more so than on a surface level, almost like he did it to keep up some facade.

“I could still do it though,” Jamie said. “I could take care of you,” Jamie said.

“What about school? Your job? Money?” Tony said going back into the same argument. Jamie shook his head.

“That's not what its about and you know it.” Jamie said. Tony hung his head. Yeah, he was right. His other objections were valid, but underneath them perhaps subconsciously was the root of Tony's refusal. His Mom was his Mom she would always be she had taken care of him before. Aiden had been his boyfriend for two years, they were still figuring one another out, there relationship hadn't yet crystallized into defined roles, maybe that's why it felt easier to change. But he and Jamie's roles had been defined long ago, they weren't supposed to change. Tony was the big brother who was

supposed to look out for his younger brother. Overwriting that felt unnatural. The act of doing so almost felt like the last nail in the coffin. The last connection Tony had to his old life. Maybe that's why he was even still considering Aiden's offer, something that would make it so they didn't have to separate out of each others life. Tony had lost everything. His years of work, gone, his future, set way back. He had been through so much to get to the point where he had been and now he was desperately hanging on to the two things that connected him to his old life, to the person he had been.

“Jamie” Tony said with the voice of a church mouse. “I appreciate what you are trying to do, but there are other reasons that Aiden might be better.”

“Name one,” Jamie said.

“I know I'm going to have to grow up again, and I guess I'm kind of scared of that. I mean I know there are good things about becoming a little kid. Today with Mom at the zoo. I had fun...like more fun than I've had in a long time. It felt good. Being with Mom just felt right, like there was nothing to worry about.”

“She wants you back,” Jamie said almost as if he was reassuring Tony that the answer he had given to a math question was correct. “Maybe she is the person you need to be with.”

“That's the little kid part of me though,” Tony said. “He has no idea whats coming, but the adult me does. He knows what the future is. He knows about all the mistakes I'm going to

make, all the hard stuff I'm going to deal with."

"It would be a little different this time, though," Jamie said.

"That doesn't actually make me feel a whole lot better. I don't like the unknown quantitys."

"I guess I'll concede you on that point," Jamie said.

"People are a mix of things they are and things they experience," Tony said. Jamie nodded. He knew he was talking to his older brother right now. "I'm gonna grow up again, but what if I don't become the same person I was, it would be like I died."

"Tony, you'll still be you, its not like you're disappearing. The me I am now will be different in ten years but I'll still be me," Jamie said. Tony let out a grunt. He knew that of course, it was becoming difficult for him to try and get his point across.

"All I'm trying to say is that I don't want to lose the part of me that was made because of the past. The part that was made because of how I related to you and Mom and Aiden. Maybe that's why I want Aiden around. He is the most important person to me right now," Tony said. "No offense."

"I get it," Jamie chuckled.

"I just think being around him would be sort of a reminder. A reminder of that old part of me. He's only known me as the person I am now, he doesn't have some different version of me in his head like you and Mom."

Jamie was silent for a moment. It was hard to hear this. Just

knowing this was what Tony had been wrestling with this whole time, all on his own. Jamie felt guilty. He should have realized it. He hadn't even thought about what Aiden meant to Tony until his Mom had mentioned it earlier in the evening. How could he have been so blind! He should have been there for Tony. He should have been there to offer him a kind ear. To help Tony work through all this. But he hadn't been. He had been too busy with work and school. Had he been avoiding Tony? Had he kept his distance because he didn't want to admit that he was going to lose his older brother, the person who had always been there for him. Jamie groaned at himself. Tony had needed him like he had needed Tony in the past, and what had he done? Give him an hour here and there? No wonder Tony didn't trust him.

“Tony I'm so sorry,” Jamie said. “I should have been there for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Tony said cocking his head. “You've been helping me all the time. You went to the hospital with me, you rescued me from that school and...”

“No,” Jamie said. “I should have been here more.”

Tony pursed his lips.

“Listen Tony. I want to take care of you. I want to help you. I want to help you discover the person you're supposed to be. You've watched out for me all these years. So now I want to be there for you the way you were for me.” Jamie put his hands on Tony's shoulders. “All this stuff about older or younger doesn't matter. At the end of the day we are brothers.

We will always be a part of each others lives. We are always going to be brothers no matter what.”

Tony looked at Jamie with a blankless expression. He didn't know how to respond. He finally responded by leaning in and hugging Jamie.

“Thanks Jamie.” he said. “I got a lot to think about still, but thanks.”

The brothers never watched the movie or even touched the popcorn. Instead they were lying back in the bed. Both of them were utterly exhausted. Tony's head had found its way onto Jamie's chest his eyes were closed not quite awake, but not asleep. Jamie had a hand on the top of Tony's head. The room had been filled with a tense atmosphere but it had dissolved into peace. Jamie knew that Tony hadn't made any decision yet, he could still very well choose Aiden. Jamie had made his case though, of that he could be happy.

“Jamie,” Tony sleepily whispered.

“Yeah,” Jamie asked.

“I love you,” Tony said nuzzling a little deeper into Tony's chest. Jamie smiled. They didn't really say such things to each other. They were close yet spoken declarations of their love for one another was not something they had done. It had always been weird or too mushy for either one of them to say such a thing.

“I love you too bro,” Jamie said closing his eyes. Tony felt Jamie's hand fall away from his head. He let himself just

enjoy the moment of feeling safe and content with his brother. He had a big decision to make, but right now was not the time to analyze and weigh the pro's and cons. He was supposed to be taking a break that day. So right now he was just going to let himself fall asleep. Tomorrow he would surely have his answer shining brightly there in front of him for the taking.

Chapter 11

Adventures in Genetics: Part 11 - Chapter 11

A Different Matter

Tony shivered a little in the cool morning air. Jamie was beside him. The morning wasn't that entirely cold but given the fact that Tony was only wearing the thin pajamas he had on from last night wasn't exactly helping, that and the wet pull-up. Tony knew he should have changed, Jamie knew what he was wearing and it wasn't exactly much of a secret that he had used it. Tony was over that embarrassment.

They were walking back to Tony's dorm, it was a short walk. Plus there wouldn't be many people walking around campus on a Saturday morning. Most of the other students were probably still hung over in bed from Friday night, nursing themselves up for round two tonight. The other reason was Tony was far more pre-occupied within his own thoughts to really care. He had expected to wake up refreshed and renewed. Ready to finally look at his situation with a renewed sense of vision. To see what he hadn't seen before. What he found though hadn't been what he wanted. Jamie had gotten through to him last night. Had convinced him that he was a viable option to take him. That was where the problem came. It dawned on Tony now what his three choices were. Between his Mom, Aiden and Jamie, there was no doubt that they all loved him, that they all wanted him. It should have been a

touching thought. Tony saw it the other way. He had a choice between the three people that loved him the most in the world. That also meant whoever he chose, he would hurt the other two. Overnight his choice had gone from hard to almost impossible. No matter what he was going to have to hurt people he cared about.

