

Bobby Buddy

by andlat

The Costume Box
2024

Chapter 1

Bobby Buddy - Chapter One

"C'mon, it'll be funny!" Rob said. That was what he always said. Bobby sighed.

"Why?"

"You know why." Rob held up his phone. "You just gotta do it for the Madagascar part and then we'll watch the movie in peace." Bobby sighed.

"How come you never do this stuff?"

"It's creepy when I do it. It's funny when you do." Bobby was about to ask why, but he knew the answer. All their lives as friends, Rob had been bigger than Bobby. To the point where he had started going by Bobby so people would stop saying Big Rob and Little Rob all the time. "Come on! Please? I'll... give you five bucks." Bobby considered it. He could always use money, but Mom and Dad still insisted on only giving him a meager allowance. Rob always seemed to have money.

"Fine." Bobby slid out of his chair and moved to the aisle just as the screen at the front of the theater showed the logo for the pre-movie dance party. It was a way for little kids to burn extra energy, but this movie wasn't some little kid movie!

"Remember, look like you're having fun!" Rob said, starting recording. Bobby rolled his eyes and began to dance as I Like to Move It started playing. It always felt long sitting there in the seat. They played the whole song, after all, but dancing

along to it in the aisle, with everyone staring at him, it felt like he danced for half an hour before it finally ended.

"Wanna see?" Rob whispered. Bobby shook his head. It was embarrassing seeing the videos Rob made of him, let alone the comments. Plus, whenever he had asked Rob to show him the videos they made hanging out at Bobby's house, Rob would make him sit in his lap so they could both see! "Need a bathroom break during the previews?" Bobby shook his head again.

The movie was good, though not as good as the first. Bobby led the way out of the theater, feeling Rob's hand on his shoulder all the way until they reached the lobby.

"Oh, weren't we gonna make a video of you playing on the mall playground?" Rob nodded across the way to the plastic playground right inside the entrance to the mall. "We're here, right?"

"But you already have the one."

"It's good to have spares."

"You're at my house every night."

"Does that mean you want to do my 'undies on your head dance' idea?" Rob laughed at Bobby's face. "Come on. It'll be fun!"

"Doubt it." Bobby muttered, but Rob had already begun to drive him over to the plastic logs and bright yellow bus climbing frame. "So, what do I do?"

"Just play." Rob said. "And I'll record."

"What's the point?"

"You're twelve and you're playing on a little kid playground." Rob explained. "Same as always." Bobby could not find the flaw in that, so he stepped onto the carpeting. "Whoa!" Rob grabbed Bobby's wrist and pulled him over to a bench. "No shoes on the playground, bud. Didn't you see the sign?"

"Ugh" was all Bobby said as Rob sat him down on the little bench and pulled his Crocs off.

"I didn't even notice your penguin pirate t-shirt before." Rob lied. In truth, he always noticed Bobby's childish attire. He had secretly been behind Bobby's Mom going through his clothes and removing anything too big for him. With how small Bobby was, it did not make sense for him to be wearing clothes that suited his age over his size. Rob had that sort of influence over Bobby. After all, as far as Bobby was aware, Rob just hanged out with him every night. It was actually a boon for him after far too many years of babysitters. He finally just got to hang out with one of his best friends every night, which is why it was so important for him to behave and follow the rules. Little did he know, Rob was being paid. Sure, he was still Bobby's friend, but he was a bonafide babysitter.

"Yeah." Bobby said, looking down at it and his blue and white striped shorts.

"What else do we need to take off before you can play? Your

shirt?" He playfully tugged up on Bobby's shirt, exposing the top bit of his underwear peeking over his shorts. It was great that Bobby's shorts, despite being so kiddy, were still a little big for him. Where Rob's waistband would say Hanes or Calvin Klein, Bobby's said Spider-Man.

"I can see your undies." Rob teased before fixing Bobby's t-shirt again.

"They're boxers." Bobby said out of reflex.

"C'mon dude. I do your laundry, remember? Haven't seen any boxers in there in a while." Bobby's mom had taken pity and left him a few pairs of boxer briefs but Rob, under the pretense of doing his laundry, had made underwear disappear until Bobby's drawer looked like Rob's had when he was in kindergarten - brightly colored underoos and nothing else. "Now why don't you go play? Told your mom we'd be back by 4, so you've got a little while."

"What? How long am I supposed to play?"

"I want to get a lot of footage that we can edit down." Rob said. "Course, you might get kicked out." He gave Bobby a nudging swat on his bottom. "Go on and I'll record."

"What do I even do?"

"Play! Go down that little slide, crawl through that log, do whatever."

"Do whatever." Bobby repeated.

"Yeah. You gotta remember what it was like to be a kid,

right?" Bobby glared at him, but wandered onto the carpeted play area. "Don't be afraid to ham it up!" Rob called from the outside perimeter, holding his phone up. "Oh! And don't forget Mr. Snout!" He tossed the blue elephant to Bobby who caught it. It looked for all the world like a stuffed animal, but it actually had a zipper so that Bobby could keep all his money inside it. "It's tougher to lose than a wallet." Rob said after hearing from his parents that Bobby had lost his. "What? It helps the video." Rob remarked with a smile.

Bobby sighed and decided to do his best to play. He crawled through the log, went down the slide, and ran out of things to do.

"Go down with Mr. Snout on your lap." Rob called. "Then run over to the bus and climb inside. And... action!" Bobby did his best to follow the instructions. Rob had once explained to him that he was an actor and Rob was his director. He just wished the direction wasn't always something dorky and babyish.

He climbed into the yellow bus and looked to Rob. Rob wasn't even paying attention! He was talking to... to Grace Wilkins! She was in their class! Had she seen him? He looked down at his blue and white striped shorts and, worse, the penguin pirate prominently on his chest and belly. Could he hide in here until it was time to go? What if Rob planned to just keep talking to her until Bobby came to find him? He knew Rob had a crush on her, after all. Grace laughed, tucking a bit of shiny brown hair behind her ear, and Rob grinned.

"Great. Just great." Bobby muttered.

"Hey, cool. An elephant!" Bobby's head spun around and he glared at a brown-haired boy standing outside the bus, holding Mr. Snout.

"That's mine." Bobby said, climbing out of the bus. The boy sneered at him.

"Gonna have to catch me then." The boy immediately jettied off, leaving Bobby with no choice but to chase after him, bare feet slapping against the carpeted floor of the play area.

"Give it back!" Bobby said as the boy dodged around the log. He wished he sounded more authoritative. He glanced over at Markus, who was now sitting down, still chatting away with Grace. He growled. "Guess I'm on my own. Give it back. Now!"

"What's wrong? Can't catch me?" The boy took off again and Bobby had no choice but to run after him. If Dad -- or Rob -- found out he let some little kid take Mr. Snout, he would never hear the end of it. "Must be hard keeping up in a diaper!"

"What? That doesn't even make sense."

"Does too!"

"Just... just give it back." Bobby tried to put on a burst of speed, but the boy seemed to anticipate his every move, easily avoiding him. "Now!"

