Finny

by andlat

Finn groaned as Nate and Felix laughed about something that had happened at their friend Jaycen's house. He hated hanging out with his little brother, but that was the rule for the whole summer ever since their parents…

The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

Finny: Backyard Fun - Chapter 1

“Nathan, time to go.” Finn called, standing at the gate of the backyard of Nathan’s best friend Felix.

“In a minute.” Nathan called. “And it’s Nate.” Finn smirked. Ever since Nathan had said that he preferred Nate since it was more mature, he had taken to exclusively calling his little brother Nathan. Maybe it was revenge on Nate for having a growth spurt before him, but he did not think of it like that.

“Mom needs us home now.” Finn insisted, struggling with the gate’s latch. Felix came over and easily undid it.

“There you go, bud.” He said, grinning down at the older boy. Wearing nothing but his grey swimming trunks, hands placed casually on his hips, Finn could even see a little bit of peach fuzz under his arms. Was he really only ten? Sure, it was not so unheard of for a ten year old to be taller than a thirteen year old, but two of them? It bothered Finn, although he tried to hide it. “Race you to Nate!”

“You’re on!” By the time the words had left Finn’s mouth, Felix had quite the head start. Finn growled and charged forward. He was older, he had to win.

By the time Finn reached the boys, he was out of breath, practically huffing and puffing. He bent over and did not notice the look the two exchanged.

“Looks like he needs to cool down.” Felix said.

“Wha?” Felix seized Finn’s arms, pinning them behind him as Nathan grabbed the garden hose and blasted him from head to toe. “Stop!” Finn protested, spitting out the water that got into his mouth.

“Think he’s cool enough?” Felix wondered out loud. “He still feels a little hot to me.” Taking his best friend’s cue perfectly, Nathan walked right up to his older brother and shoved the hose right down the front of his shorts. Finn squealed and water gushed out of the legs of his shorts as the hose flooded and thoroughly soaked his underwear.

“There we go.” Nathan said with a grin, extracting the hose from his brother’s shorts. “All nice and cool now, hmm?” Finn was so furious, he could not even string two words together, stammering angrily.

“Oh, he’s shivering!” Felix exclaimed. “How can we warm little Finn up?”

“Let’s get those wet clothes off of him first of all.” Nathan said with a grin. Between the both of them, it was not hard at all to strip Finn completely down to his wet skin.

“Thought you said he was your big brother.” Felix asked, holding up Finn’s underwear with a smirk. “These don’t look like big brother undies.”

“He’s not my big brother.” Nate said. “Obviously, he’s my baby brother who followed me here.”

“Here, let’s get his clothes on the clothesline so they can dry.” Felix said. “We’ll put his underwear right in the middle

where everyone can see little Finny's tighty whities."

"Shuddup." Finn hissed, his hands covering his crotch. He did not know about Felix, but he knew Nathan wore the same underwear he did. With the boys distracted at the clothesline, he snuck over to Nathan and yanked his shorts down. He gaped as he saw his brother's boxer briefs.

"Yup." Nathan said with a grin. "Mom let me switch six months ago. You're the only one still in little boy tighty whities, Finny."

"But but"

"Oh, he's still chilly."

"Well, he is outside naked." Nathan replied mildly. Felix nodded.

"Mom!" He called. The patio door opened and his mom stepped outside, her eyebrows raising as she saw her son and his friend standing on each side of, all things, a naked boy.

"What's going on here? Felix, Nate?" Finn tried to jump in to explain, but the two ten year olds had everything firmly in control.

"My baby brother Finn followed me here and had a little too much fun with the hose."

"We got him out of his wet clothes, but he needs something to wear. Do we have anything old of mine he could wear?" Felix's mom studied Finn.

“Hmm… any of your shirts are going to look more like a dress on him, but” She reached out and took Finn’s hand. “C’mon, cutie. Let’s get you some clothes, hmm?”

“What? Where are you taking me?” Finn looked over his shoulder in a panic as he was dragged into the house, Nathan and Felix chuckling.

They laughed all the more when Finn emerged from the house, wearing a red Paw Patrol t-shirt and equally red shorts. He glared at them.

“Nathan, we’re going home right now.”

“Your clothes aren’t dry yet.” Nathan said. Finn looked at the clothesline. He had been in there for at least half an hour while Felix’s mom had doted on him. Why did his clothes look just as wet? He glanced at the hose and knew.

“You sprayed them again?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Nathan replied. “They’ll be dry soon. But first, you need to tell me what took you so long.”

“Yeah, tell us.”

“Tell your big brother, Finny.” Nathan ordered.

“You’re not my big brother.” He should have known to hold his tongue as the bigger boys were more than able to pull him toward them. He found himself across Nathan’s lap and, squirm as he might, he could not stop them from yanking down his shorts to expose his new underwear.

“She put you in freaking Pull-ups?” Felix and Nathan exclaimed in near unison. Finn blushed, tears welling up in his eyes as they looked at his Cars Pull-ups. They had been the only thing she could find that fit him, not even giving him the chance to try on a pair of Felix’s boxer briefs before declaring them too big for him.

“Oh, this must be some of Adam’s clothes. He’s my cousin. He’s three.”

“You’re wearing a three year old’s clothes?” Nathan’s smile could not have been any wider. He pulled Finn’s shorts back up and looked him over. “I can’t believe they fit.”

“He’s big for his age.”

“And Finny’s itty bitty for his age. Aren’t you, bud?”

“Shut up.”

“So what else did you do in there?” Finn groaned.

“I ate.”

“Like lunch?”

“No, it was a snack. She insisted.”

“Sippy cup, bib?” Felix looked like he already knew the answer.

“No bib.” Finn mumbled.

“But sippy cup for sure?” He nodded, whimpering. Felix laughed, but what was far more troubling was how pensive

Nathan looked.

“Well,” he said with a grin. “I think you’ve been embarrassed enough for one day. Felix, do you think your mom’ll give us a bag for Finny’s clothes? I should get my baby brother home so he can change out of this before mom and dad get home.”

“Aww, leaving already?” Nathan nodded.

“Yeah. You can see how fussy Finny’s getting. But” he grinned down at his furious brother. “I think I’ll be spending every day here. And I’ll bring Finny with me. Since your mom knows just how to treat him.”

Chapter 2

Finny Goes to the Movies - Chapter 2

Finn groaned as Nate and Felix laughed about something that had happened at their friend Jaycen's house. He hated hanging out with his little brother, but that was the rule for the whole summer ever since their parents had seen some news report or something. Neither of them could go anywhere with a “buddy”. Nate had convinced their parents that Felix counted as a buddy, but if Finn wanted to go somewhere, he had to go where Nate was going.

He had only agreed to come along with Nate because they were going to the movies, but somehow, Felix's mom had convinced them they had time to hang out and drink lemonade. It was dumb, Finn thought. What made it a million times worse was that Felix's mom was convinced Finn was Nate's little brother, hopelessly little, so he got stuck with a sippy cup and the babyish nickname Finny. He tried to set the record straight, but neither Nate nor Felix would back him up.

“And the third one's your weenie!” Nate bellowed. Even though both Nate and Felix laughed raucously, Finn's annoyed groan still drew their attention.

"Too bad we don't have a highchair for you." Felix had said that at least six times since they had arrived. Finn glared at him all the same, but Felix's mom was one of those parents who seemed to believe that her son could do no wrong.

"Aren't you done yet, Finny?" Nate asked. He picked up

Finn's sippy cup and shook it. "You're not even halfway and your cup is smaller than ours!"

"We could take it with us." Felix suggested, his tan shoulders lifting his tank top up and down in a shrug.

"Is that what you want, Finny winny? Take your sippy with you?"

"No!"

"Well, hurry up then." Nate said.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Cuz" Finn did not know how to explain that the sippy cup made it hard to drink quickly without sounding like a total baby.

“Cuz why?” Felix asked. “Do you need help?” Finn glared at Felix.

“Aw, he’s too bashful to ask for help.” Nate said. “Little Finny needs help drinking all his juicy woosy.”

“Why are you talking like that?”