Tony ever ensnared in his own thoughts was on auto-pilot as he walked and if it wasn't for Jamie announcing out loud that they were here he very well would have walked face first right into his own door. Jamie knocked on the door and a few moment later Aiden opened it up. He smiled upon seeing Tony.

“Still in your jammies, eh,” Aiden chuckled.

“I was going to have to change anyways,” Tony mumbled.

“Yeah,” Aiden said. “You're right, come on it and I'll help you get changed.” Tony walked in as Jamie followed closely behind tossing Tony's backpack that he had been carrying onto the bed.

“He can get dressed himself you know,” Jamie said. Tony had already slipped off his shoes leaving him barefoot. His toes curled a little. He could hear the ire in Jamie's voice having returned from last night.

“I know,” Aiden said not having picked up on it and replying in good nature. “But he likes it when I help.”

“Did he say that or did you just decide that?” Jamie asked. Aiden looked down at Tony for a moment before shrugging.

“Well no, but he doesn't complain so I just figured.” Aiden said.

“He had no problem doing it last night,” Jamie said.

“Okay,” Aiden said looking at Tony. “You can get dressed by yourself if you want or I can help, you decide.” Tony nodded. He really didn't mind one way or the other. Its not like he really thought about it all that much. Although it was good to know that he had the option.

“I would really appreciate if you asked his opinion instead of just deciding for him in the future,” Jamie said his voice tense, yet restrained.

“Did Tony complain or something about me?” Aiden asked. Tony looked up alarmed at Aiden who was looking at him with a suspicious look. Tony shook his head vehemently.

“No, not exactly,” Jamie said, the only actual complaint Tony had leveled at Aiden had been a lie so it didn't really count.

“So then you're the one who is mad at me?” Aiden asked crossing his arms a little as he looked at Jamie.

“I wouldn't say that,” Jamie said. “I just think it would be better if you didn't make decisions for Tony especially without talking to me about it.”

“I get your his brother and everything,” Aiden said. “But given I'm with Tony a lot more I think it would be a bit much for me to run every decision through you. Logistically speaking.”

“I was talking more big picture stuff,” Jamie retorted. “Like enrolling him in a daycare for instance.”

“Its a drop in center,” Aiden said. “Also its not like I did that just because. You know Tony shouldn't be left unsupervised. Besides I cleared it with your Mom after the first day when it seemed like a good idea. You're also on his pick-up list so you can get him out of there if you ever have the time.”

Tony felt his stomach twist up as he saw the twitch hit Jamie's eye. Aiden had given him a small dig. In most situations Jamie probably wouldn't have even responded. But Tony knew Aiden had just set off the explosion. Jamie had his axe to grind before last night and now Aiden had just tempted him in the worst way.

“You really seem to think Tony is a little kid.” Jamie said. The fuse was snaking its way up to the powder keg.

“I'm just helping him the best I can,” Aiden responded.

“But if he is a little kid,” Jamie said. “THEN I DON'T THINK YOU SHOULD BE TRYING TO CONVINCE HIM TO LEAVE HIS FAMILY YOU PSYCHO,” The keg had exploded. Aiden looked back with wide eyes in a moment of astonishment. His nostrils flared for a moment. Before a slightly embarrassed look came to his face.

“Its his choice,” Aiden said quietly. “I just thought it was a good idea.”

“Good idea!” Jamie exclaimed. “You've been gas lighting him this whole time so that he thinks its his only choice.

That's what creeps do to little kids.”

“Oh, now who is sounding like they are treating Tony like a little kid,” Aiden fired back. “I was just giving him an option since he didn't want to go back to his Mom. I was helping.”

“HELPING,” Jamie roared.

“YEAH HELPING,” Aiden responded. Tony stood in between Aiden and Tony as they went back and forth. With each salvo he felt his throat tighten, his stomach clench. His sides were aching. Jamie and Aiden were at each others throats and in a few seconds that might cease to become a figure of speech and become reality. Tony tried to interject, yet his feeble attempts at mediation were completely drowned out. Tony took a step back. He couldn't take it. Jamie and Aiden were fighting and it was his fault. It was his fault because he couldn't make a decision. It was his fault because he couldn't choose. It was his fault, none of this would be happening if not for him. It was his fault that he had taken the serum against Dr. Pai's wishes. It was his fault that he kept trying to hold on to his old life, it was his fault that nothing was working. It was his fault that he couldn't do anything for himself.

“IT”S MY FAULT” Tony shrieked. Jamie and Aiden came to a stop before looking down at Tony. He could see the looks on their faces. Filled with pity he could almost hear the words that either one of them would say. Tell him that they weren't mad at him, that he didn't do anything wrong. Tony couldn't hear that. He didn't want them to lie to him. He couldn't stop

them. That's when Tony did the only thing he could think to do. He ran.

Where? Nowhere. Anywhere. It didn't matter. He was trying to outrun the feeling of guilt. He was out the door and down the hall before the others could even react. He went down the side exit. The door was closed behind him just as he heard someone shout his name after him. He kept on down the stairs. He was in the lobby of the dorm and then outside. He ran, his bare feet plodding on cold rough cement, yet he didn't stop. When you are trying to outrun a feeling no where is too far.

Tony finally came to a stop. Sweat was caking his body, his feet hurt and each step sent pain into his cold limbs. He breathed hard, his breath forming out clouds on the cold air of the morning. He kept walking, aimless.

“Little boy are you alright,” a voice called out. Tony looked up and saw a few paces away from himself was a girl and guy. Both of them wore slightly confused expressions. Why wouldn't they. He was dressed only in his pajamas. His wet pull-up was no doubt noticeable under the thin pajama pants. He didn't have shoes or a coat. Anyone would look at the scene and know something was indeed wrong. Tony went to say something but found he couldn't seem to even muster up a response in between his panting. “Are you lost,” the girl said kneeling down. “Are your parents around here?” Tony shook his head. The girl extended out a hand out to him like he was some stray cat she was trying to coax closer. Tony took a step back. The girls face showed the faintest hint of

panic. Tony didn't wait for it to resister fully he turned and was back running again. He bounded around a corner. He could hear the pursuers footsteps, he knew he couldn't outrun them. He dived into a row of bushes. Making himself as small as possible. From within his hiding spot he watched them rush past.

“Where the hell did he go?” the man said.

“He couldn't have gotten far,” the woman said. “We gotta find him.”