"Or what? You'll go tell your mommy or daddy?"

"No. I'll... I'll beat you up."

"You're a baby. I'm five."

"That's so much younger than me." Bobby muttered. "Give it back."

"Gonna cry?" The boy laughed. "That's what babies who bring plushies to the playground do."

"I am not a baby." He sighed. "Look, my name's Bobby. What's yours?"

"Markus."

"Markus, can you please give me that?"

"Nope." Bobby groaned and charged toward him, but Markus skillfully dove into the log.

"Ha! You're trapped now!"

"Am not." Bobby shrugged and sat down on the log. Once Markus came out, he would be ready. Markus, however, had other plans.

He peered out of the small knot window in the log, which Bobby had just so happened to sit right next to. All he had to do was wait for Bobby to relax and then he could sneak his hand out. It just barely fit, just enough for him to tickle the smaller boy's bare foot. Bobby squealed, completely taken by surprise. Markus cackled, launching himself out of the log. He had played here so many times, he knew it like the back of his hand.

"Give it!" Bobby whined as he chased fruitlessly after Markus. Markus grinned, but felt a twinge. This was fun, but it really did sound like Bobby might start crying. He stopped and turned toward Bobby.

"Stop!" He held up a hand. To his amusement, Bobby skidded to a halt. Good. "What's the elephant's name?"

"He doesn't have one."

"Fibber. He does so! What is it?"

"Mr. Snout."

"Aw, Mr. Snout. Do you miss..." he looked at the little boy. "What's your name again? Baby, right?"

"Bobby."

"Baby?"

"Bobby! God, little kids are so annoying!"

"Mr. Snout, do you miss baby Bobby?" He made the elephant nod. "Well, maybe you can go back to him. If he proves he's still a baby."

"Dude, just give me the elephant back." Bobby began to walk toward him, but every step he took, Markus took a step back. That might work. Could he maneuver him over to where Rob and Grace were? Did he want them to think he needed their help though? With a wicked grin, Markus took off running again as Bobby was distracted. He groaned and gave chase, trying to take whatever shortcuts he could to catch Markus.

How was he so fast?

"Ask nicely!"

"Please" Bobby panted. "Please give me it."

"Nope." Markus giggled, but then stopped again. "I'll only do it if... if you crawl."

"What?" Markus nodded, liking the idea more and more by the minute.

"Yeah. You stay right there and I'll" he took three big steps backwards. "There. Crawl to me like a baby should."

"I'm not"

"I promise I'll give you Mr. Snout back if you do." Bobby sighed, checking to make sure Rob and Grace were not looking. He squatted down, shifting to his hands and knees. "Come on, baby Bobby!" Markus said, pretending to make the elephant talk. Bobby rolled his eyes and began to crawl as quickly as he could. Markus laughed. "Good baby!" He said as Bobby reached him. "Oh, nope. Don't stand up."

"What? I'm supposed to sit here? Give me my elephant back. Now."

"Not yet." Markus said, grinning as he dangled the plush toy just out of Bobby's reach. "You know what babies say when they want to get up?"

"What?" Bobby growled. Why was he putting up with this? By the time I get back up, he'll run off again.

"Uppies! Can you say uppies, baby?" Bobby glared and went to stand back up, only for Markus to push him back down.

"Not until you say uppies."

"Fine, uppies."

"Say it right."

"I don't know what that means!"

"You're a baby." Markus said. "Say it like a baby should."

"I don't"

"Do it or I'll tear off Mr. Snout's head." Bobby's eyes widened. That was so mean! Plus, what would Dad or Rob say if Mr. Snout lost his head? That had to be almost as bad as totally losing him. He whimpered, unsure of what to do.

"Three, two"

"Bobby wants uppies!" He squealed at the top of his lungs, bouncing on his bottom as he reached desperately for Mr. Snout. Markus seemed taken aback, so Bobby seized his opportunity to get to his feet.

"Whoa." Markus said, handing Bobby Mr. Snout. "I thought maybe you might be my age, but you're really a baby, huh?" Bobby fumed.

"I am not a baby!" He snarled, knowing he looked very much like one in his matching outfit, hugging a stuffed elephant in the middle of a play area.

"Well, sure. It's not like you wear diapers like a baby."

Markus said. Bobby glared at him. "Or do you?" Quick as a flash, he lunged and tugged down Bobby's shorts, exposing his Spider-Man briefs.

"Bobby!"

"Markus!" Both Grace and Rob were heading over, Bobby frozen in place from shock, his shorts pooled at his feet.

"What are you doing?" They said in unison.

"He pantsed me!" Bobby said at the same time as Markus launched into his own explanation. Wait, Markus was Grace's brother?

"Uh-huh. And why would he do that?"

"But you gotta believe me!" Bobby protested. Rob had one answer for that, a gentle swat on the smaller boy's underwear-clad bottom. For years, it had been his nonverbal way to remind Bobby to listen, the sort of thing that only made sense when you had been friends for as long as either of you could remember.

"All that matters is you were showing off Spidey to the whole mall, buddy." He pulled Bobby's shorts back up. "Now come on. Let's get socks and shoes on." He took Bobby's hand, but paused as if considering picking him up. Grace followed them over to the benches, holding Markus's hand. Bobby could see the resemblance now, but to have the little brother of his classmate bully him? Humiliating!

"Markus, I want you to apologize to Bobby."

"Sorry."

"Markus."

"I'm sorry for taking your toy."

"That's better."

"And Bobby," Rob said. "What do you say to Markus?"

"Huh?"

"Be polite."

"Uh, thank you for giving me my... my toy back." Rob and Grace both nodded approvingly.

"Alright, let's get your feet and hands wiped, Markus."

"What're you doing?" Rob asked.

"Oh! Uh, these play places are filthy and my mom's a doctor, so she tells us to always clean off hands and feet after Markus plays." She opened a package of baby wipes. "Do you want a couple?" Bobby's heart fell as Rob immediately took some and, kneeling down, began to wipe his feet. Bobby squirmed.

"Rob, come on."

"What? You want yucky feet?" He set to work. "Ew germs, right, Markus?" Markus nodded, but looked concerned as he saw Bobby's wiggling.

"You gotta sit still, Bobby." He said gently. "Be a big boy like me."

"Grace!" Bobby said, involuntarily kicking his leg as Rob went between his toes with the baby wipe. "Please tell Markus I'm in your class."

"Did you two have fun playing?" Grace asked.

"Yeah! Bobby's really fast."

"I saw you two running around a lot."

"Cuz he stole my elephant."

"I gave it back!"

As Markus and Bobby went back and forth, Grace and Rob simply smiled and got them ready to go. Before long, Bobby watched in relief as Markus left, rolling his eyes as the five year old waved good-bye.

"Let's go home." Rob said with a chuckle, helping Bobby to his feet.

"Again?" Bobby whined the moment they were in his house.

"I'm doing laundry, so yes, shirt and shorts. You were showing your underwear off at the mall, so why not play in it in your own house?"

"He pantsed me."