“It’s the way my mom talks to my little cousin Adam.” Felix explained. “You should know about Adam, you wore his stuff that one time.”

“Quit! Let’s just go to the movies.”

“It’s not time yet.” Nate said. “And you need to finish your

lemonade."

"Who cares?" Finn snarled.

"You're a guest and it's rude not to finish everything you're given." He rolled his eyes. "Geez, little brothers, right?"

"I am not your little brother."

"That's too bad." Nate's grin made it clear that he had something Finn would not like on his mind. "I know just how to help my little brother finish his lemonade on time." Finn frowned and took another drink from the sippy cup. There had to be some way to make it come out faster!

"But remember, he doesn't want our help." Felix said. "Cuz you're a big boy, aren't you, Finny?" Finn rolled his eyes, turning the sippy cup all the way upside down to try and get it to come out even a little bit quicker. It's working, he thought, but then Nate snatched the sippy cup from his hands.

"Here." He said. "Hold him, Felix." Finn cried out as Felix grabbed his arms, kicking and screaming as Nate pulled the lid off of the sippy cup, pulled out the front of his brother's shorts and dumped the last third of the lemonade right onto his crotch.

"All gone!" Felix hissed in Nate's ear, cackling. Felix's mom finally came to investigate what all the commotion was. All Finny could do was whimper and blubber as Felix and Nate wove a tale about him being in a rush and trying to pull the lid of his sippy cup off.

“Well, that’s why we gave you the sippy.” Felix’s mom said. She grabbed Finny’s hand. “So sticky icky, huh?” Felix and Nate snickered as he nodded timidly. “Let’s get you cleaned up, hmm?”

“Bye-bye Finny poo.” Felix whispered as Felix’s mom led him out of the room.

“Here, you can get undressed in Felix’s room.” She said in that tone that made it obvious she had no idea he was Felix's big brother – or even north of five.

“But”

“The less you fuss, the quicker you’ll be all clean.” She said, kneeling down and lifting up on Finn’s shirt. The top of his shirt was red, but the bottom half was white and she was glad to see that it was unscathed beyond a few crumbs. “I see a Finny tummy!” Finn pulled away. “Oh, alright. You can do it yourself.”

Despite that, she stayed right there as Finn bashfully undressed, trying his best to tug down his briefs – now more yellow than white at the front – with one hand while keeping his modesty with the other.

“Let's get this over with.” Finn muttered, handing his soaked briefs over to Felix's mom.

“Remember where the bathroom is?” She asked as he took off running, half-expecting Felix and Nate to be there, waiting. They weren't.

“Uh…” he saw the tub filling up.

"Oh, the shower is broken, so you'll have to settle for a bath." She explained. It sounded like an obvious lie to Finn. All the same, once she left, he got into the tub. At least she had not insisted on bathing him this time, he thought.

He tried to relax, but knew he needed to hurry. They had to make the movie, right? Wait… If the shower was broken, did that mean that Felix took baths? Finn snorted at the thought. Maybe his mom still gave him baths and that was why she so easily slid into babying Finn.

Pushing the upsetting thoughts that followed aside, Finn got to work washing himself. He felt a little foolish. The lemonade had mostly been focused on his crotch, so why was he washing his arms? He moved lower, figuring his belly needed some washing, just to be safe. He cried out as the shower suddenly came on, a cloudburst of lukewarm water hitting him right in the face.

“Everything okay?” Felix’s mom said, bursting into the room every bit as suddenly as the shower had begun to run. “Oh! Yeah, it does that.” She hurried over and fiddled with the knobs. Finn covered himself as he felt her gaze shift to him. “Well, with a surprise like that, I bet the bath isn’t much fun at all anymore, hmm?” Finn was too bashful to speak. He was naked, after all! Last time, she had at least turned her back while he got dressed in those ridiculous toddler clothes. “Let’s get you all dried off.”

“Are Felix and Nate wondering where I am?” He knew his

brother was always impatient when they had places to be.

“Oh, they already left.”

“What?”

“But don’t worry. I don’t mind ba… watch… hanging out with you, Finny!”

“What? I was supposed to-” She slipped her hands under the distressed boy’s arms and lifted him out of the tub, the action wrenching his hands away from his groin. “Hey!” He kicked in the air, but she had him wrapped in a towel before his toes even had time to curl on the fluffy bath mat below his feet. “I was supposed to go see the movie with them!”

“Well, your big brother told me you were a little worried it might be scary.”

“No!”

“It’s ok. Even I get scared sometimes. Did you know that?” Finn fumed. “Oh, but I bet you never ever get scared, huh?” Finn refused to play along. “I bet you don’t even sleep with a nightlight any more, do you?” When Finn once again set his jaw and refused to answer, she brushed a bit of wet hair out of his face, murmuring about how he could use a haircut, and pulled something from behind him over his head. It was only then that Finn looked at the towel he had draped around him and realized it was one of those hooded towels. Atop his head were the bubble eyes of a green frog. “Finny the Froggy!” She said. He gave a weak smile. “What sound do froggies make?”

“Ribbit.” He said. “I'm really too old for this sort of thing.”

“Aww. You're too big to hop like a froggy to Felix's room?”

“Yes.” Her smile worried Finn. She picked him up and carried him back to Felix's room. He had the same posters as Nate, but what caught Finn's attention was the clothes on the bed.

“I know you want your big boy undies.” She said as she saw him notice the Pull-ups on Felix’s bed. “But Felix’s boxers would be too big for you and those are all we have. We’ll get your undies clean lickety-split and then you’ll be back out of Pull-ups before the big- older boys get back.” Finn grumbled under his breath, but at least it was better than being naked.

He sighed as he finished dressing. Felix’s mom had stayed right there, pretending to tidy Felix’s room, but really watching him put on the Pull-ups and the matching – why’d it have to be matching? – Mickey Mouse Clubhouse t-shirt and shorts. Standing there in Felix’s room, which was a lot like Nate and his, seeing the younger boy’s boxers on top of his dirty laundry hamper, only made Finn feel worse about his toddler attire.

“I know you’re still bummed about the older boys ditching you, so let’s try and make this fun. Okie dokie?” Finn’s shoulders rose and fell in defeat. To his surprise, she kneeled down and grabbed his shoulders. She looked him over.

“What?”

"How old are you really?"

"Huh?" He did not understand why she was asking this now.

"I know your brother teases you about being a baby. That's what siblings do. But I also know you're not as young as my nephew Adam.” Even though you fit in his clothes hung in the air. “And you certainly don't talk like a kindergartener."

"Um" did he tell her the truth and risk her thinking he was lying? "Th" he stopped himself. "I'm"

"And I know for a fact that was lemonade on your underwear, wasn't it?" He nodded. Maybe this was all working out. "So, how old are you, bud?" His heart pounded in his chest and he was pretty sure his palms were sweating. He made up his mind. He was going to tell her the truth. No matter how she responded, he would tell her the truth.

"Thir... Thirteen." He mumbled, meek as a mouse, before clearing his throat to try and say it a bit more clearly.

"Thir? Oh, you're going into third grade in the fall?" His eyes widened. That was not what he had said at all! "So that makes you seven?" Panicked, he shook his head. "Oh? Six then?" She was going in the wrong direction!

“I’m eight.” He blurted out, knowing that it was ridiculous to say when he was really thirteen. Felix’s mom looked at him appraisingly.

“I see.” She said. “So you’re only two years younger than Nate and Felix?” She held up two fingers.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m eight.”

“Well, I’m not so sure about that. A big boy eight year old wouldn’t be so willing to wear Pull-ups and drink from a sippy, would he?” It’s gonna blow her mind when she realizes I’m thirteen, Finn thought.

“Uh, well, my mom always says be a good and gracious guest.” She shook her head.

“You’re just a silly little boy, aren’t you? Aren’t you?” Finn squirmed and tried to get away as she got closer, but by the time he had realized what was coming, it was too late. “Silly little boy! Silly little boy!” She chanted in a goofy voice, tickling his sides and belly. Finn tried to push her away, but she was much bigger than him. He laughed and rolled around, but she seemed to be everywhere at once. There was no escape, at least until…

“Oh.” Finn said as he felt a squirt escape.