“Yeah,” the man agreed. Tony didn't even dare to breath as they went past. When he was sure they were gone he came out of his spot. Leaves finding themselves in his hair and one or two strays sticking to his clothes. Tony walked along coming to the back area of the campus. It was quite here, there wasn't anyone around. He came to a crossroads. One path lead over to the visitor parking and some storage buildings. The other lead off campus. Tony stood in the middle weighing his options. He had no reason to go wander around a parking lot. He also knew going off of campus would be monumentally stupid in his situation. He also didn't want to wander back onto campus, Jamie and Aiden were no doubt looking for him. Tony squatted down bringing his knees to his chest. There really was nowhere to go. He was stuck. He figured he would just wait for the inevitable. Someone would eventually find him. He would then be taken to the campus police or something as a lost child. He could run again, but he didn't have the energy. Adrenaline could only take one so far and besides his legs already felt like wet

noodles. He wouldn't get far.

“Stupid, stupid,stupid” he muttered under his breath. That was all he could repeat for the next several minutes.

“Tony?” A voice called out. Tony recognized it at once. He stood up whirring around to see his Mom standing with surprised look on her face. Tony frowned as he walked up to her. She knelt down to his level. Tony didn't say a word as he fell into her before wrapping his arms around her neck.

“What in the world are –“ she began before pausing. She went silent hugging him back tightly. She didn't make any shushing or cooing sounds. She just held him against herself. She could tell that he didn't need to be calmed or comforted by words. Right now he just needed to be hugged.

“You're cold,” Mom said softly as she leaned back taking off her light jacket and draping it over his shoulders before she picked him up off his feet. Tony put his head onto her shoulder. She began to sway back and forth, humming some song. It was familiar to Tony. She had hummed it a lot over his life. He had no idea what the song was called, or if it was even a real song. As his Mom rocked him she noted his feet which were black with dirt. She also saw the leaves sticking in his hair. She picked one out of his hair.

“You want to talk about it?” Mom asked. Tony shook his head burying his face deeper into her shoulder. “Okay, that's fine,” Mom said softly.

“Oh thank goodness.” Tony looked up to see the girl and guy

who had chased after him. Mom put her hand on Tony's head leading his head back down to her shoulder as she did all the talking, getting the whole story of their interaction.

“Thank you so much for looking out for him, but as you can see I got him now,” Mom said. The other two people were soon on their way. Tony let out a sigh, at some point he was going to have to talk.

“They were fighting,” Tony whispered.

“Who? Those two?” Mom asked.

“No, Jamie and Aiden.”

“I see,” Mom said. That was all Tony needed to say as his Mom let out sigh. She understood, or well understood enough.

“Mom!” A yelp sounded out. Tony looked up again to see Jamie and Aiden running towards them.

“Thank god you found him.”

“How in the world did you get all the way out here?” Aiden asked looking at Tony. If he hadn't looked so worried he might have looked impressed. Tony didn't respond only turning his head away and laying it back on his Mom's shoulder. His Mom took the hood and pulled it up over his head. Tony smirked underneath. Yet once again his Mom knew just what he wanted.

“I guess you want to know whats happening and why Tony is out here in his pajamas,” Jamie said.

“I think I know enough,” Mom said her voice becoming strict. “You two were carrying on and fighting and Tony ran away.” There was a silent pause in the air. “That sound about right?

“Well yeah,” Aiden said.

“We didn't know he was going to run though,” Jamie said a little more familiar with being on the receiving end of his Mother's anger.

“And why wouldn't he?” Mom asked. “You two were probably really going at it if it was enough to scare him so bad that he ran away.” Both of the boys sputtered a little before falling silent. Mom boosted Tony up a little in her arms before continuing. “Here is what is going to happen. I am taking Tony back to my hotel room to get him cleaned up. We will then be going to the Pancake Depot for breakfast,” she said as if she were a drill sergeant issuing orders. “You two are welcome to join us if and only if you figure out some way to act civilly with one another, is that understood?”

“Yes Mom,” Jamie said sounding like he had just been time warped back to elementary school.

“Understood Ms. McCallister,” Aiden said sounding in a similar situation.

“Good,” Mom said as she began to walk off. “I hope to see both of you there.”

Tony was in his Mom's arms being walked through the lobby of the hotel. His Mom had stopped by a dollar store to grab

some cheap clothes for him. Thankfully she hadn't insisted he come with her. She was in an out within a couple of minutes. She seemed pleased that they had clothes there to fit him. He hadn't spoken a word on the whole car ride there. Not that he had anything much to say. He didn't exactly feel great about everything that had transpired either. He hadn't been able to do anything except get him self into a bad situation. His Mom had to be the one to save him. He was powerless in all of this. It shouldn't be like this. It felt like everyone was in a raft trying to steer among the waves. Tony was the only one with a paddle but he just couldn't use it.

Tony was brought into a room and his Mom went directly into a bathroom. She set him on the feet as she took a seat in front of him on the toilet.

“Arm's up,” she said in a cheery tone. Tony didn't resist as he lifted his arms up so his Mom could remove his pajama top. He did let out a small yip when his Mom pulled down his pants. He had forgotten about the pull-up underneath. His face went a little red as he stepped out of the pants. His Mom knew all about it. She had even seen it before. That knowledge was really the only reason Tony didn't break down. That and the fact that for the first time he felt like he actually wanted her to take care of him like this.

“Oh my, you've been in that thing longer than usual,” Mom said as she started to pull away at the sides of the pull-ups. “All that running around to, I really hope you don't get a rash.” She had the pull-up off and Tony could not resist covering himself. Thankfully his Mom didn't make any sort

of comment about him not needing to be modest, that would have probably set him over the edge of humiliation.

“What are we even doing in here,” Tony said finding his voice at the strangest time.

“I'm going to give you a quick bath,” Mom said. “Oh silly me I didn't even start the tub.” She reached over turning on the water.

“I can do it myself,” Tony said.

“Probably on most days,” Mom smiled. “But I think this mess is going to require a little more scrubbing than usual.”

Tony groaned a little as he stood shivering waiting for the water to warm up. His Mom placed her hand under the running water before she reached over giving him a light pat on his butt.

“All warm,” she said. Tony got into the tub and sat down quickly as the water began to fill. His Mom cupped her hands and poured the warm water on his shoulders. Tony remained tensed, crouched over with his legs crossed. His Mom then took some soap and and started on his shoulders. She wasn't rubbing it instead she was massaging his shoulders. It felt good. Tony felt the tension melting from his bones. He let his legs splay out and his arms go limp at the sides. His Mom took one of his arms massaging the bicep and moving down to his forearm. She was humming that familiar tune again. Tony closed his eyes letting her do whatever she needed to. Some time later she dumped some water on him washing

away the soap. She wet his hair and took some shampoo to his hair massaging it in for several minutes. Tony wished she would never stop. After his hair was rinsed his Mom left the side for a moment before coming back with a washcloth.