"Oh, really? You mean, like this?" Rob tugged down Bobby's shorts. Bobby glowered. "Your shirt and shorts are going in the wash, same as always. You can play for a bit."

"Ok..." Bobby flopped down on the couch in nothing but his

underwear.

"Bobby. What's the rule?"

"I'm not even playing."

"But you're about to. So what's the rule?"

"Play on the floor." Bobby's parents had long had a 'no playing on the furniture' rule that was really meant to keep little boys like Bobby from jumping on the couch or crawling around like it was a jungle gym.

"Remember, we gotta prove to your mom and dad that we can follow the rules even when they're not here so they let us keep hanging out. Okay?"

"Kay."

"So?" Bobby sighed and slid down onto the floor. "That's more like it."

By the time Rob had the washer going, Bobby had gotten invested in his toys. Rob poked his head into the living room and was glad he had his phone in his hand as he saw Bobby, reclining on his tummy, playing with a farm set. When Rob had pulled it out of storage a week ago, Bobby had turned up his nose. Wasn't it for toddlers? Look who's playing with it now, Rob thought, sneaking a few photos.

Rob watched for a few more minutes before making his presence known. Bobby jumped in surprise, but did not stop playing.

"Laundry's in." He flopped down on the couch and looked down at Bobby playing. "Do you want to keep playing or should we get your bath out of the way?" Bobby made a noncommittal sound. "Don't be like that. You know your parents' rule is a bath every night now that you're becoming a teenager." He had to keep himself from laughing. When he skipped a shower, he stank. When Bobby skipped a bath, there was no BO. Not that Rob let him skip baths, at least not since he had surreptitiously replaced Bobby's body wash with Baby Soft, ensuring his skin stayed soft and he smelled like baby powder in the evenings. No wonder Markus had... he smiled. "Especially since you were playing on that germ-riddled playground!"

"Did you even" was all Rob heard before Bobby dropped his voice too low to hear.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

"It was really nice of you to humor Grace's little brother. She and I talked a lot with you distracting him."

"He was a bully" was what Rob thought Bobby said.

"You two ran around a lot. And what was that you were doing? Playing baby with him?" Bobby jumped to his feet indignantly.

"He took Mr. Snout and wouldn't give him back!"

"Come on. He was five. You had to be playing along."

"No! He... he..." Bobby frowned. "You gotta tell Grace."

"Tell Grace what? That you, her twelve year old classmate, were bullied by her baby brother?"

"Yes!" Rob looked Bobby up and down.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!"

"Well," he held up his phone. "How about you tell her yourself?"

"Huh?"

"I'll record you telling your side of the story and send it to her. I got her number while you and Markus were chasing each other. You're an awesome wingman, dude."

"Uh"

"We can either record that or we can do your bath. Which do you want to do?"

"Bath." Bobby mumbled. Rob got to his feet at once.

"Alright. You know the drill. I'll fill up the tub with lots of bubbles and you'll take your big boy undies to your dirty hamper, put them in, and come to the bathroom to take your bath. Sound like a plan?" Bobby nodded, but Rob still made him repeat it to him. "Big boy undies." He corrected.

"Why do you always say that?"

"It's what they're called." Rob shrugged. "Spider-Man is like

the best superhero, right?" Bobby nodded reluctantly. "And you are a big boy, right? You're older than me!" Rob laughed and patted Bobby on the head. "Let's go. The sooner you're clean, the sooner we can eat."

Bobby knew all too well that dilly-dallying would mean Rob would come track him down and give him a swat on the butt. Why did he do that? Bobby wondered. He had done it for years, sure, but it really stung now that his hand was so big. In his room, Bobby pulled down his underwear, half-expecting to see a red mark on his butt before realizing that that was silly. He doesn't even really spank me. He thought, depositing his underwear in the hamper.

"Miss my boxers." He had tried to ask Mom where they had went, but she did not seem to care if her son wore boxers or briefs. It had to be Rob, but Rob had only laughed when he had tried to hint at it. It was not the sort of thing you outright ask a guy when he's doing your chores for you. "Better get in there." Planting his hands firmly over his crotch, Bobby half-ran to the bathroom. He knew it was silly to be so weird about being naked in his own house, but Rob was there.

"Ready?" Rob asked, grinning at Bobby.

"Shuddup." Bobby mumbled.

"I did lots of bubbles." Rob said, nodding to the tub as if Bobby could not see it for himself.

"Kay."

"In the tub."

"I know."

"Don't be like that. We just have to make sure we're following the rules."

"I just..." Bobby felt vulnerable in more ways than one.

"What?" Rob sat down on the edge of the tub. Bobby squirmed, hands still over his groin.

"I just don't like that you let Markus"

"Buddy, if I had known"

"But you were talking to Grace!" Bobby's voice echoed in the bathroom, but it did not make him sound as indignant as he wished it would.

"Oh. Is that what this is about?" Bobby shrugged. "Don't worry! Grace is nice and cute and... all that, but you're still my Bobby buddy. You'll always be my Bobby buddy." He reached out and gave Bobby's shoulder a reassuring pat. "Now get in the tub and I'll go get started on dinner."

"Can you close the door?"

"You know I can't." Rob said, smiling sympathetically. Maybe he won't ask for once, Bobby thought as he climbed into the tub. "Oh! What's the bath list?" Bobby sighed.

"Arms, legs, front and back. Privates, butt"

"Weinie and bumbum."

"You know it better than me!"

"But I'm not bathing you. Am I?"

"No..."

"Good. Make sure you get all over." Rob left Bobby to it.

He headed to the kitchen, put dinner in the oven, and then headed to the laundry. He really did not mind doing things around Bobby's house. Bobby's parents were basically a second set of parents and it felt good to help them out. Somehow, it made sense that he should do more than Bobby. They were paying him after all and Bobby? Well, he was different. It was easier to just let him play while Rob handled things.

"If he wants to help, he'll ask." Rob smiled, imagining tousling Bobby's hair and telling him he can be his extra special helper. His brow furrowed slightly. Bobby was his age, older than him by a few months even, but somehow. That never made sense. He was twelve, Bobby was... "he's still bossed around by kindergarteners." He laughed. Grace had said Markus was... what was the word she had used? Opinionated. Still, the way Bobby had given in and obeyed Markus. It was interesting.

By the time Bobby's laundry was in the dryer and Markus had checked on dinner, his mind was made up. He had been meaning to tell Bobby the truth for a while now, but had always talked himself out of it. Their system worked. It did not need Bobby to know. But now that... he dismissed the thought as he realized that Bobby had been in the tub for quite a while!

"Geez! Did you grow gills and fins?" Rob asked as he walked into the bathroom. He held out the towel and Bobby took it, seemingly embarrassed. Wasn't he always? "Were you busy playing with the bubbles you claim you don't like?"

"No." Bobby muttered. Back when he had a babysitter, they would hardly check on him. He would take a bath, get dressed in his pajamas, and then go watch TV. Rob seemed to be everywhere. He told himself it was because they were friends, but it was still weird, in a way he could not quite explain.

"Well, dinner's almost ready. Go put on your nightie."

"It's a sleep shirt."