“Oh? Oh!” Thanks to her maternal instincts, she immediately knew what had happened, but still checked him out of habit, tugging down the front of his shorts to see his Pull-ups. “It’s okay. It’s just a little accident.” She smiled. “I won’t tell if you don’t.” She helped him to his feet. “And I had a feeling those weren’t just lemonade stains on your undies.” He blushed and stammered, but she had already moved on. “That’s why they call them accidents.” She smiled down at him. “But promise me no more using your Pull-ups, okay? Adam didn’t leave any diapers here!”

“I just wanted to go to a movie.” Finn mumbled, feeling as if his face had never been as red as it was.

“How about we watch our own movie?”

“Huh?” There was no way he would let her take him to the movies dressed like this!

“You saw the big TV. I know you did. We can make popcorn and you can watch the movie, color, play with toys, whatever you want to do.”

“Can we watch Slugman?”

“Is that what they went to see?” Finn knew moms well enough to know he had just gotten Felix into some trouble. “Well, that movie's not even appropriate for Felix and Nate, let alone you.”

“I can see PG 13 movies.”

“I'm sure you can, but I've got the perfect movie in mind for you. Adam loved it.”

“And he's a movie critic now?” Finn mumbled as she picked him up and carried him along.

“Oh, here's a photo of Adam from about a year ago!” She stopped in the hall and pointed at a photo of a chubby cheeked toddler with messy brown curls. He wore nothing but a diaper as he beamed up at the camera.

“And he's four now?” Finn said, doing the math.

“Yep, Adam's a big boy just like you.” She kissed his cheek and laughed. “Cutie Finny pudding and pie.”

“Huh?”

“Course, he still needs Pull-ups. You're just in them until your clothes are clean.”

“Which will be soon, right?”

“Oh, not yet. Maybe when your big brother comes back.” Finn sighed.

“What movie is it?” He asked as she finally set him down to have both hands free to work the TV.

“It's called Captain Snuggle and the Pajama Pirates.”

“Oh.”

“Have you seen it, Finny?”

“No.” He could have lied, but what if she asked him about it?

“I bet you'll like it.”

“Can’t we do something else?”

“Here.” She stood up and pulled out a cloth bin of trucks and cars. “You can play while the movie’s on, kay?” Great, he thought. I'd be seeing Slugman if Nate and Felix hadn't spilled lemonade on me. Now I'm wearing Pull-ups and playing with toy cars because this lady won't believe I'm thirteen.

Captain Snuggle proved to be the worst kind of little kid movie. A boy and girl were bored, so they boarded Captain Snuggle's pirate ship, the Cuddle Cruiser. It almost looked more like a crib than a ship. There were almost constant songs and each and every one seemed to be a lullaby. Finn

wished he could be anywhere but here, but Felix's mom sat on the couch, making no effort to hide the fact that she was watching him more than the movie. He had no choice but to half-heartedly explore the trucks and cars in the bin.

Things got a little better when he discovered a fire truck that, when you pushed the button, played a siren. He grinned and began to push it around, making a game out of drowning out the music in the movie with the fire truck's siren. He smiled, glad that he didn't have to hear yet another obnoxious song about being a pirate and loving your friends. These guys weren't real pirates!

“I think we've had enough of that.” Felix's mom said, bending over and pulling him back toward her. “Let's watch the movie.”

“I don't really like this movie.”

“You've barely watched it.” She set him next to her. “How about this? You watch it while I get you some more lemonade.” She stood up. “And no moving. That toy needs to rest now.” Finn rolled his eyes, but tried his best to give the movie a chance. “Look, Finny! That boy looks like you!” She pointed to a boy in baby blue fleece footie pajamas with a sailboat applique on the button seat and a sailor cap who looked a few years too old to be talking excitedly about the pacifier compass pinned to his pajamas. “His name's Tugboat Teddy the Cabin Boy.”

“More like Cabin Baby.” Finn muttered under his breath. Thankfully, she didn't push it.

“Avast, ye snugglebugs!” Captain Snuggle said. “We're nearing the land of Lights-Out! Prepare for warm blankies and cotton candy trees!”

“What's that, Captain Snuggle?” The boy asked, pointing to the horizon.

“It looks like a storm.” The girl said. He had not caught either of their names.

“It's a Sleepy Storm!” Captain Snuggle declared.

“A doozy of one!” First Mate Binky added.

“Do we need to go down below?” The boy asked.

“This is ridiculous.” Finn muttered. “They're prolly gonna-”

“We'll sing it to sleep!” Captain Snuggle declared. Everyone on board the crib-ship began to sing yet another lullaby. Where was Felix's mom with the lemonade?

Finn slid lower down on the couch, feeling his eyelids grow heavy. The movie was so boring, it was putting him to sleep. He tried to force his eyes open again as the soothing lullaby continued.

Why was he trying to fight it? He didn't want to watch this movie. At least sleep would make the time go faster. He opened his eyes and was dimly aware of Felix's mom draping a blanket over him.

“Wake up, Finny.” He snapped awake to Nate's voice, briefly disoriented. He sat up and looked around. The blanket was

still over him and Nate was grinning.

“You abandoned me.”

“Looks like you had fun.” Nate said with a snort.

“Are we leaving?”

“Not yet.” Nate walked away and Finn took stock. His thumb felt weird and he looked at it, suddenly worried he had been sucking on it in his sleep. He threw the blanket off and almost immediately scrambled to grab it again when he realized he was not wearing pants! All he had on was the t-shirt and Pull-ups!

“Did you have a nice nap?” Felix's mom asked, coming in with the sippy cup. She handed it to him. “Have some lemonade, it'll help you get those last little bits of sleepy out of your eyes.” He put the spout to his lips.

“Where's my pants?”

“Oh, I wanted to make sure I could keep an eye on your Pull-ups.” She whisked the blanket away, ignoring his indignant glare, and checked his Pull-ups. “Still dry! Good for you, Finny, but we'd better get you to the potty, huh?” She took the sippy cup from him, setting it on the coffee table before lifting him up and depositing him on his feet.

Nate and Felix were only in the next room, so they could not miss a flustered Finn being led by the hand to the bathroom, wearing a Mickey Mouse Clubhouse t-shirt and Pull-ups.

“How has he not told her he's thirteen?” Felix whispered.

Nate shrugged.

“All that toddler stuff fits him and she seems to like babying him.” He said. “Maybe he did tell her and she doesn't believe him.” He shrugged again. “It'll all get straightened out.”

"Are my clothes dry yet?" Finn asked as Felix's mom put the seat down. "H-hey!" She had his Pull-ups down around his ankles before he even knew what was happening, his bottom landing on the toilet seat.

"Potty time first and then we'll go check, kay? Did you have a nice nap?"

"How long was I asleep?"

"We can finish the movie next time you're here, okie dokie? And I won't forget about your nap next time either."

"I don't..." he sighed, knowing that once she decided something, it was all but set in stone.

"You don't take naps everyday?"

"Right. I'm too old for naps." She looked at him as if she didn't believe him. "Seriously. I'm thirteen. I'm Nate's older brother." He waited for her to apologize, to look surprised, something. What he didn't expect was for her to laugh.

"Oh, Finny. That's so silly! I've changed you, I've given you baths. I think I'd know if you were thirteen, sweetie pie."

"But" he was gobsmacked. "I am!"

"Focus on going potty, Finny. We're going to finish this up,

check on your clothes, and then we're going to take Nate and Felix out for dinner."

"But we need to get home."

"It's ok. Nate called your mommy and daddy while you were napping and let them know the plan." Finn did not like the sound of that.

"Can we go get my clothes now? I don't need to pee." Felix's mom studied him as if she could tell how full his bladder was with just a look.

"Let's give it one more minute." She looked at her smartwatch. "Try to go." Finn rolled his eyes, wondering what she would do if he got off the toilet. Would she spank him? Could he make a run for it? Why was he putting up with all this? He was thirteen years old and this lady was- "Time's up!"