“Alright lets see these feet,” she said. She plucked one foot out of the water and began to scrub the bottom of it. She was putting some real elbow grease into it. Tony was beside himself laughing. It tickled so much which only seemed to spur his Mom on more. By the time she had sufficiently scrubbed both feet Tony was gasping with tears in his eyes.

“I'd say you're all cleaned up now,” Mom said pulling the plug on the tub. She got up getting a towel from the rack and wrapping it up around Tony getting him dried off. Mom then went into her bag from the dollar store and pulled out a package of underwear. “They didn't have a whole lot of choices,” she said showing him a pack with three pairs, all of them decorated with childish designs.

“It was the dollar store,” Mom said.

“Its fine,” Tony mumbled.

“Which one would you prefer?” Mom asked ripping open the top of the package.

“I don't care,” Tony said shrugging. “Its just underwear.” Mom gave a little smile pulling out the first pair which had farm animals and a bright red waistband, handing them to Tony. He got them on as his Mom went back in the bag.

“Raise those arms up buckaroo,” Mom said with a plain green

shirt in her hand. Tony did as he was told. His Mom then went right in tickling him under his arms.

“Mommy stooop,” Tony shrieked and laughed.

“Sorry,” Mom said. “You were wide open. Now c'mon lets put your shirt on.”

“No more tickling,” Tony said holding his hands under his armpits, though still smiling.

“I promise not to tickle your arms anymore,” Mom said putting her hand over her heart. Tony lifted his arms again as his Mom put the shirt on him. She pulled it down a little. It was about a size too big.

“Guess you'll grow into this one,” Mom smirked.

“Yeah maybe,” Tony mumbled.

“What do you mean maybe?” Mom said as she tickled his tummy sending him back into fits of laughter. "You're going to shoot up like a beanstalk in no time."

“You promised no more tickling,” Tony fake whined.

“I said your arms, nothing about that tummy,” Mom said in a matter of fact way. She then tilted her head. “Do you forgive me?”

“Yeah,” Tony said as he hugged her not mad at her in the slightest. He needed the hugs, he needed the laughter. Mom then got him dressed in a pair of snug gray sweatpants.

“Go to the bed and we'll get your socks and shoes on,” Mom

said. Tony lead the way out into the room plopping himself up on top of the bed. His Mom grabbed his foot flipping him onto his back. She grabbed at each of his toes. “One little piggy, two little piggy,” she cooed grabbing at each toe before getting his sock on his foot before doing the same to the other foot. Once that was done she laid down next to him so their faces were looking at one another. “Doesn't mommy make getting dressed fun?” she asked.

“Mhmmm,” Tony said as she nuzzled their noses together.

“So is is safe to say you're feeling a little better?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Tony said. She really had made him feel better. For the moment Tony hadn't been thinking about the fight or really anything other than how happy he was to be with his Mom. He put a hand to her cheek his fingers working along some of the wrinkles. She was older than she had been back then of course, but at that moment it didn't feel like any time had passed. It was as if he had always been that little boy from so long ago.

“What'cha thinking about,” Mom asked. She could see the deep concentration on Tony's face.

“I was just thinking maybe,” Tony began pulling his hand away. “Maybe I should go back with you.” Mom smiled.

“No can do,” Mom said sitting up. Tony followed suit sitting up in surprise.

“But I thought that's what you wanted?” Tony questioned.

“Oh I do,” Mom said. “But that's not what you want,” she said ruffling up his hair. Tony crossed his legs putting his hands in his lap and looking down.

“Maybe I don't know what I want?” Tony said. “I just can't make this choice. No matter how hard I think about it.”

“Then stop thinking about it,” Mom said.

“But I can't,” Tony yelped. “I have to make a decision.”

“That's not what I mean. I know you're very smart,” she said putting a finger on his forehead, “And you've always tried to come to a logical reason for all your decisions. But this isn't a decision that needs logic, you need to listen to what's in here,” she said tracing her finger down to his chest. Tony scrunched up his face.

“That sounds hokey,” Tony said.

“Call it what you want,” Mom said. “This is a matter of the heart, not the head. You should listen to it.”

Tony sat for a moment. Maybe his Mom was right. He had gone around enough in his head, hit enough dead ends. Maybe the answer wasn't in there. He needed to search elsewhere. The only question was how?

Chapter 12

Adventures in Genetics : Final - Chapter 12

Figure it out

The breakfast at the Pancake Depot had started off quiet. Jamie and Aiden had both shown up. Aiden had even remembered to bring Tony his shoes, which was helpful since he had left them at the dorm upon running out. Jamie and Aiden had also given Tony sincere and heartfelt apologies. Tony had accepted them. The table had then looked at their menu's deciding what they wanted.

“The biscuits and gravy sound kind of good,” Jamie said.

“I think I gotta stick with the bacon and eggs,” Aiden said.

“What about you?” Jamie then asked looking at Tony.

“Huh,” Tony said looking up. He had been scribbling with a crayon on the paper kids menu.

“You should probably look at the menu dude,” Aiden chuckled. “We are here to eat.”

“Oh geez,” Mom said picking up the paper menu, and holding it out front so that both she and Tony could see it. “Mommy forgot, let me read out the menu for you.”

As Mom told Tony about his options both Aiden and Jamie looked at one another. Neither one of them knowing of this

new development.

“Umm I want the chocolate chip pancakes,” Tony said.

“And do you want one or two eggs?” Mom asked.

“No eggs,” Tony said.

“What? I though you like eggs.” Mom said.

“I don't like the gooey stuff,” Tony said scrunching up his face.

“Then just get them scrambled dear,” Mom suggested. Tony looked back at his Mom as if he suddenly remembered something.

“Oh...yeah that's good,” Tony said.

“And do you want bacon or sausage?” Mom then asked.

“Neither,” Tony said sticking out his tongue as he shook his head.

“Then you can get the fruit salad,” Mom said.

“Whats in it?” Tony said as his eyes narrowed in suspicion. Mom looked pulled up her glasses holding the menu closer.

“Looks like melon, grapes, blueberries and strawberries.”

“Oh ok,” Tony said smiling. As Jamie sat watching the exchange he wondered how he would have handled it, not as well as his Mom he was sure. Tony had always been peckish and picky. If Mom had'nt been there he and Tony probably would have gotten into an argument.

“Tony buddy,” Aiden then said. “Can you not read?”

“Nope,” Tony said seemingly unfazed.

“When did that happen?” Jamie then asked.