"Nightie." Rob replied, smirking. Bobby used to have a mix of pajama sets and some oversized shirts that he switched between, but as master of the laundry, Rob had gotten rid of the pajamas and left him only with his nighties. At least until the colder months. "Go put it on. Dinner's almost on the table." Bobby hurried off, dragging the oversized towel behind him.

Dinner passed uneventfully and they were soon winding down for the night. Bobby lounged on the living room floor, playing with toys, as Rob folded his laundry. Rob loved nothing more than holding up the most babyish garments from Bobby's laundry and asking him if they were his.

"Whose big boy undies are these?" He asked, holding up a brightly colored pair of briefs.

"Mine. Like the last three pairs."

"Your mom should start labeling these. In big block letters." Bobby rolled his eyes. "Whoa." Rob pulled out a tank top with a grinning blue stegosaurus on it. "Dino-mite!" He read. "When'd you wear this?"

"Oh. when Dad and I went to the museum. I think you were busy."

"And you wore this?"

"Mom." That was all Bobby needed to say. His mom still set out his clothes more often than not.

"Well, you can wear it on Saturday."

"What's Saturday?"

"The day after Friday."

"Rob!"

"It was supposed to be a surprise, but" he grinned as if he was about to reveal the most exciting thing ever. "Grace and I thought it would be fun for you and Markus to play at his house."

"What!?" Bobby was on his feet. "What? You're joking."

"Nope!"

"He's a bully! And he's... he's five!"

"I need someone to keep him distracted while Grace and I hang out."

"No! No way!"

"You're my wingman." Rob said.

"But... that's not what a wingman does!" Rob shrugged and made a show of shaking out the last pair of shorts before folding them and adding them to his tidy pile.

"Well, you're doing it. It'll be in the backyard unless it rains. Markus has a playground."

"I am not." As far as Bobby was concerned, that was it.

"You are."

"Why, just so you can make fun of me?"

"I would never. We're best friends. I tease you sometimes, cuz that's what friends do."

"Well"

"Well, a friend would also help his friend out by playing with Markus."

"But"

"Look, I don't want to play this card, but you're doing it. Because I said so."

"So?" Bobby scoffed.

"You're a little boy. Markus accepted it right away. Why can't you?" He walked over and knelt down by Bobby.

"I am not."

"I mean, sure we're in the same grade, but it's no secret that you're still a little kid. Whenever we go to McDonald's, we all get like Big Macs and you still get a Happy Meal." He chuckled and rubbed the little guy's back. "And I mean, you know." He gestured around. "I babysit you."

"You do not!"

"Dude, really? I thought you knew."

"You don't!" Even as he said it, Bobby wondered if that was where all of Rob's cash came from. No, it couldn't be.

"I walk you home from school."

"And we hang out."

"I make you dinner."

"So? You eat it too."

"C'mon, that doesn't even make sense. Then what happens after dinner?"

"I dunno."

"Sure you do!"

"I... brush my teeth and go to bed?"

"Yep. And who makes sure you do that on time?" He stared at him, recognition dawning. "Yep. We're best friends, man, but I'm also your babysitter."

"But"

"But what?"

"That doesn't make me some little kid! We're in the same grade!"

"We are and like I said, we're best friends." He gave his back another rub. "but I'm also your babysitter. That means I'm in charge, understand?" He was beginning to pout. Just like a little boy, he thought, reaching down and lifting his chin so their eyes met. "Which makes you a little boy and little boys need to do what they're told."

"I'm not."

"You are." Rob said gently.

"I'm twelve."

"Yeah, at school, sure. But here? At home? At the mall? You're not."

"Am too."

"Bobby, come on."

"I'm not a baby."

"I didn't say you are!" Rob rubbed his back once again. "I would say... given how Markus treated you and how you act" Bobby whimpered. "Shh, I'd say you're four."

"What!?"

"Shh, not so loud. Yes, Bobby. You're four years old. You still need a babysitter, but you can also play with a big boy like

Markus."

"I'm not four."

"Well, you just turned four." Rob said with a chuckle. "Yeah, I think that's perfect for you."

"I'm twelve!"

"At school."

"No, everywhere!"

"I think you're just getting sleepy, so you're being a little unreasonable. It'll make more sense in the morning." Rob stood and grabbed the basket of clean laundry. "Come on. Bedtime."

"Is not!" Bobby pointed to the clock on the mantle. "See? 7:05."

"You know I can't read those old fashioned clocks." Rob replied. "And I know for a fact it's 7:30, Bobby's bedtime."

"That clock says right there"

"Maybe it's slow." Rob shrugged. "Besides, even if it is, you're not actually in bed yet, right?" He smiled and gave Bobby a nudge. "Go or it'll be another swat."

"But"

"No buts. Little boys need their sleep."

"I am not" the swat landed hard on his rump. Bobby jumped and nearly knocked the basket out of Rob's hands.

"Bobby." He said calmly. "I am your babysitter. You are an overly tired four year old who wants to feel like he's in control. Pout all you want, it's true. Now, lead the way to your bedroom or I'll treat you like a baby. Is that what you want? A baby bedtime? Bottles at dinner? No more big boy undies because you're back in diapers?" Bobby stared up at him, his face different than it had been before. The defiance was still there, but it was fading, realization taking its place. Was he coming to terms with the fact that Rob was in control, had been in control? Did he understand that Rob had been babysitting him, without him even knowing it, for months now? Rob doubted he would ever fully comprehend the depth of it, yearned to tell him just how many small ways he had nudged Bobby along, helped him accept being babysat by his best friend. Later. Maybe. Maybe never. "So, ready for bed?"

They headed to Bobby's room, Rob with his basket of laundry, Bobby fussing with the hem of his nightie. Bobby stood by his bed as Rob put the laundry away.

"Big boy undies here. Nighties here." He narrated, hoping Bobby would stay right where he was, just out of reach. "Shorts here. T-shirts here." He closed the drawer and spun, scooping Bobby up and plopping him down on his bed. "Little boy here!" He gave Bobby's tummy a tickle and smiled in relief as he laughed. The tension seemed to be gone now. He pulled the blanket up to Bobby's chin, smiling tenderly down at him. He wanted to kiss his forehead, but maybe not yet.

"Am I really" Bobby's voice was small. "Gonna have to play

with Markus?"

"Mhm." Rob murmured. "But that's not until next weekend." He smiled and brushed a bit of hair out of Bobby's eyes. "You'll see. It'll be fun." Bobby only grunted. Rob walked away, turning out the lights. He could not be sure, but he thought he heard Bobby murmur something sleepily.

"I'm not really four. Am I?"

Chapter 2

Bobby Buddy: Study Buddies - Chapter Two

"Remember, Bobby." Rob said as they neared Bobby's house.
"As soon as we're home, how old are you?"

"...four." Bobby mumbled after a pause.

"You had to be a big boy all day! I bet you're excited to get home and be yourself."

"What if I just stay on the steps?"

"Hmm?"

"Well, once I go inside, you make me be four. So I'm just going to-" Rob picked him up.