To Finn's relief, she let him get off the toilet by himself. Even though he could reach fine, she made him stand on a stool to wash his hands and then they were off to the laundry room. He couldn't believe his luck. He was about to get his own clothes back, Nate and Felix weren't around to see him walking in just Pull-ups and a t-shirt, everything was going so well!

“We've got to go down the stairs to the basement, Finny. Can you be safe and go down them by yourself?”

“Yes.” That wasn't good enough for Felix's mom. She kneeled down between him and the door to the basement.

“One step, one foot, holding tight, that's how we go down the stairs right.”

“Ok.” Finn said. Why was she making such a big deal out of this? As if she could hear his thoughts, she began to sing.

“Step by step, hold the rail, going slow will never fail! No big jumps, safe we stay. We go down the careful way. Step by step, hold on tight. We go down the stairs just right!” She repeated the song until they reached the bottom. “Alrighty doodles, let's see what's in the dryer!”

Finn stood there as she opened the door. What if something had gone wrong? He grinned as he saw his red and white shirt come out of the dryer, looking especially mature since it didn't have Mickey anywhere on it. His shorts came next. Then, his face fell. That underwear in her hands was not his!

“Where's my underwear?”

“Right here, Finny.” She held up the Thomas the Tank Engine briefs. No, those were not his!

“Those aren't mine. Mine are just white.” These had a red waistband and leg holes with Thomas the Tank Engine all over them, going every direction. They weren't his. They couldn't be his. “They're not mine.”

“Whose else would they be? Felix wears boxers and these would never fit him.” She held them up. “They're Finny sized.” Finn's heart pounded. Something weird was going on here. Felix or Nate had swapped them out or something! “They're exactly the same as the ones I put in the wash

earlier. I think you were wearing white undies last time you were here.” Finn shook his head. He couldn't wear those.

“These are your options, sweetie.” Felix's mom said. “You can keep your Pull-ups on or we can do your big boy undies. Up to you.” Finn didn't know what to choose. Thomas the Tank Engine briefs were at least as babyish as Mickey Mouse Clubhouse Pull-ups, maybe even more so somehow. He was pretty sure Nate was still in diapers when he watched Thomas the Tank Engine everyday.

“There has to be something else in the dryer.” He pushed his way over and looked into the empty drum.

“You've been begging for your undies all day.” Felix's mom said, opportunistically hooking a finger into the back of his Pull-ups. “You'll feel better about them once you have them on.”

“Those aren't mine!” He whined as she removed his Pull-ups. He pulled his Mickey Mouse Clubhouse t-shirt down over his crotch as the Thomas briefs came into view. She held them open.

“Step right in, step left too.” Finn sighed, but obeyed. “Pull them up, it's what we do.” Up came the babyish briefs. "Snug and cozy, soft and neat. Nice clean undies can't be beat!”

“Oh, my god.” Finn muttered.

“Doesn't that feel better?” She stood up and grabbed his hand. “Alright, let's go upstairs and find your shorts.”

“What? You have my shorts right there.”

“These are clean.” She replied. “You've got those shorts upstairs you've been wearing all day.”

“But”

“Your butt'll be in the shorts upstairs. Let's go up the stairs. Do you want to be extra safe and crawl?”

“I am not crawling up the stairs!” Finn snapped, realizing he had barely improved his situation. He was still pantsless, just instead of Pull-ups, he had the worst underwear imaginable. It made no sense. Not only had his underwear vanished, but it was obvious the Thomas the Tank Engine briefs were for a toddler, yet they were no more snug on him than a new pair of his own underwear.

“Alright, we'll go up the stairs, nice and slow, holding-”

“I know!”

“Someone's getting hangry, hmm?”

“Can't I have my clothes back?”

“I told you.” She said gently. “These are clean and it's too late in the day to put on clean clothes.” The way she emphasized clean as if he was a dumb little kid only infuriated him more.

“I'm thirteen!” He snarled.

“Finny, do you need some quiet down time?”

“No! I need you to listen and quit treating me like a little kid!

I know you're trying to be nice, but I am almost fourteen years old. You can't keep treating me like a baby."

"Those are big feelings." Felix's mom said.

"Stop!"

"And I'm sorry you feel like I'm treating you like a baby. I promise that, from now on, I'll remember how big you are, okay?" Finn scowled. That did not sound right at all. "Now, we need to go upstairs. Lead the way."

Finn stomped up the stairs, taking care to hold the railing to make sure Felix's mom had no reason to intervene. It was only when he reached the top that he realized he was pantsless and should have insisted on shorts.

"Where are those boys?" Felix's mom murmured. "Alright, here's what we're gonna do. You need some quiet time."

"What? What does that mean?"

"Shh, quiet and I'll tell you." She said. Finn rolled his eyes, but stayed quiet as she grabbed a coloring book and crayons. "For the next ten minutes." She said ten as if he might have never heard of it before. "You're going to color. No talking, just coloring. I just know that'll help you feel better." Finn needed his shorts, even if they were the red ones with Mickey on the left leg.

"Can-"

"Shh. No talking." She set the coloring book on the coffee table. "Come on. Ten quiet minutes of coloring. No talking."

Finn descended to his knees and took the offered crayon. “There we go.” She said soothingly.

Even as Felix and Nate came down from Felix's room, Finn was forced to focus on coloring the car in the coloring book, so the first they saw of him was the boy on his knees, coloring with his underoos-clad bottom on prominent display. They snickered and whispered to each other before Nate spoke up.

“Finny! You're out of Pull-ups!”

“He's having quiet down time.” Felix's mom said, pointing him back to his coloring. “But yes, we got his clothes all nice and clean. I know you two poured lemonade all over him. What a nasty thing to do to a little boy!” Finn smirked. Make them wear Pull-ups, he thought. “Are you ready to go eat?”

“We are.” Felix said, only sounding the slightest bit chastised. Was that all they were going to get?

“Alright, Finny.” Felix's mom held the Mickey Mouse shorts. “Come over here and let's get your pants on.” They're better than Pull-ups, they're better than Pull-ups. Finn thought as his brother and Felix were treated to the sight of him walking across the room and stepping into his shorts. At least she didn't sing, he thought glumly. “I think we're all set. Finny can handle a few blocks, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” Nate replied, clearly a little unsure what the question meant. Felix's mom nodded before kneeling down again. I'm not that short, Finn thought grumpily. His head met

Nate's shoulder when he stood on his toes, after all!

“Now, Finny, we're going to walk to the restaurant for dinner. Whose hand do you want to hold?” Was that even a question? There was no way he would hold his brother or Felix's hand. Then again, he'd prefer not to hold anyone's hand, but he had a feeling that was not an option Felix's mom would even think about.

“Uh, yours.” He mumbled.

“Okie dokie!” She presented her hand and he took it. It was better than being carried or having to hold his brother's hand. He was almost surprised she hadn't insisted on either of those.

Nate and Felix walked behind Finn and Felix's mom, chatting quietly. Finn looked over his shoulder, trying to figure out what they were talking about. It looked like they were watching something on Felix's phone. It might not have had anything to do with Finn, but he had a sneaking suspicion it did. Had they taken pictures or even a video of him in Pull-ups? The Thomas briefs?

Where had his underwear gone? He couldn't believe he wanted his white briefs back. He had every plan of abandoning them come back to school shopping, finally getting boxer briefs like Nate wore. And now I'm wearing freaking Thomas underoos, he thought bitterly.

“Look, Finny!” Felix's mom said, scooping him up as if he had no hopes of seeing the playground they were walking past with his feet on the ground. “Maybe we can stop here to

play after dinner, huh?”

“Uh, I guess?” Once they ate, he would be demanding that he and Nate go home. I'm the older brother, he reminded himself. I should make an executor decision or whatever it's called.

“And there's the restaurant!” Felix's mom said, keeping Finn in her arms as they arrived.

The hostess smiled as they walked in, her face lighting up as she saw Finn in Felix's mom's arms. He groaned and had to fight the primal urge to hide his face in Felix's mom's shoulder. Another person who seemed to think he was a little boy.

“Do we need a highchair?” The hostess eyed him up. “Oh, probably a booster seat.”

“Yes, thank you.” Felix's mom said.