“I don't know,” Tony said. “Yesterday or maybe before that, I'm not sure.” The conversation ended there. What more was their to say on the topic. After breakfast the group found themselves in the parking lot. There was an awkward energy in the air. Both Aiden and Jamie seemed hesitant, waiting for someone to bring up what happened with Tony now. Was he going to want to stay with Jamie in his dorm or go back with Aiden as always. Even Tony himself knew they were expecting something out of him. They were standing at Mom's car.

“So,” Tony said rocking a little on the balls of his feet.

“So,” Jamie and Aiden said.

“I don't really know what to say, but sorry,” Tony said.

“Sorry for what, not for running away I hope,” Aiden said.

“Yeah, Tony that was totally not your fault,” Jamie said.

“No, not that,” Tony said. “I'm sorry for taking so long, you know to make up my mind.”

“Its a big decision,” Aiden said. “You just take your time.”

“Yeah so I just want you to know I love you both and that's what is making this so hard.” Tony said. “I think I just need to be alone for awhile, so I think I'm going to go back with

Mommy for a bit and think things through."

"Tony sweetie, I don't think that will work," Mom said placing a hand on top of his head. Tony looked up at her with a worried expression. "What I mean to say is that I never got a room set up for you back at the house, and besides all of your stuff is here."

"Well I don't need a room," Tony said. "And we can just take my stuff with me."

"Here is a better idea," Mom said kneeling down. "How about I take the week off and you can stay with me at the hotel for the time being?"

"You would take a week off for me?" Tony asked.

"They won't miss me for a week," Mom chuckled. "Plus I would like to spend some more time with you rather than just a couple of hours here and there." Mom then stood up. "That sound good to you boys?"

"Yeah, of course," Aiden said. Jamie gave a nod. Mom cocked her head slightly looking at Jamie.

"Aiden," Mom said. "Be a dear and get Tony in the car for me," she said.

"I can do that," Aiden said. Mom walked over to Jamie putting a hand on his shoulder as she lead him away. "Woah that looks like a space ship dude," Aiden exclaimed upon seeing the car seat.

"Its does not," Tony giggled a little. Jamie and his Mom came

to a stop.

“Whats on your mind?” Mom asked with a smirk.

“Geez am I that easy to read?” Jamie asked a little embarrassed.

“Only slightly better than Tony,” Mom said with a chuckle. Jamie didn't laugh.

“Maybe you should take Tony,” Jamie said. Mom's face took on a more serious look.

“Getting cold feet?” Mom questioned.

“Its not that I don't want him,” Jamie said. “I'm just starting to think he was right when he said I was too young. Aiden is too. I mean back their in the restaurant you got him to do what you needed him to do and made it look effortless. You just know how to handle him better than I could.”

“It doesn't happen overnight,” Mom laughed. “I'm sure there are times you can remember when I wasn't a perfect mother. Times when I got frustrated with you two?”

“Well yeah, but I mean... I guess I'm starting to think this is me problem. I mean I think that's why I've been distant towards him. I just don't know how to act in front of him.” Jamie said with a saddened look.

“You're not the only one. Aiden has been keeping me in the loop and I've had to give him more than a few pieces of advice.” Mom said before putting her hands on Jamie's shoulders. “Both of you have done a good job. Being a parent

isn't something you just learn overnight. Its on the job training. You've helped Tony in more ways than you will ever know.”

“Still he's going to be a little kid, don't you think he will need his Mom, just like the first time?” Jamie said.

“Tony will be a little kid, that s true. But it will be a little different this time.” Mom said. “And though it pains me to admit it. I don't think he is going to need me as much.”

“What do you mean?” Jamie asked.

“You and Tony have a bond, same with him and Aiden. Its a bond that I don't have. I'll always be his Mom, someone that has always been above him in a way. But you and Aiden were equal to him. And well...” Mom then paused before shaking her head. “Now I don't even know what I'm saying.” she said. “Honestly this made sense in my head when I thought about it,” she laughed. “I guess what I'm saying is that there are two Tony's and they need to be at peace with one another for him to be happy. You might be one of the few people in this world that will be able to help him. Does that make sense?”

“No,” Jamie said now it being his turn to laugh. “but I do feel better at least.”

Mom rolled her eyes with a smirk.

“If Tony wants me. Then I'll be there for him,” Jamie said a renewed sense of purpose in his voice.

“He will,” Mom said.

***

Tony sat atop the bed in his Mom's hotel room. The local morning news was playing. Tony wasn't really watching it. He had just been dressed for the day and his Mom was currently in the bathroom getting ready herself. Tony sighed.

He had been here for the last week. His Mom's work break would be coming to an end soon and Tony was no closer to his answer. He was just going back and forth in his head ad nauseam. He would seemingly end up at a conclusion before changing his mind, there was just no winning. There was no use in talking about it either. He had pretty much talked with his Mom about everything that now it would just be repeating what was already said. His Mom just kept telling him to try and not think so hard about it, he couldn't brute force this.

Tony laid back on the bed, picking up Paddy and holding him above himself. Aiden had come by one day to drop off Tony's toys and some clothes including Paddy. That had been fun as Aiden had sat and played with Tony for a bit while Mom took some time to take advantage of the spa. Jamie had also dropped in with a swimsuit for Tony and they had gone swimming in the hotel pool which had also been a lot of fun. That only made things harder for him. He knew he could be happy with either one of them, but this wasn't about happiness. It was about so much more than that. Tony looked into his stuffed parrots eyes.

“Weeelll?” Tony asked of his friend, yet the bird was silent. “Some help you are,” Tony grumbled tossing the parrot aside.

The answer was inside of him, of that he knew, he just had to figure out how he was going to get it out. He wished he could just rip it out. Put himself in such a state that it just came right out of him.

“Looking toward our forecast,” the meteorologist said on the tv. “We are going to be having some storms soon.” Tony sat up looking at the tv screen. He didn't like the sound of that. Tony had been utterly terrified of storms as a young child and it seemed that old fear had resurfaced now. He looked over to the bathroom door where he could hear his Mom humming. He was glad she was here. She would keep him safe. An idea then popped into his head. Tony froze as his brain formalized it. He shook his head. No way was he going to do that. Yet it nagged at him that this was his solution. He tried to figure out if this was just his child mind's version of a good idea. It made eerily too much sense in the moment, then again so had the one he had concocted to try and get kicked out of daycare. He just hoped he wouldn't come to find he was once again tricking himself into thinking he was making an adult decision.

“Tony,” Mom said coming out of the bathroom. “Can you get your shoes on for me?”

“Um Mommy,” Tony said as he held his hands behind his back while he swayed back and forth on his feet. “I kind of have a question to ask you.”

“Sure, sweetie what is is?” Mom asked smiling softly.

“I want to be alone today,” Tony said. Mom blinked a little.

“Well we have to go to the college today to finish a little paper work, but afterwards we can come back and we can take it easy in the room today.”