"That's just silly. We need to get you inside and into your nightie so you can start on homework, remember?" He carried Bobby inside, kicking his own shoes off before undoing the Velcro on Bobby's and dropping them by his. He smiled as one bounced and landed in his shoe, making a striking point about the difference in size.

Carrying Bobby was remarkably easy unless he squirmed. It had taken a bit of training to get him to stop doing that, which had translated into Rob carrying him near-constantly, kissing his cheeks and murmuring into his ear nonstop about what a little boy he was. Even Bobby's parents had hardly blinked.

“Didn't realize just how different in size you two are until now.” Bobby's dad had remarked. Rob had smiled politely and waited for him to leave before cooing into Bobby's ear that even his daddy knew he was a little Bobby buddy boy.

Bobby's age had occupied Rob's thoughts more often than not from the moment it was decided that he would be more of a babysitter to the little guy. Almost immediately, he had gone from twelve to the single digits and then Rob started 'kiddifying' his wardrobe. For a while, he had thought of Bobby as seven, maybe eight, but he had come over to find Bobby eating breakfast in nothing but his underwear and no self-respecting third grader would want to be seen in Scooby-Doo underoos! That had gotten him demoted to kindergartener, where he had secretly stayed in Rob's mind until Grace's brother Markus had shown him that Bobby was undeniably, obviously a very young four.

Bobby did not touch the floor again until they reached his bedroom, another area of focus for Rob's gradual babying of him. Up until fifth grade, Bobby's bed had had colorful construction truck sheets, pillowcases, and a matching comforter. When Rob had discovered the full set still in the back of the linen closet, they had gone back on. Bobby was not sure where the bed rails had come from, but they were there too, transforming his bed completely into a toddler's.

"Do I really have to put on my" he forced himself to say the word. "Nightie?"

"Yes, you do." Rob said. "What's the schedule?"

"Homework, dinner, bed." He jumped as Rob gave his bottom a swat.

"Let's turn off surly school Bobby and get happy, four year old Bobby." He said. "Where's the Bobby who dances?" Bobby groaned. The revelation that Rob had made him make all those videos just to ease him into behaving like a four year old had especially stung. "Can you get undressed for me?" He smirked. "Or do we need to call Markus?"

"Quit!" Bobby growled. Rob made that joke every single day. He winced as Rob swatted his bottom.

"One more outburst like that and it'll be a timeout." Rob said sternly. "I know it's tough to pretend to be big all day long, but we're home now." Bobby could tell Rob was not in the mood to hear him argue. "Arms up."

"I can do it myself." Bobby said, stripping down to his Spider-Man briefs in record time. He wondered if Rob knew they were the same pair he had worn when he had met Markus. Probably. He thought sullenly.

"That's so much better. There's my Bobby buddy!" Rob's sudden shift in attitude was almost frightening, but it did make Bobby feel better to know that he had made his best friend happy. Are we even still best friends? Sometimes it feels like he's my babysitter. Though it was a thought he had had more than once, he pushed it away. That was ridiculous. Babysitters were older than you, not the same age. "Give me a Spidey pose and then we'll lose the undies too." He smiled as Bobby bent over, balancing on one hand and spread-out

legs as he made the webslinging gesture with his other. “Adorable!” Rob said. “Who's my Spider-Baby?”

“Me,” Bobby mumbled, trying to figure out if Rob had said Spider-Baby or Spider-Bobby. He had for sure said Spider-Bobby that morning, so maybe he had just misheard.

“Alright, Spidey undies off. This is your house, after all!” Rob chuckled. Bobby blushed. He had occasionally walked around the house in a t-shirt and boxers before Rob started whatever it was he was doing, but walking around fully naked, especially with Rob there, never stopped being embarrassing. Rob never seemed to understand why when he brought it up. They had both changed in front of each other a million times, even before Rob had demoted Bobby to four years old.

“Alright,” Rob clapped his hands. “What do we need to get on your butt, Bobby?”

“We both know.”

“Hey.” Rob grinned as if they were once again just two friends hanging out. “Don't get all sour again.” Bobby sighed.

“My nightie and a diaper.” He said. Rob nodded eagerly. He could not decide what he liked better about Bobby wearing an oversized (for him) t-shirt to bed every night: the way it slid off his slender shoulder sometimes or that the shirts were still just short enough to give peeks of his Pull-ups when he wasn't careful.

“Buzz Lightyear!” Rob announced as he pulled one of the

Pull-ups out of Bobby's underwear drawer. It never stopped delighting him that Bobby could actually wear bonafide toddler nighttime Pull-ups. Goodnites would not have been the end of the world, but knowing that Bobby had seen the words 'potty training pants' on the package made it all the easier to justify getting him to call them his diapers. "Were you wet or dry this morning?" Bobby's mouth opened and closed. He had never had a wet morning, except the one time he had peed the Pull-ups as an act of defiance while waiting for Rob to pick out his underwear one morning.

"Dry." He said, shuddering as he remembered just how cloyingly sweet Rob had been about his four year old oopsie in his diaper. Had that moment of rebellion got him stuck in them permanently?

"Good! But remember, almost a third of four year olds wet the bed, so you need to wear your diaper." Bobby nodded impatiently. Rob relented and held out the Pull-ups for him to step into. "Attaboy. Now for your nightie!"

The nightie of the day had an orange and blue Stegosaurus under bubble letters that read Bobbysaurus. Bobby had a smaller one as well for daytime wear, but the nightie version was one of Rob's favorites to dress him in.

Bobby stood awkwardly by his bed in his Pull-ups and oversized t-shirt as Rob changed out of his school clothes. He stared covetously at Rob's gray boxer briefs, unfathomably mature to a boy who had had cute cartoons on his underwear for the last few months. Rob stretched in his sweatpants and

hoodie before grinning at Bobby.

“You really are adorable, Bobby buddy.” He said, coming over and playing with Bobby's hair. “You're getting a little shaggy. Think it's time for a haircut?” Bobby's shoulders rose and fell. “Hmm.” Before Rob could say anything more, his phone chirped. “Oh! Grace is on her way.”

“Grace?” Bobby felt a stab of panic. A surprise playdate with Markus the bully seemed like something Rob would pull.

“Just Grace. Well, Jackson and Pat are coming a little later. We've got a project for World History we're working on.”

“What? You can't... you can't let them see me like this!”

“It's not like you're naked.” Rob said. “Oh, no! Now everyone will know Bobby sleeps.”

“That's not what I mean.”

“Well, the plan's already been made.” Rob picked up Bobby. “Since you're not in the class, I didn't think I needed your permission.”

“But it's my house!” Bobby protested, but Rob chose not to engage, heading downstairs and setting Bobby up for homework.

“Not much today.” Rob said. “You know what that means!” He took the grouchy boy's arms and waved them above his head. “Lots of playtime for Bobby Buddy!”