“And how old is this little guy?” The hostess asked as she led them to their table. No one seemed to know how to answer, so Finn seized his chance.

“I'm thirteen!” His declaration hung in the air.

“Thirteen?” The hostess said in the mock disbelief adults only ever used for little kids. “Is that how old these two are?”

“Naw, we're ten.” Nate said. “Finny'll be five next month.” Finn glared at his brother, but Felix's mom distracted him by setting him in the booster seat and even getting the plastic bib around his neck before fishing wet wipes out of her purse to

give his face a wipe, just because she could.

“We'll have to have a birthday party for you.” She said softly. “Well, at least a cupcake.” She smiled.

“I'll be fourteen.” Finn sputtered as she wiped all around his mouth.

“No, you already are four. You'll be five. Big brother just said.”

“Nate's lying. I'm a teenager!” Felix's mom leaned in close to him.

“Do you want to go potty or color?”

“Don't change the subject. I'm a-”

“You didn't go earlier, so let's visit the potty.” She plucked him out of the booster seat and set him down, keeping a hand on the back of his head as he led the way to the bathroom. It was only when they were at the doors that he realized he had the plastic bib around his neck. “No, no, leave your bib on. We don't need more laundry today!” Felix's mom said.

“Fine.”

“We need to go in this door, snugglebug.” She nudged him toward the womens’ room. Finn felt a twinge of panic. He couldn't go in the girls’ room! That was forbidden!

Realizing the bathroom was empty, Finn felt a little better, though his relief faded when Felix's mom took him into a stall.

“I'll do it myself!” Finn declared, tugging down his shorts and underwear before realizing he had sounded every bit like the almost five year old he had been declared. Felix's mom smiled, amused. What am I doing? Finn thought. Pulling my pants down completely? I pee standing!

“And up on the potty goes Finny-boo, we'll flush and wash when you're all through.”

“Did you just come up with that?” She smiled and nodded.

“You really shouldn't-”

“Shh, go peepee.”

“You shouldn't listen to Nate. He's a dumb ten year old. I'm honestly turning fourteen.” Felix's mom sighed, but tried to hide her irritation.

“Finny, you need to stop with this. There's no reason your big brother would lie about something like that and I think I know a four year old when I see one.”

“Then why did you need to ask me how old I am?”

“Enough silly questions. Finish peeing and we'll go eat.” Muttering under his breath, Finn peed, glaring down at Thomas's smiling face around his ankles. He kicked his foot, feeling a little better as his shorts and underpants fell off onto the bathroom floor.

"What did you do that for?" Felix's mom asked, picking them up. Finn did not answer. "Are you done?" He nodded.

As Felix's mom had him step into the Thomas briefs, he heard the door open. He froze, but she smiled.

"It's a public bathroom, Finnyroo. Let's do your shorts." He knew it would go quicker if he got to put them on himself, but she held them tightly and all he could do was step in. Then it was out to wash his hands, coming face to face with a girl a couple years younger than Felix and Nate.

"What's he doing in here? Boys aren't allowed."

"We make an exception for little boys who still need help." Felix's mom explained.

"You were changing his diaper?"

"No, no. Finny's too big for that. He's four." It annoyed Finn how readily the girl accepted that he was about half her age when they were nearabouts the same size, but she shrugged it off as he was shepherded to the sink for Felix's mom to help him wash his hands, the mirror reminding him of his bib. Isn't this over yet?

Felix and Nate were too busy chatting with each other to pay Finn much mind, though he wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. Felix's mom gave him nonstop attention, leaning in close to have him decide what he wanted from the kids menu. It made him feel a little better that Nate and Felix also had to order from it, though they didn't have to color in the smiling food items with the crayons the server brought. They also got to order whatever they wanted to drink while Finn got chocolate milk.

"It'll give you strong bones." Felix's mom said as he eyed the other two's root beer floats covetously.

"Ice cream has calcium too." He mumbled.

"But the sugar will rot their teeth." She tickled his side. "Right out of their heads!"

Finn ate his grilled cheese and fruit as quickly as he could, but it didn't help that Nate and Felix were too busy making each other laugh with their fries, so he was stuck there in the booster seat.

"Don't we have to get home, Nathan?" Finn asked. Nate snorted, seeing right through Finn.

"Nope." He went back to sticking fries up his nose to Felix's delight.

"Honestly." Finn muttered. "How can anyone think I'm younger than those dweebs?" He shifted in the booster seat, still unsure if his underwear was any better than the Pull-ups.

"We're all paid." Felix's mom said. "Felix, get your hand out of your pants. Finny, up you come." She lifted him out of the booster seat and down to the floor. "I think I owe you a trip to the playground."

"No, Nate and I need to get home." Finn said, trying to sound as mature as possible. "Our parents might get worried."

"Finny!" Nate said. "I told you before, we're spending the night."

"What?"

"I'm sure I mentioned it too." Felix's mom said. “In all the excitement, he just forgot.”

"No! No no no." Finn said. "Nate, we have to go home!" His mind raced with terrified thoughts about what a night over at Felix's might mean for him. What would Felix's mom do to him? "Nate!"

Nate turned away from Finn, smirking at Felix. Everything was going perfectly. Kneeling down, Felix's mom pulled him to her, giving him a big hug.

"I know it's scary, the idea of sleeping in a new place, but I promise you'll have fun."

"But" his voice was muffled by her shoulder.

"I'll take good care of you."

That's what I'm afraid of, Finn thought as they left the restaurant and he imagined himself dressed just like Tugboat Teddy the Cabin Baby. That had to be her plan. She'd even said he looked like him!

"We don't want to go right to bed, do we?" It took Finn a moment to realize she was talking to him.

"No." He said. His bedtime at home wasn't for hours yet.

"Well, here's the playground, how about you run around and burn off some of those big feelings?"

"Uh"

"But let's stay in this fenced in area. That big playground over there looks scary." Finn looked at the brightly colored plastic playground in front of him versus the bigger one made of wood and metal. He frowned. Just my luck, he thought. I have to be on the baby playground. "Unless you're feeling sleepy. It's been a long day." She smirked as Finn ran toward the playground. That never failed to work.

Finn had to think -- and fast. There had to be some way to get out of an overnight stay. I could fake a stomach ache ? That could easily backfire. She thinks I'm a baby, maybe I could sob for mommy and daddy? No, that would definitely come back to bite him.

He was stuck. He couldn't climb over the fence without being noticed and Felix's mom was sitting right in front of the only gate. He sighed and slid down the slide.

There was no way to avoid getting bored before long. The side of the playground had rolling tic-tac-toe, but there was no way he was going to ask Felix's mom to come play with him. Defeated, he shuffled over to Felix's mom.

"All played out?" He nodded. "Wanna go down the big slide once before we go?" She pointed to the tall metal slide over at what Finn remembered calling the big kid playground when he had been little.

"Sure."

"Show me how fast you can run!" She said. Finn rolled his eyes, but burst into a run, only realizing halfway there that

this would only mean he would be going back to Felix's house sooner. He didn't know what waited for him there, but the very thought of it made him shudder. "Climb up!" Felix's mom called. Finn began to do just that, knowing that this was just delaying the inevitable. "And down you come!" He slid down right into her arms. “I've got the cutest jammies for you at home.”

“Another thing of Adam's?” He muttered in disbelief. That kid must've left all his clothes at her house.

“Nope, these were bought extra special just for you, Finny.”

Finn tried to nonchalantly get an answer from her about just what pajamas waited for him, but Felix's mom saw it as him being excited, refusing to 'spoil the surprise'.

Nate and Felix were holed up in Felix's bedroom, so Finn had no way to delay being herded to the guest room. Felix's mom went over to the closet.

"Can you get undressed for me, Finny?" She said, busying herself with something in there. Finn stripped, wincing as he remembered he had Thomas and not his actual underwear. He tried his best to cover his childish briefs as he inched over to the door Felix's mom had left wide open. Was he going to close it? Make a run for it? Why hadn't he noticed the door was open and unguarded before he got down to his underwear? "Undies too!" Felix's mom said, turning around with something distressingly baby blue in her arms. Finn, however, was more focused on the blue and white Pull-ups she held up.