“No,” Tony said shaking his head. “I mean I want you to leave me here...alone.”

“Tony it won't take all day,” Mom began.

“But this is important,” Tony cut in. “I...I need to do this.” Mom was silent as her brows furrowed a little. She gave a little sigh as she knelt down to eye level with Tony.

“Don't get upset with me when I say this,” she said. “But you are too little for me to be leaving on your own.”

“Mommy,” Tony mewled. “I'm twenty two years old, I can take care of my self.”

“Tony,” Mom said, a hint of firmness finding its way into her voice. “I know there are times when you are perfectly capable of taking care of yourself, but even you have to admit that you act more like a little kid than an adult these days.”

“I know,” Tony said sounding a little teary. “But I really need to do this.”

“Do what?” Mom asked.

“Be alone, like really alone, like you can't be anywhere nearby. I need to be on my own.” Tony pleaded. Mom looked thoroughly unconvinced.

“I don think that would be safe,” Mom stated.

“Oh c'mon,” Tony said. “I would stay in the room, just how much trouble could I really get into?” Mom looked at him. The corners of her lips were going up and down. Tony knew he had her on the ropes. “Please, Mom. I have to do this.”

His Mom frowned as she stood up and went and grabbed her purse. “You have two hours, think that's enough time?”

“Yeah,” Tony smiled.

“You call if anything happens?” Mom said extending his cell phone to him. Tony pushed it away shaking his head.

“No, no safety net,” Tony said.

“And you're not going to tell me whats going on?” Mom questioned. Tony shook his head. “I'm really starting to not like this,” Mom said. “I'll leave but you understand I'm going to be gone, like not coming back, right?”

“Yep,” Tony nodded.

“Okay,” Mom said standing by the open door. “Good luck.”

“Thanks Mom,” Tony said. “For trusting me.”

“Always,” she said with a smile before she left leaving Tony alone.

Tony felt a rush as he heard her footsteps walking away. It had been ages since he had been left completely alone. He almost felt like he was getting away with something. Now he just had to wait.

***

Twenty minutes later the rain had started and Tony could feel his nerves tick with every patter of rain against the window. Then the thunder could be heard rumbling. Tony took a deep breath as doubt began to seep in. Maybe this hadn't been the greatest idea. As a particularly loud and bright flash of lighting filled the room he yelped diving under the covers. Yep this had been a really bad idea. The storm raged on. Tony was beginning to cry. How could he have been so stupid? He had gotten what he wanted but of course it wasn't right. Why did he think this had been a good idea? First he pushed Jamie and Aiden away retreating to his Mom and now he pushed her away. More lighting and more thunder came as Tony began to fall into a panic. He wanted his Mom. But she wasn't going to come. He had made his intention clear and it was just his luck that she was going to respect his wishes. The storm was reaching its peak and Tony was no longer even thinking anymore.

He was curled up under the blankets in a fetal position. Every explosion of thunder causing his body to shudder. He needed someone, anyone to come save him. Why wasn't anyone coming? A particularly close bolt of lighting came down sending a rumble through the room. Tony screamed, but it wasn't just any scream it was a name. The name of the person he wanted to come and save him more than anything. The storm seemed to die down, almost as if it understood. Tony was breathing heavily as he felt the name still on his tongue. He knew he had his answer. He had it along. It wasn't the first time he had called it out. It was the first time he had realized it though. Tony was still whimpering. Even though he had his

answer he was still going to have to ride out the storm alone. He just hoped this was the last time.

***

Mom walked quickly down the hallway towards the room. The storm had started while she had been at the college. She had no way of getting back sooner. She had thought of giving a call to Jamie or Aiden to see if they could go over and check on Tony. She knew how much he hated storms. Yet she had resisted the urge. Tony would have probably been mad at her if she had. Getting into the room though she could see that perhaps he wouldn't have objected. She found him curled up under some blankets on the bed.

“Oh baby I'm so sorry,” she said immediately going and gathering him up into her lap blankets and all. Tony let out a little moan as he nuzzled into her. She wrapped him up tightly rocking him a little. He was shaking still. “If I had known there was going to be a storm I wouldn't have left you. Mommy is so sorry.” As she continued to rock him she felt his shaking subside.

“I knew there was a storm coming,” Tony finally said. Mom pulled back some of the blankets to see his tear stained face.

“Why would you do that to yourself?” Mom asked.

“I don't know. I just felt like I needed to force myself, like I couldn't admit something unless I was desperate.” Tony said.

“I don't know if this was the way to do that,” Mom said.

“But it worked,” Tony said. Mom raised an eyebrow. She then set him on the bed and peeled his blanket cocoon away. “D-don't you want to know what my answer is?”

“I do,” Mom said. “But first we are going down to the lobby and getting you some juice to drink to help you calm those nerves.” Mom said as she lifted him up into her arms. “You can tell me all about it down there, okay?”

“Okay,” Tony said as he put his head on his Mom's shoulder, happy to be held safely in her arms.

***

It was a nice day at the park as summer was beginning. Tony heaved the basketball up but missed the hoop. He frowned.

“Looks like a miss,” Aiden said his arms crossed. “I win.”

“Its not fair,” Tony grumbled. “You're taller than me.”

“I can't help that,” Aiden said picking up the ball as it rolled to his feet. “I played the game fair and won. You're the one who told me not to let you win.”

“Yeah, I know,” Tony said kicking the ground a little.

“You played a good game, tried your best. One day you'll beat me,” Aiden said.

“Yeah, for real,” Tony nodded.

“But that day is not today squirt,” Aiden said giving Tony a punch to the arm. “Now how about you come get some Gatorade.”

“Is it blue?” Tony asked.

“Of course, that's your favorite,” Aiden said. Tony smiled as he followed Aiden to the bench. Tony guzzled down the sweet drink. Playing basketball with Aiden always worked up a sweat.

“So anything fun happen at daycare today?” Aiden asked as they sat next to one another cooling down.

“No not really,” Tony said pursing his lips. Something had happened but it wasn't fun or really anything he wanted to talk about.

“You sure?” Aiden asked. “Did you not have a good day or something?”

“No, it was just fine,” Tony said.

“Hmm well hey you won't have to go their anymore,” Aiden said. “Its summer so you're going off to spend the whole summer with your Mommy and then in the fall you're starting kindergarten. That will be fun.”

“Will it?” Tony questioned.

“Sure you got big plans this summer,” Aiden chuckled.

“I was talking about school,” Tony said. “If I'm there all day then we don't get to hang out anymore.”

“Yes we do,” Aiden said. “I'm picking you up afterschool three times a week so we'll have plenty of time to hang and I'm going to come see you this summer too.”

“Really?” Tony asked sitting on his knees as he looked up at Aiden.