Bobby had figured out quickly that racing through his

homework did not show Rob he was a mature, smart twelve year old. It just made him look like he was eager to play with his toddler toys. Try as he might though, there was only so much delaying you could do without it being obvious. By the time Grace arrived, Bobby was sitting on the floor with his farm toys. She came in and chatted with Rob. Bobby noticed that they both seemed a bit like they wanted to kiss, but too afraid to be the one to lean in. He made a face and sent the cow into the barn.

“Hi there, Bobby!” Grace said, sitting down on the couch right in front of him, as if to make sure he could never forget that she was in his house.

“Hi.” Bobby said.

“Sorry, he's a little grouchy today.” Rob said.

“I know what'll make him feel better! Presents!” She patted a couple bags by her legs. Presents? What could she possibly have brought him? “Oh, looks like he's curious.” She gave a little shrug. “It's just a few of Markus's old things.”

“What?”

“He's still grateful for them.” Rob said, giving Bobby a knowing look. “I've been having a tough time finding things that help Bobby remember the new way of things. Getting a bunch of handmedowns from a big boy like Markus will help.”

“But”

"Markus really is growing up so fast! I miss when he was a little cutie like Bobby. Just playing with toys, no worries about being big."

"What?" Bobby exclaimed. This was going too far! When it was just Rob, he could pretend it was just a game, but the way Grace was talking, they really thought he was a little kid! "I was the only one in Mr. McNeil's class to-

"It's rude to interrupt, Bobby buddy." Rob said. "Apologize."

"But"

"Now."

"I'm sorry for interrupting."

"And what else did you do?" Rob asked.

"Dunno."

"You contradicted Grace, didn't you?"

"Huh?"

"You were about to say you're bigger than Markus and we all know that isn't true, is it?"

"But"

"Bobby." Rob shook his head. "Tell Grace how old you are." He knew Grace knew, but he still pouted over it before finally answering.

"I'm four."

“Now, since you're bored of your toys, how about you show Grace the new song and dance we're working on?” Taking the hint, Bobby began to play with the little plastic barnyard animals, but Rob got to his feet. “Up you come!” He lifted Bobby by the arms and there was no doubt that Grace saw his blue Pull-ups even as Bobby tugged down on his nightie. “Do you remember all the words?”

“What song is it?” Grace asked.

“Five Little Monkeys! You must know that one, right?”

“I do.” Grace said. Bobby waited for her to say it used to be Markus's favorite. “Actually, I have the perfect shirt in those hand-me-downs I brought.” She dug into the bag by her feet. “Tada!” She held up a light blue shirt with Curious George's face on it. “It says go bananas! Isn't that fun, Bobby?”

“Let's try it on.” Rob said. Before Bobby even knew what was happening, his nightie was up over his head and he found himself standing in front of Grace in nothing but his Pull-ups.

“Hey!”

“Your nightie will go back on soon. This is just for trying on.” Rob said, taking the shirt from Grace. He looked at the tag. “Oh, that should fit. Arms up, Bobby buddy!”

“It fits!” Grace said, smiling as Bobby tried in vain to pull the perfectly fitting t-shirt down over Buzz Lightyear.

“Perfect. Showtime!”

“What?”

“You were gonna sing for us, remember?” Bobby glared at Grace.

“I need... pants or something.”

“Why?” Rob asked. “Grace has a brother. She's seen it all.”

“But you're gonna record this, right?”

“Just for us.” Rob said. “I promise I won't post your diaper tush online.” He held up his phone. “And make sure you show Grace the whole dance too.”

“Of course.” Bobby muttered under his breath. “Do I have to?”

“Yes.” Rob said.

“Five little monkeys” Bobby sang, hopping from one foot to the other, his hands tickling under his arms. “Jumping on the bed!” He bounced up and down. His nightie probably would not have covered his diaper, he knew, but having it fully exposed the whole time was worse. “One fell off and bumped his head.” He rubbed his head. “Mommy called the doctor and the doctor said.” This was the worst part, but he knew Rob would just make him do it over again. He spun around so his back was to the pair. “No more monkeys jumping on the bed!” He said, wagging his butt to and fro.

In the version Rob had shown him, he just had to wag a finger, but Rob improvised and said it was cuter to waggle his butt, so that was what Bobby had to do. He hoped Rob would hold true to his word and not post this as he spun around and

launched into the next verse.

“Four little monkeys jump-”

“That's enough, buddy.” Rob said. “We should look at what else of Markus's there is for you before everyone else gets here!”

“There are more people coming?”

“I told you that already.” Rob said. “But if we get through all these clothes, you can have your nightie back on before they come, okay?”

“I don't think either Jackson or Pat would care about a four year old in his diaper though.” Grace observed. “Pat's got like five little siblings, I think.”

“They both know I'm not four!”

“Oh, come on, Bobby.” Rob said. “They've seen you. They know you're a little boy.” He picked up one of the shirts out of Grace's bag. “Oh, wow! Look how cool this is, Bobby!”

For the next twenty minutes, Bobby went from Rob to Grace and back to Rob, getting undressed and dressed over and over. If he whined or tried to do anything for himself, whoever he stood in front of gently swatted his bottom and told him to be a good little boy. Most everything fit, though there were one or two shirts that didn't.

“Markus just outgrew this, so it makes sense it's a little big for Bobby.” Grace said.

“Something to grow into.” Rob said. Bobby frowned, less than thrilled he would have to grow into a t-shirt that said ‘holy cow, I’m cute!’ on it. “What’s that?” Rob asked, seeing Grace holding a roughly rectangular piece of fabric.

"My mom heard I was bringing things to a little boy, so she tossed them in. Does Bobby wear bibs still?"

"No!"

"He can start." Rob said with an air of finality. Seeing Bobby's typical glare, he shrugged as if the decision was out of his hands. “Remember last summer? You got ice cream all over your shirt.” He looked at Grace. “He had to take his shirt off and they almost didn’t let us on the bus home.”

“It melted! It was so hot.”

“My shirt was fine.” Rob loved how, even in that childish situation, that Bobby was infinitely more mature than the toddler before him. When we go to the pier this summer, I’m gonna put him in a highchair and feed him ice cream myself. He could already almost see the photo of an indignant Bobby in a bib, chocolate ice cream all over his face.

“So that’s a yes to the bibs.” Grace said with a decisive nod.

“There’s just one last thing.”

“And that is?” Rob asked with a smirk.

“Well, I heard you mention that Bobby wears nighties and I should’ve known you meant nightshirts.” She slapped her forehead. “Hello, Gwen! But, well, I had some old-” she

reached into the bag and pulled out a soft yellow nightgown with white lace around the collar.

“No way.” Bobby backed away instinctively, but he ended up in Rob's clutches.

“Oh, you are definitely trying that on, Bobby buddy!” Bobby squirmed and tried to pull free as Rob got his shirt off. Grace tossed him the nightgown and Bobby seized his chance to break free, but only ended up with the nightgown landing on his head.

“Get this off me!” He clawed at it, only managing to get it off his head as Rob gathered it in his hands and forced it down over Bobby's body. “No! Stop!”

“We're just trying it on, baby.” Rob's words were muffled by the fabric as it slithered down Bobby's body.

“It's for girls!”