"No!" He exclaimed.

"Sweetie, don't start. They're just in case."

"I don't need them!"

"I know." She said. "But you already had an oopsie or two today, so I'm not taking any chances." She grabbed his hand and pulled him back into the room, away from the still open door. "Undies off." Finn groaned, but complied. "I know, you like your big boy undies, but these are what big boys wear to bed."

"Do Nate and Felix wear them?" He asked with a dismissive snort. She only smiled and waited for him to step into the Pull-ups she held out. He groaned again as he noticed just how puffy the Pull-ups were, sticking out from his butt.

"Arms up!" Felix's mom announced, gathering the pajama shirt in her hands. Finn raised his arms, wishing not for the first time that he had the hairy armpits Felix did. He knew, however, that they remained as hairless and disconcertingly soft as they always had been.

Finn did not get a good look at the pajamas until he was wearing them. He was glad they were not the soft footie pajamas Tugboat Teddy the Cabin Baby wore, but they had to have been inspired by them; same color and there was a pacifier compass applique on the left side of his chest. He covered it with his hand as Felix's mom looked him over.

"Such a long face!" Felix's mom remarked. "Someone must be sleepy." She kissed the top of his head. "And such long

hair." She mused. "Well, at least you don't need a second bath, huh?" She chuckled and nudged him toward the door.

After Finn sat on the toilet one last time before bed, he had to brush his teeth under Felix's mom's close supervision.

"All minty fresh?" She asked. He nodded. "Give me a big smile!" He forced a smile. "Attaboy! No rotting teeth for Finny!"

"Yay..." he said half-heartedly.

"Aww, sleepy little boy. Let's get you to bed." He figured that that would at least give him some breathing room, so he walked docilely along until they went right past the bedroom he figured he would be sleeping in.

"Huh?"

"You need to say good night to big brother, don't you?" Finn felt a twinge of panic. Even if Nate had no chance of recognizing that his pajamas were from a baby movie, there was no way he was going to let Nate see him like this or realize he was being put to bed so early.

"We don't need to bother him."

"That's just silly, Finny. He loves you!" She picked him up and carried him to Felix's closed door. "Knock, knock!" She said, opening the door. "Finny wants to say good night!"

Felix and Nate sat on Felix's bed, playing a video game. The window behind them showed that the sun had not even touched the horizon yet. They looked up as one at Felix's

mom and then their eyes slid in unison over to Finn as he was put down on the floor.

"Can you two watch him for just a second?" Felix's mom asked, leaving the room before they had a chance to answer. As soon as she was out of sight, they pounced.

"Look how cute you are!" Felix said, grinning. "Mom's got you totally babied, huh?" Finn was about to counter, but he realized there was still a way out of this.

"Nate, you gotta tell her that we need to go home. Make up an emergency or something."

"Why?"

"Because! I can't" he struggled to find the right words. "I can't do this!"

"She's just gonna put you to bed now." Felix said with a shrug. "It's really not as bad as being awake with her."

"You guys told her I'm four!"

"What's important is she believed it." Nate said. "And you've been with her all day."

"I tried to tell her."

"And?" Felix asked as if leading Finn on.

"She didn't believe me."

"Exactly." Nate said. "We're responsible big boys and you're a fibbing little Finny who keeps having accidents."

"This isn't fair!"

"We'll go home in the morning." Nate said.

"Yeah, after she feeds me baby food or something." Finn muttered.

"I mean, you are in a diaper." Nate said, lunging and tugging down Finn's shorts. They were snug enough that they only came down enough to expose Mickey waving from the front of his pull-ups.

"They have a fly though, so Finny feels like he's a big boy." Felix said with a laugh. Finn glared at them, tugging on his shorts.

"This is ridiculous! You two need to tell her the truth!"

"Or what? You'll tattle?"

"Face it, dude." Nate said. "She thinks you're four, you've let her treat you like you're four. Just ride it out."

"And you'll turn five soon." Felix said with a snort. He flopped back onto his bed.

"Seriously." Finn said.

"It's not that bad." Nate said. "We just spend the night and then go home in the morning. If she gets too out of hand, I'll figure something out, kay?"

"She already has!" Finn protested. "I mean, look at me!" Nate snickered as he did just that.

"You're adorable." He said, choosing not to mention that the back of Finn's shirt was tucked into his pull-ups.

"And I'm back!" Felix's mom said. "What have you three been up to?" As if a switch flipped, Nate looked like the picture of maturity.

"Oh, I was just making sure Finny's wearing Pull-ups. He's gotten into the habit of telling Mom and Dad he doesn't wet the bed, despite the evidence." He gave Felix's mom a knowing look before gazing down at Finn. "Isn't that right, fibby Finny?" Finn only grunted.

"We'd better get you to bed, kiddo." Felix's mom said, picking him up. "Nini, big brother and Felix!" She patted his puffy bottom. "I guess Felix is kinda like a big brother too, isn't he?"

"No." Finn said, sighing in defeat.

"And here's your berth for the night, sailor Finny!" Felix's mom said, returning to the guest room. "We've just got one more thing before it's time to set sail on the Sleepy Seas!" Had she memorized the movie?

"What is that?" Finn asked as she pulled a long lanyard, covered in teddy bear decals, out of her pocket. At one end was an orange plastic clip. At the other, the end just emerging from her pocket, was a well-loved pacifier. "No, no, mmph!" Finn only barely caught a glimpse of a faded 'I heart mama' on the pacifier before the bulb opposite it pushed its way through his protests and into his mouth. He gave it a few

startled sucks as Felix's mom clipped the other end to his shirt.

"I know you're too big to need one during the day, but Nate told me you still use your binky at bedtime."

"No, I don't." Over her shoulder, he could see himself in the mirror. From the pajamas to the obvious Pull-ups to the pacifier -- faded and worn enough to conceivably be the binky of a five year old who hadn't quite kicked the habit -- in his mouth, the boy in the mirror was undeniably a toddler. It was just supposed to be a trip to the movies and now, hours later, he was being put to bed by a woman who refused to believe he was a teenager! "I don't need it!" He spat the pacifier out only to have her immediately return it to his mouth.

"Says the little boy who was sucking his thumb at naptime." She returned the pacifier to his mouth three more times before shaking her head. "This isn't funny, Finny. Big brother Nate was nice enough to remember it and spitting it out isn't going to keep you from going to bed." She pulled back the covers. "Crawl in." Finn did so, chewing a bit on the bulb of the pacifier. Maybe he could break it? It felt too durable for that, so he resigned himself to just waiting to spit it out until she was gone.

Felix's mom had other plans. Once she got him tucked in, his back turned to her, she sat down in a chair right by the bed and began to rub his back gently. He realized she planned to stay with him until he fell asleep! He slowly pushed the

pacifier out of his mouth with his tongue, but it only sat on the pillow for a moment before she returned it to his mouth.

"I know it's hard to sleep in an unfamiliar place, snugglebug." She whispered soothingly. "Just close your eyes, suck on your binky, and relax." She rubbed his back, humming and then starting to sing a soft lullaby. "Good night, snugglebug, time for bed. Now rest your sleepy little head. The stars are twinkling up above." It's still daytime outside, Finn thought irritably. "And sending down their bedtime love." She returned to humming and Finn could feel sleep starting to near him. No, he couldn't fall asleep! That would only prove her point. "Tucked you in, all warm and tight. Kisses, cuddles, soft moonlight." The weight of the day's humiliation was beginning to take its toll. "Close your eyes and dream away, we'll snuggle more another day." Finn began to suck automatically on the pacifier, feeling her hand rubbing rhythmically up and down on his back. "Goodnight, snugglebug, time for bed." She began again. Finn wasn't sure when or if she finished the second round of the lullaby. He was asleep.