“Yeah. We're going to go check out the state fair. You me and Rick. That sound fun?” Aiden asked.

“Rick?” Tony asked, referring to Aiden's boyfriend.

“You okay with that?”

“Mhmmm,” Tony said. He liked Rick, he was really funny. Although sometimes when he saw Aiden and Rick together he felt a little sad. Tony sat down and then put his head up against Aiden's side.

“Hey Aiden, was I a good boyfriend?”

“Yes you were a good boyfriend,” Aiden said putting an arm around the small boy. Tony could remember things about his past, some, not all. He could recall brief snapshots here and there, but they were almost like remembering dreams. Fuzzy and disconnected. He understood that once upon a time he and Aiden had been the same age but not much beyond that. That's the problem with dreams. You could remember the images but not the context, not always. Still it felt good to hear that he had been a good boyfriend.

“You know I love you,” Aiden said.

“Yeah, love you too,” Tony said. Aiden then looked at his phone. “Welp about that time, lets get going.” Tony stood on the bench as he leapt off onto the ground below. He and Aiden then began their walk back to the college campus.

They met up with Jamie who was waiting in front of the building where his last class had been for the day. Tony ran up to him and gave him a big hug.

“Hey have a good time at the park?” Jamie asked.

“Yeah,” Tony said. “I lost again though.”

“You're the one who says not to let you win,” Jamie said as if reminding Tony.

“If he lets me win then its not winning,” Tony said.

“He had me on the ropes though,” Aiden said. Tony's eyes then wandered to the entryway to the building where there were some candy machines.

“Jamie can I get a gumball?” Tony asked. Jamie rolled his eyes a little but fished a quarter out of his pocket and gave it to Tony who scurried off to secure his prize.

“Everything go okay?” Jamie then asked Aiden.

“Yeah, well maybe,” Aiden replied. Jamie raised an eyebrow. “I think something happened at daycare today. Though he didn't really want to talk about it.”

“Hmmm,” Jamie hummed. “It was his last day so...I'll see if I can get it out of him.” The two continued to talk until Tony returned chewing happily on his gum.

“Alright Tony say goodbye to Uncle Aiden.” Jamie said. Tony gave Aiden a big hug.

“Bye Uncle Aiden,” Tony said giving the man a big squeeze.

“I'll see you soon,” Aiden said giving Tony a kiss to the cheek. They watched Aiden leave before heading to the bus. On the days Jamie had class they took the bus home, otherwise Jamie had his car. Jamie thought about trying to bring up daycare during the bus ride, but Tony seemed content enough to chew his gum while watching the passing scenery outside the bus window. At their stop it was a quick walk back to the duplex where the two of them lived. Jamie had bought it using some of the money Tony had gotten as part of his settlement. Coming into the front door they could smell something good coming up the stairs towards the kitchen. Claire came walking to the head of the stairs.

“Good timing you two, I made something for dinner,” she said.

“It smells good,” Tony chirped as he went up the stairs. As Jamie ascended the stairs himself he saw that Claire had Tony on her hip by the stove and was currently spooning some sauce out of a pan into his mouth.

“Good?” she asked.

“Good,” Tony said giving her a big thumbs up.

“Then go wash your hands,” Claire said setting Tony down. “Dinner is ready.” The three of them ate dinner. Afterwards they retired to the living room as Claire brought down a box of Monopoly from the closet.

“All right Friday night, you all know what that means, family game night,” she said with a big smile on her face. Tony

didn't get up from his spot on the couch.

“I don't think I really want to play tonight,” he said. Jamie and Claire were already sat around the coffee table looking a little surprised that Tony didn't want to join in.

“Bud its Friday night we always play a game on Friday night,” Jamie said.

“I have a lot of stuff to do,” Tony said sliding off the couch. “I gotta pack for tomorrow.”

“Sweetie you're already packed. Your Mommy also said she has plenty of clothes for you at her house so you don't need to bring much of anything.” Claire said.

“Oh yeah well,” Tony said searching for some sort of plausible excuse. “Maybe I'm just tired, you know gotta get up early tomorrow and stuff.”

“Tony if you don't want to play its okay,” Jamie said. However Claire then held up a hand, she could tell something else was going on.

“Honey is there something that is bothering you?” she asked giving Tony the look that seemed to make him melt to the point where he would say anything. “You know you can tell us anything, right? We're family.”

“Its that...family,” Tony said. He walked over to his backpack and got a piece of paper out from it. He brought it over and set it on the coffee table. On it was a drawing of himself with Claire and Jamie on either side of him. Then off to the side

was a drawing of Aiden and Mom. “We drew our families in daycare today.”

“This is pretty good,” Jamie said looking at the drawing with all their names written in childish scrawl underneath.

“Yeah this is a good picture,” Claire said.

“Some kid said it was weird,” Tony said.

“Why would they say it was weird?” Jamie asked as he looked at the picture closer. It looked like a completely normal drawing for a five year old to do.

“I don't know,” Tony said. “We were supposed to draw us by the people we live with and then draw other family members we care about to the side. The kid asked me why I wasn't next to my Mommy and where my Daddy was. I told him that I didn't live with Mommy. That you and Claire take care of me.”

“Oh Tony that other boy probably just didn't understand,” Claire said. “I think the point of this activity was to show that there are lots of different types of families. Just because me and Jamie aren't your Mom and Dad doesn't mean that we can't take care of you like parents.”

“That's what I tried to say,” Tony said slapping the table a little. “I said you guys were like my parents, but he said that was weird,” Tony said as his face formed into a frown. “He said my brother couldn't be my Dad and Claire couldn't be my Mom. That it wasn't the same as parents.”

“Oh Tony,” Claire said as she scooted closer to Tony and pulled him into her lap so she could wrap her arms around him. Jamie watched as Tony seemed to turn into putty in her embrace. “Now who was it that bought me that sweet little mother's day gift?” she asked.

“Me,” Tony said. It was true, during mother's day Tony had surprised Claire with a gift. Claire had been a little hesitant afterwards but learned it was Mom who had taken Tony to get it. She had told Claire that she deserved it because she was being like a mother to Tony.

“And I love it so much,” Claire said. “I love you just as if you were my kid.”

“That's right,” Jamie nodded. “It doesn't matter who we are, we care about you the way we need to.” Tony let a smirk take up the corner of his mouth. They were convincing him.

“Could I call you Mom and Dad though,” Tony asked looking back at Claire. “I mean would that be okay?”

“Tony you really shouldn't,” Jamie interjected. “We're trying to tell you that is doesn't matter. We're a family regardless of who we are to each other. We're brothers and that's good enough.”

Claire gave Jamie a displeased look yet didn't let Tony see.

“I guess,” Tony said. “That makes sense.”

“Great,” Jamie said clapping his hands. “Are we ready to play now?”