“It's not any different from your nighties, except it's a bit longer.” Rob said, buttoning the pearl buttons. “You can't flash your diaper unless you do a somersault. You must like that!”

“Oh, he's adorable.” Grace cooed.

“I think it'll be good for colder nights.” Rob said.

“But”

“Hush, Bobby. It's just for bedtime, so no one will see.”

“I'll see if I can find any others and give them to you on

Saturday.” Grace said.

“Is that everything?”

“I think so.” Bobby thought his torment was over, but Rob pulled him into his lap, still wearing the nightgown.

“Bobby. What do you say?” Rob leaned in and fed Bobby his lines.

“Thank you, Grace, for my new t-shirts, bibs, and this nice new nightgown.” Bobby parroted.

“Good boy.” Rob cooed, kissing his cheek. “Ready to take this off and put your Bobbysaurus nightie back on?”

“Yes, please.” Bobby said.

Once Pat and Garrett arrived, Bobby hoped he would be out of the spotlight. Rob made him say hello to the both of them and he could not understand why they took it in stride that he was wearing nothing but an oversized shirt and playing with toddler toys. He had classes with both of them! Garrett sat right next to him in Mr. McNeil's class!

“We'll set up shop at the table in the dining room.” Rob said, taking charge. “I still gotta feed Bobby dinner, but once he goes to bed, we'll be able to spread out.”

“What time's that gonna be? I gotta get home to say good night to Markus.” Grace said.

“What time do you need to leave?”

“Oh, a little before 8:30.”

“Not a problem.” Rob said. “Bobby’s bedtime is 7.” Bobby looked up at Rob, betrayed. Only then did it really sink in that everyone was sitting on furniture except for him. “But first, are you hungry, Bobby?”

“Yes.” Bobby said softly. Rob smiled.

“How hungry are you?”

“So hungry.” Bobby replied. They went through this practically every night, so of course Rob would not skip it when he had an audience.

“Alright, I’m gonna get some food going for Bobby. Bobby, can you be a big boy and show everyone where the dining room table is?” Bobby looked from Rob to his classmates, but they were all taking it in stride that this was how Rob talked to him. I’m not four though!

“Let’s clean up your toys real quick.” Grace said. “Pat’s pretty clumsy.”

“Hey!”

“Well, it’s true. Do you really want to trip and break Bobby’s cool barn?” Grace sat down on the floor, but rather than move as quickly as she had said, she held up each cutesy little animal and quizzed Bobby on what sounds they make.

“What sound does the piggy make?” Bobby glared at her, but he knew she would not let him get away with not making the animal sounds.

“Oink, oink.” He said. She smiled and put the pig away.

“What about the cow?”

“Moo.”

“What about the chicken?”

“Cluck.”

“Actually, isn't that a rooster?” Bobby looked at Garrett, betrayed. He smiled. “Do you know what sound a rooster makes?”

“Cock a doodle doo!”

“Oh, that was good!” Grace praised. “How about a horsie?”

“Neigh.” Finally, everything was put away and Bobby led his classmates over to the dining room table.

“I know where Bobby goes!” Grace said, picking him up and depositing him in the waiting booster seat. He shifted, but he could not manage to get his nightie back down over his Pull-ups. He pushed down on the shirt between his legs. Maybe Garrett and Pat had not noticed?

“Do you have any homework?” Grace asked, her tone making it sound like a toddler with homework was pretty silly. Bobby wished he still did.

“No, Rob- I did it all already.”

“Very responsible.” Grace praised. “Guess you can color while we work on our stuff.”

Bobby did not know if Rob had planned it or not, but he was

soon set to work coloring in a smiling cartoon cow with crayons as the study group got to work discussing their project.

“At least it's not finger paint.” He murmured to himself, hoping no one would go in the kitchen to see his finger paint picture on the fridge. They probably had seen the video Rob had posted of Bobby in nothing but his underwear finger painting last weekend, though if they brought it up, he would make it very clear that Rob had dotted his nose with the paint and smeared it on his chest and hands before starting to record, just to make him look more like a messy toddler artist. Or the rainbow slime!

Bobby put the crayon down as suddenly, he wondered why he was sitting here, coloring peacefully. This was his house! Checking to make sure no one was looking at him, he slid down off of the booster seat, landing with a thump. Before he could even fix his nightie, Grace's head whipped around.

“Where you going, buddy?”

“Uh” he couldn't think of a lie as Grace grabbed him and returned him to the booster.

“Look, here comes dindins!”

“Can you get his bib, Grace?” Rob asked.

“Sure can!” Grace practically skipped off as Rob sat down next to Bobby, rubbing his back.

“Where were you off to?”

“Nowhere.”

“Ok.” Rob murmured into his ear, matching Bobby's volume.

“But if you need to go potty, tell me, okie dokie?”

“It wasn't that.” Bobby said, but Grace returned with the bib.

“I think this one's on theme.” She handed it to Rob and Bobby saw it had a smiling triceratops on it.

“Is there one for Garrett?” Pat chortled, but glanced at Rob to get a hint if it was okay to joke like that.

“They'd be too small for him.” Rob said with a chuckle.

“They're just for little Bobby.”

“I'm the oldest one here!” Bobby objected. Rob's finger was to Bobby's lips in an instant.

“Uh-oh! That was your outside voice, Bobby.” Rob looked around the room. “Can we remind Bobby what voice he should be using?” Bobby's heart fell as Grace, Pat, and Garrett all smiled at him.

“Inside voice, Bobby.” They chorused. Had they rehearsed that? How had they all known to say it just like that?

“Ok, how about you eat up?” Rob said, giving Bobby a squeeze. “Hungry Bobby gets a little fussy.”

“Isn't everyone else gonna eat?”

“Later.” Rob said. “All these smiley fries and fish sticks are just for you!” He kissed the top of Bobby's head. “Now no more talking. It's rude to talk with your mouth full and you

need to eat.” Rob turned away, though his arm remained on the back of Bobby's seat.

Bobby began to eat, figuring it would not do him any good to let the food get cold. He listened to Rob and them discuss their project. It was hard to feel included when he had no idea what their project was even about. He watched them cautiously, only taking drinks out of his sippy cup when he was certain no one was paying attention. Rob had somehow brainwashed them all into thinking he was four. Maybe Grace had a hand in it!

“Did you hear Grayson and Emmie broke up?” Garrett said, looking around to make sure everyone knew about his juicy gossip.

“Oh!” Bobby chimed in. “I actually saw them break up!”

“Don't get distracted, buddy.” Rob said, swooping in and grabbing a carrot, which he pushed into Bobby's mouth. “You gotta finish your dinner!” Bobby tried to explain that he had important details, but all Rob seemed to care about, even after the conversation moved on to Coach Sullivan's horrible magenta shorts, was keeping him quietly eating.

Every time Bobby swallowed, Rob had another piece of food ready for him. He hardly even looked at Bobby, automatically grabbing food and pushing it in the general direction of his mouth. That meant Bobby had to focus and make sure it got to his mouth rather than ramming into his cheeks.