Chapter 3

Finny: Back to School - Chapter 3

“Good morning, Finny!” Finn snapped awake with a start, still unused to the sound of Felix's mom's voice first thing in the morning. He sat up and looked around the room in confusion. That's right, he was at Felix's house. His third morning waking up here and it was still taking some getting used to. “Did you sleep well?” Especially because of her. He only grunted as she peeled back the Pajama Pirates sheets to reveal his matching pajamas. “And you have dry Pull-ups? Let's get you to the potty straight away!” She picked him up and carried him across the hall to the bathroom. Finny was sitting on the special potty seat before he even knew what was happening. “That makes three dry mornings, Finny!” She said as he tried to focus on peeing. “If you make five days.” She waved a hand in front of her face. “You'll get a special prize.”

“Like treating me my actual age?” He muttered. She didn't seem to hear him, so he peed and wondered what today would hold. He knew it wouldn't be anything good. The last three days since he and Nate had come to live at Felix's had been, as Mom would've put it, an adjustment.

Their parents had come across what Dad called a once in a lifetime research opportunity, which meant a lot of adjustments, most notably coming to live with Felix and his mom until winter break. It better be only 'til then, Finn thought.

At first, the plan had been to have them go to their grandparents', but neither Finn nor Nate liked the idea of a whole new school. Though they had both begged Mom and Dad to think of something else, Nate was the one who suggested Felix's house. Even as Finn's apprehension about that grew, the plan seemed to take shape to the point that they all went over to Felix's to propose the idea.

"I've always wanted to go to Antarctica!" Felix's mom gushed.

"It's going to be great." Mom said with a smile. "Both for our research and just for sight-seeing."

"But, there are things that need to happen back home." Dad said, getting down to business. "Rather than uproot the boys and send them to their grandparents' with a whole different school for at least half the school year, we thought it'd be better to stick with the school they know"

"Not Finny!" Nate interrupted. "He's going to a new school." Midtown High, Finn thought with almost reverence.

"We thought," Dad said pointedly. "We thought it might be best if they could board with you for the year. Might even only be until winter break, depending on how things go."

"Though Nate does make a good point. It's a delicate age for Finn," It was Finn's turn to interject.

"Mom! I'm not delicate." She shushed him and continued.

"So the more continuity we can give him, the better. Again,

it's up to you.”

"Oh, what an idea!" Felix's mom beamed. “I think it's a wonderful plan.”

“We know it’s a big ask, but if you’re willing, we think it’d be best for the boys.” Finn watched Felix’s mom closely. Surely she’ll say something, anything that would give away that she thought he was a toddler.

“Well, I think it would be just dandy. Felix has that bunk bed that Nate’s used before, so as long as you two are ok with them sharing,” Mom and Dad glanced at Nate before nodding. “And I’ll do the guest room up special for Finny. You should have your own room, don’t you think?”

“Yes, since I’m older.” He said.

“He has his own room here.” Mom said, misunderstanding.

“Well, I think it's a marvelous idea!” Felix's mom said.

“We've obviously got a few weeks to iron out the details.” Dad said. “We leave only about a week before school starts, so…”

“So,” Mom said, patting her husband's knee. “If you suddenly come to your senses about having triple the boys around the house!” She laughed.

For Nate, the arrangement meant a long-term sleepover with his best friend. For Finn, it meant seemingly never-ending toddler time. How had this all been decided without Mom or Dad making it clear he was a teenager? For the first time in

his life, Finn was actually looking forward to school starting next week, if only as a break from Felix's mom. Then again, once he got home from Midtown High School, surely she would realize she was horribly mistaken.

“All done?” She asked cheerfully. Finn nodded. “And you went! What a big boy!”

“I always go.” Finn said.

“I know, but better safe than sorry, especially since this is all still new, huh?”

“Nate and Felix around?” He asked, seizing the opportunity to pull up his pajama shorts before she did it for him.

“They spent the night at their friend Jaycen's house, remember?” Wish I'd thought of that, Finn thought, though he worried just how Felix's mom would have reacted to him asking her… no, I'd tell her I was going to Jake's house! “They might show up, but we'll have lots of fun even without them. It's almost school time, you know” she guided him over to the sink, standing behind him to wash his hands for him. “So we'll eat breakfast, play outside for a little while, and then it'll be in the car to go buy back to school supplies!”

I guess that doesn't sound terrible, Finn thought as he followed her back to the guest room. He refused to think of it as his room since it was full of toys, books, and clothes fit for a boy ten years younger than him.

“Are we gonna get new clothes?” Finn asked as he watched her fiddle around in the dresser. What horrible outfit was she

assembling for him? He was almost relieved when the clothes she had chosen were plain, albeit a matching set of an orange t-shirt and shorts. And, of course, toddler train briefs. “Can't I wear other undies? Please?”

“Your Pull-ups?” That was enough to get him to acquiesce and step into the held out clothes.

He had packed plenty of his own clothes, even contemplating and then deciding against ‘forgetting’ to pack underwear as a ploy to guarantee getting boxers for back to school. Remembering the Thomas the Tank Engine briefs from his last stay, he had shoved every pair of his own underwear into his bags. It turned out not to matter since Felix's mom dressed him every day. He was almost certain his underwear had made it into the dresser in the toddler room, but all he ever saw come out of the drawer was Pull-ups and what he wore now.

I'm almost glad they don't make Pajama Pirates underwear. He thought. Trains had to be better than having Tugboat Teddy on his butt. It’s probably illegal to put a baby like him on underwear anyway.

“Do we want cereal or french toast sticks for breakfast?”

“Burritos.” Finn said at once.

“Finny.”

“I want burritos, please.” Please really was the magic word with Felix's mom.

“Are you sure you'll like them?”

“I'm sure.” She studied his face and then smiled.

“Alright, but you need to eat all of the burrito, okay? Promise?”

"I promise," Finn mumbled, not particularly liking the idea of Felix's mom acting like she knew his tastes better than he did. French toast sticks were fine, but he wanted something else! Felix and Nate got to make their own breakfast and eat whatever they wanted. Why did two sixth graders get more control than he, a soon-to-be ninth grader, got?

"Order up!" Felix's mom said, placing a burrito in front of him. "You can have the other one once you finish this." She said, eyeing him as if she still did not believe he would like it. "It's still really hot, so blow, blow, blow on it!" Finn did so, feeling like she was watching his every move. She was, and had been for the last few days.

"Can... can I have some juice please?"

"Oh! I completely forgot your sippy!" She hurried away and he seized his opportunity. He picked up one of the two halves of the burrito -- why did she cut everything up for him? -- and took a bite. His nose wrinkled as the taste hit his tongue. Oh. Oh, no. "Juice for Finny!" If she noticed his face, she made no indication of it. "Now you can eat up." Finn forced the bite down and tried to form a strategy. He would have to keep forcing it down. There was no other solution. Why did it taste so gross? Nate and Felix at these every morning! Had they

gone bad?

Felix's mom did not hover once she saw him take a few more bites. Finn picked and pecked at the burrito, managing to finish half of it before realizing that this would not end well. He was hungry, but not for something that tasted like soapy socks.

"How's it going in there?" Felix's mom called from the kitchen.

"Fine." Finn panicked. Did that sound fine? Did he answer too quickly?

"Out of juice?"

"Uh, no." She poked her head in and smiled.

"That's what I figured, Finny." She walked in, carrying a plate with french toast sticks on it. "Give these a try." Finn was too hungry to question it, though he did glare at the smug face of Tugboat Teddy on the plate. He watched through the fringe of his hair as Felix's mom grabbed the other half of the burrito and took a bite, showing no sign that it tasted bad to her. What was going on? "Once you're done and we've cleaned up, how 'bout you go outside and play?"

"Sure."

"Don't talk with your mouth full, Finny." She said, kissing the top of his head. "Mouth full of hair!" She teased. "Didn't your mommy say you need a haircut before school?"

"She said it might be a good idea." Finn allowed, making a

point to talk with his mouth full, just to spite her.

"Hmm." She looked at her phone while Finn ate. “Maybe we can sneak that in today.”

Once breakfast and clean-up were done and Finn had promised at least three times that he did not need to pee, it was time to go outside.

“What do you want to do outside, Finny?” Felix’s mom asked as she pulled socks onto his feet with him in her lap.

“Uh”

“Ride bike?”

“No.”