“I want to be on Claire's team,” Tony cheered.

“Of course,” Claire said. “Lets take all of Jamie's money.”

“What else is new,” Jamie chuckled.

The rest of the night proceeded on happily. By the time it was getting to be Tony's bedtime the game was no closer to an end. It had been declared a draw in the end.

“Alright Tony bedtime,” Jamie said. “Go get your jammies on.” Jamie then looked at Claire. “Think you could tuck him in, I want to go get the car packed up for tomorrow.”

“Of course,” Claire said as she lifted Tony up into her arms. “Tony prefers when I send him off on the sleepy time express right kiddo?”

“Yeah,” Tony smiled putting his head on Claire's shoulder. Jamie smiled watching the two of them walk off down he hallway. He thought it was a blessing how close Tony and Claire were. He had been a little nervous how Tony would react to her moving in with them. But there had been no problems, everyone had just slipped into their roles without so much as an adjustment period. Jamie went out to the car and got everything packed so they could leave right away in the morning. Coming back in the house he found Claire sitting on the couch watching tv. He took a seat next to her putting his feet up after a long day.

“Welp another day in the bag,” Jamie exhaled. Claire looked at Jamie with the face that said she had something to say. “Okay what did I do this time?” Jamie groaned.

“Why would you say that to Tony?” Claire said.

“Say what?” Jamie asked as his face screwed up. “You mean that Mom and Dad stuff?”

“Yes,” Claire said. Jamie looked at her confused for a moment. Did she want Tony to call her Mom?

“Because we aren't his parents,” Jamie said.

“Aren't we?” Claire asked.

“You know what I mean,” Jamie grimaced.

“I know you guys are brothers, but to Tony you are more than that. So if he wants to attach a title that reflects that to you why shouldn't he be allowed too?”

“Tony is not stupid,” Jamie said a little defensively. “He understands what the arrangement here is. Calling me Dad would just be weird. Why should we have to complicate things just because some twerp said something to him.”

“I know Tony is not stupid,” Claire said offended that Jamie would even accuse her of such a thing.

“Tony is a little kid though. This might just be his way of making the situation feel more normal. He might want to call us Mom and Dad as a way of assuring himself that he is secure with us. He's been though a lot this last year.”

“I'm all for doing things to help Tony feel comfortable, but maybe I'm the one not comfortable being called Dad by my older brother.” Jamie said leaning forward a little.

“I'm not exactly comfortable with the idea myself,” Claire said resting and arm across Jamie's shoulder who looked back at her a little surprised to hear she had her own trepidation's given how hard she was pushing for this. “But we are the adults in the situation. This might be one of those times we're we have to think about others before ourselves.”

“Being an adult sucks,” Jamie chuckled a little.

“Yeah it does,” Claire agreed. “You know I've also been thinking about the future, you know after we get married.”

“Oh you still want to do that?” Jamie asked jokingly earning himself a punch to the arm by Claire.

“Yes I do,” she laughed. “But afterwards you know if we have kids, we'll be raising Tony right alongside them. They'll be more like siblings, so it might not be a bad idea. I mean it would certainly send the message that we didn't view Tony any differently than our kids. Make it so he doesn't feel like an outsider. That he is just as important.”

Jamie sighed as he chewed on the thought. He hadn't even thought about how Tony might feel if he and Claire started having kids.

“I guess I can think about it,” Jamie said. He still wasn't completely sold on the idea. Was it really necessary?

“That's all I ask,” Claire said giving him a kiss to the cheek as she stood up from the couch. “I'm going to bed now, I got an early shift tomorrow.”

“Uh huh,” Jamie said as he sat back on the couch. He sat for a couple of hours as the tv played. He didn't pay attention to it though. He just thought.

They were making excellent time. Traffic had been light and Jamie and Tony would be arriving at Mom's house soon. Tony had of course been tired enough that he had fallen asleep as soon as Jamie had gotten him into the car. Jamie had been grateful so that he wouldn't need to field the 'are we there yet' question several times over he past couple of hours. He looked up in the rear view mirror to see Tony was now awake. He had most likely woken up not too long ago as he stared out the window quietly with still drowsy eyes.

“We'll be there soon bud,” Jamie said from the drivers seat.

“Okay,” Tony said sleepily from his seat.

“You excited?” Jamie then asked. “Mom says that tomorrow you guys are driving up to Grandma and Grandpa's place and going to the water park with the cousins.”

“Oh, yeah sure,” Tony said although there was a hint of hesitation on his part.

“You nervous?” Jamie then asked. It would be perfectly natural if Tony was. He had seen Grandma and Grandpas since the change yet, this would be the first time seeing the rest of the family.

“A little,” Tony said.

“It will be okay,” Jamie reassured. “Nothing to be worried,

family always has your back, right?”

Tony's mouth twitched a little as he gave a little shrug. “I guess.”

Jamie felt a pang of guilt hit him. He could almost hear Tony finish the thought saying something along the lines of 'as long as I don't want to call them Dad'. Jamie let out some air through his nose. He wanted to bring it up of course, yet it felt a little awkward just to bring it back up out of the blue. He wanted it to come up more naturally. The problem was they were rapidly losing out on time to do so. Jamie kept trying to play out the conversation in his head and before he knew it he was pulling up to his Mom's house. Jamie got out of the car and went and got Tony unbuckled and his stuff out of the trunk. Tony grabbed the handle of the rolling suitcase and began to walk up to the front door.

“Wait Tony,” Jamie called out. It was now or never.

“What?” Tony asked looking at Jamie.

“Hey so I've been thinking,” Jamie said as she crouched down in front of Tony. “You know about that stuff we were talking about last night...you know about calling me and Claire Mom and Dad.”

“Oh that,” Tony said looking off to the side.

“I just want you to know if you wanted to try it out, I would be fine with it.

“Nah,” Tony said “Its fine.”

“Really bud if its what you want lets do it, I just want you to feel comfortable.” Jamie said placing a hand on Tony's shoulder. Tony followed suit putting his hand on Jamie's shoulder.

“And I'm telling you its fine,” Tony said. “I thought about it, and you're right. I don't need to call you a certain name, I know who you are. I mean I call Aiden uncle even though he isn't. So even if I don't call you Dad, it doesn't mean that you don't care about me any less than other kid's dads. We're brothers and that's more than enough for me.” Jamie put his head down laughing a little.

“Geez Tony, that was pretty well thought out.” Jamie said as he reached out mussing up Tony's hair.

“You're going to be the smartest kid in kindergarten come fall, aint'cha?”

“Probably,” Tony smiled. Jamie then stood up.

“Well no reason to talk about school. You got a whole summer vacation to start.”

“Yeaaah,” Tony cheered as he lead the way.

THE END