Well, Bobby thought, if he's not even gonna pay attention. A

brief respite in the food coming toward him was all he needed to reach behind his neck and undo the bib. It fell down onto his lap. He kept eating, relishing his victory as he pushed the bib off of his lap and onto the wood floor.

He laughed a bit as Rob's hand felt around the empty plate before he finally looked away from his friends. He smiled at Bobby.

“You ate it all!” He said, his voice changing from the conversational tone he had had with his friends. Bobby squirmed a bit, realizing just how little Rob saw him as an equal. He really did think of him as a little boy! “Finish your milk.” He directed, holding the sippy cup to Bobby's lips. He took hold of the handle and Rob turned away again.

“Maybe we should ask if we all have to talk for the presentation.” Rob said and Bobby realized he had been ignoring them just as much as they had been ignoring him. Like we're in two different worlds. He drank his milk and pondered how he could convince them he was still their peer without making it seem like he was a little kid. He grew frustrated as he realized he had no idea how to do that.

“Alright,” Rob said, slapping his hands on the table and startling Bobby out of his thoughts. “Garrett and Pat, get started on the outline real quick. Grace, order the pizzas, and Bobby” he smiled down at his little buddy. “What time is it?”

“No.” Bobby said.

“Yes, buddy.”

“No. It isn't fair. You guys haven't even eaten yet.”

"But you had your dinner.”

“Rob, no. I am not going to bed. Not when there are people over.”

“Bobby. You don't get to throw a tantrum just because you have an audience.”

“Seriously. You all know me. I can see you avoiding looking at me! Tell Rob he's being ridiculous!” Rob sighed and picked Bobby up. Setting him against his shoulder, he gave him a few swats right on his exposed Pull-ups.

“You're just tired.”

“I am not! This is... this is crazy! You can't treat me like some little kid just... just cuz!”

“It's not just cuz.” Rob said, his lips right by Bobby's ear. “It's what's best for you. Your Mom and Dad agree. Everyone agrees.”

“But...” He tried to push himself off of Rob's shoulder, but he held him tightly in place. “But it's embarrassing.”

“What's embarrassing? Did Grace, Garrett, or Pat tease you? No, they were nice. Weren't they?” Rob began to head for the stairs. “Be back soon, guys.” He said, turning slightly to look back at his friends.

“Rob! No!” Bobby protested, kicking and wiggling.

“Careful. I don't want to drop you on the stairs.” Bobby tried

to hold still for a moment before realizing that that was not the way to get what he wanted.

“Let me go!” He yelled, his voice echoing in the stairwell.

“Bobby.” Rob said. “You're being naughty.”

“I'm sick and tired of this! I'm tired of being treated like a baby and getting hand me downs from some little ass-” Rob's hand covered Bobby's mouth.

“That is enough.” His voice radiated calm, but Bobby could tell he was mad.

“But” Bobby said into Rob's hand. “I...” he sniffled as he felt so helpless, tears began to well up in his eyes.

“Look.” Rob carried Bobby into the bathroom and sat down on the closed toilet, still holding Bobby against him. “I know this is tough. You have to get used to a lot of new things and maybe having people over wasn't the smartest move on my part. But acting like you're two isn't going to solve anything. You want so hard to be seen as a big boy and that's causing big feelings. I get that. But you can't throw tantrums whenever you don't get your way.”

“I'm not.”

“Shh. I know things are tough right now and that's a lot going on, but think of it this way. The school year's almost over and then you won't have to worry about pretending to be big anymore. You'll get to be a happy four year old all day long.”

“I don't want to be four, Rob.” Bobby said, trying to whine as

little as possible. Rob chuckled.

“Silly, it's not like we can just snap our fingers and change your age.”

“But... you...”

“Let's get your teeth brushed. Can you do that for me?”

Rob left Bobby sitting on the toilet lid while he got his toothbrush ready. He had bought a special toothbrush with a molded grip that fit Bobby's hand perfectly. He put a pea of toothpaste on it.

“Let's see those pearly whites.” Rob said. Bobby gritted his teeth and Rob nodded. “Alright, you still got teeth, so let's get them brushed.” He handed Bobby the toothbrush. “Don't start until the timer's going.” One of Bobby's acts of rebellion had been to keep brushing his teeth to delay bedtime. He had gone for at least ten minutes before Rob intervened, telling him overbrushing was bad for his teeth. Bobby thought that was ridiculous. If brushing was bad, why would the dentist tell him it's important to brush every day?

With Bobby's breath now minty fresh, he did a last chance potty break and then they moved to Bobby's bedroom. Rob held Bobby against his shoulder as he pulled back the blankets and gently set Bobby in bed.

“Bobby's got clean teeth.” He whispered. “Bobby's got his nightie. Bobby's got his diaper.” He nodded. “All that's left is your bedtime story.”

“Which one?” Bobby asked with an annoyed sigh as Rob pulled the construction themed covers up to his chin. At least he had finally given up insisting he did not need a bedtime story every night.

“Since you're wearing your bobbysaurus nightie, I thought we'd read this tonight.”

“Not Ten Little Dinosaurs!” Bobby whined the moment he saw the book. It barely even counted as a book!

“Shh, you're supposed to be powering down for the night. It's late for little Bobby.”

“It's like seven.”

“Which is the time you've gone to bed every night this month.” Rob replied. “And we have this conversation every night.” He patted the book in his lap. “But let's give you a choice. We stay up here and read this or we go downstairs and you do Snuggleby Baby for everyone.”

“No.” Bobby grunted. That book was just a cloying lullaby masquerading as a book.

“Then tell me which one you want to read.”

“Ten Little Dinosaurs.”

“Sure doesn't sound like you want to read it.”

“Ten Little Dinosaurs. Please.” Rob kissed Bobby's forehead and opened the book.

“What's this one?” He pointed at the cartoon representation.

“Triceratops.” Bobby said dutifully. Rob began to half-sing the words on the page.

“One little, two little, three little dinosaurs. Four little, five little, six little dinosaurs. Seven little, eight little, nine little dinosaurs. Ten little dino babies.” The book continued with Bobby naming Stegosaurus, Pterodactyl, and Brontosaurus. Each time, Rob sang the little song in a soothing voice, noticing Bobby's eyelids beginning to droop around the third verse. By the fifth verse, Rob knew he would not be awake for very long after the end of the book. Bobby seemed determined to keep his eyes open, but he only barely managed to say the final dinosaur: Tyrannosaurus rex.

“One little, two little, three little dinosaurs.” Rob sang, barely above a whisper, watching proudly as Bobby lost his fight with the inevitable. “Nine little dinosaurs. One little sleepy baby.” He whispered, tiptoeing away as Bobby's breathing was slow and even. He had wondered if Bobby would ever get used to going to bed at a four year old's bedtime, but the evidence spoke for itself. At this rate, he thought as he headed back down to his friends. He might be begging to stay up until 7 in a few months. He had heard once that toddlers could fall asleep anywhere and he smiled at the image of Bobby asleep on the living room floor, hardly even stirring when Rob scooped him up and carried him off to bed. Maybe someday. He thought, rejoining his friends.