“Still not feeling brave?” The bike in question was a toddler bike she had found somewhere. It was almost worrying just how much effort she had put into getting things ready for Finn's stay. Rather than risk being seen riding that little blue bike around the block, he let her believe he was afraid of it after inexplicably managing to fall over and scrape his elbow, despite the training wheels. “How about we get the chalk out? You can play hopscotch or whatever it is little boys play.” Just like that, she tickled his sides. “Finny’s a little boy! Yes, he is!”

"Stop!" Why did she seem to tickle him out of the blue? He didn't even know he was still ticklish until she started to do that last time he was here.

"Alright, mister. Gonna draw me a nice picture on the

sidewalk?"

"I guess?" Finn hoped against hope that she would not supervise him outside. He got his wish in the most ironic fashion when they met Nate and Felix outside.

"Did you boys have fun?" Felix's mom asked as she held Finn in her arms, seemingly unaware of how he squirmed.

"I guess." Felix sounded just like Finn, but his mom reacted completely differently.

"I want details, young man."

"Geez." Felix muttered. "Can I pee first?" Felix seemed immune to her maternal stare.

"Finny, how about you go draw with your chalk and Nate will watch you." She said, her tone making it clear that she did not want them around while she spoke with Felix.

"Uh, sure." Finn snorted. Even a blockhead like his little brother had caught her tone.

"Alrighty, Finny. Draw me a pretty picture and in a bit, maybe Nate can help you play a fun game I found online." Maternal duty called and that meant, for the moment, Finn was released from her metaphorical clutches and her arms.

"We didn't even do anything." Nate said, more to himself than to Finn once Felix's mom disappeared inside.

"You know Mom and Dad told us to be on our best behavior."

"Is that what you're doing?" Nate asked with a snort. Finn

blushed. "It's hilarious that you still try to boss me around. I saw your butt yesterday."

"Only cuz you insisted on peeing while I..." Noticing Nate's smirk, Finn quit while he was ahead. "You really could help me, you know."

"With your art project?"

"No. With everything."

"School starts on Monday. Felix's mom knows you're going to Midtown. She'll figure it out." Finn sighed. He could think of about two hundred ways Nate could have been more helpful than that, but, dressed the way he was, he knew trying to tell him any of them was pointless. "Are you really gonna draw?" Finn sighed again.

"With her," he jerked his head toward the house. "It's better just to go with the lesser of two evils. She might..." Once again, he cut himself off. The last thing he wanted was to give Nate ideas, especially since they both knew there were only a few more days left of this treatment and Nate would definitely like the idea of some sort of last hurray.

Unsure of what else to do, Finn began to draw spirals and abstract patterns on the sidewalk just below the stairs up to the house. If only he was an amazing artist, he could have done a masterpiece to prove his age to Felix's mom. He had tried everything. School starts soon, he reminded himself. Once he was going to Midtown every day, Felix's mom would finally realize how wrong she was. Or she'll just keep…

"Looking good, Finny!" Felix's mom said as she came out with a chastened Felix.

"There's breakfast inside." Felix said to Nate, barely even looking at him. He disappeared inside.

"Do you want to keep drawing... whatever it is you're drawing or do you want to try one of the games I found?"

"I dunno."

"Well, how about this?" Kneeling slightly, she took his hand and pulled him to his feet. "Over here on the driveway, lie down like you're doing a snow angel."

"Ok?" Finn complied and she took a piece of white chalk.

"Are you tracing him like a crime scene?" Felix asked, curiosity piqued.

"Not quite. We're gonna make a chalk Finny! Hold very, very still, Finny. Still as a stone!" She drew around him and once again pulled him to his feet. "Now you get to be an artist and color yourself in!"

"Oh." She smiled and kissed the top of his head.

"Once Nate finishes eating, I want you two to play with Finny."

"Ok." Whatever he had gotten in trouble for, it must have stuck, because Felix seemed much more mellow than he had ever been.

Just a couple weeks ago, Finn had been pulled into Nate's

room to record his present for Felix's twelfth birthday: him dancing around with Pull-ups on his head to a video of a counting to twelve song, though song was charitable.

"One, two, three, count with me!" Felix had whispered to him just a few days ago and he knew from Nate that Felix had loved it.

"Here you go, Finny!" Felix's mom said, pulling him back into the moment. She handed him brown chalk. "How about you draw your chalk self with the hair style you want? I made you an appointment at Funky Monkey for this afternoon!" The sun beating down on him suddenly seemed ice cold. Funky Monkey?

"I think" he stopped, remembering one of his pet theories: Felix's mom stopped listening after six words at most, so he had to speak clearly and keep it short. "Mom said a trim."

"Well, show me, muffin." She said, kneeling down and nudging him toward the bald outline.

"Give yourself a big green mohawk!" Felix said. "Actually, can I get one of those?"

"Maybe for school picture day." His mom teased.

"We're outta burritos." Nate announced as he came out of the house.

"Oh, right. Finny and I split one and I realized we were getting low." She smiled down at Finn, who had looked up from pretending to color with chalk when he heard his name.

Rather than actually color in his chalk doppelganger, Finn had resumed doodling abstractly, surrounding his crime scene outline with swirls and polygons. "Add it to our shopping list, Finny. Actually, I should write one down. Can you boys play with Finny while I do that?" Finn was a little relieved that she had said play with this time instead of watch. That made it a little less embarrassing.

"Play what? Isn't he just drawing?"

"You clearly did not sleep well last night." Felix's mom said. "If he's not wanting to color himself in, there's another game I found. You draw colored squares and have Finny hop into the one you call. It'll help him review his colors." Finn eyed Nate, who was clearly considering if that could be embarrassing or not.

"We could write the alphabet and have him practice letters." Felix suggested.

"He knows how to read." His mom said. "Don't you, Finny?"

"Yes."

"See?" She smiled. "You holler if the big boys try to abandon you, Finny."

"We're not gonna do that." Nate promised. She gave them both one last maternal look of warning before disappearing inside.

"Four, five, six, march to the beat." Felix sang.

"Did you memorize that whole song?"

"You should sing it for mom." He said. "Or we can show her."

"Prolly better to reenact it." Nate said.

"Why are you coloring, chalking, whatever?"

"He says it's better to do this than whatever your mom comes up with instead."

"Playing in the sprinkler again?" Felix grinned at the thought.

"Summer is almost over." Nate said, clearly considering it. Felix always seemed to coax his bully side out. "But your mom's mad, dude. Maybe we shouldn't."

"Why not?"

"Do you want to get grounded?"

"My mom doesn't-"

"Or have to go shopping with her and Finny insteada" he jutted his chin. Clearly they had some sort of plans.

"Take me with you."

"Huh?" Finn looked up at Nate and Felix. He hadn't even realized he had said it out loud.

"I'm getting sick of your mom." He said. "What's her problem?" To his surprise, Felix flopped down on the grass so that they were closer to eye level.

"Honestly, no clue. Even when my little cousin Adam's here, she isn't like she is with you."

"You're like the son she never had." Felix rolled his eyes and, lunging, tried to pants Nate. Nate danced away. "But seriously, it's only for a few more days, right?" Finn nodded, but he could not shake the fear that high school would not fix a thing. What if she tried to send him to school in Pull-ups?

"It would really help if you guys told her."

"I'm already in trouble with her, dude." Felix said. "If she finds out we've lied for like two months..."

"And it's really your fault." Nate said. "You coulda told her like a thousand times. You're always with her."

"I've tried! She doesn't ever listen."

"Well, that's just moms." Nate said sagely.

"Are we gonna-" Felix jerked his head.

"Remember, we're trying to be go- behave." Nate reminded him. "We'll go after Finny and your mom leave."

"Please take me with you. Wherever it is. Whatever it is!"

"We have to ask permission if we do that." Nate said.

"We'll leave after you do and be back before you are." Felix explained. "Mom'll never know because you're not gonna tattle."

"I will." Finn said. "Unless you tell her I'm a high schooler."

"How about I tell her you peed?" Felix retorted. "Right in your widdle baby diaper."

"Don't try to deny it." Nate added. "Your pajamas really don't hide anything."

"That's just at night." Finn muttered.

"But you go to bed so early, it's like ten hours of diapers."

"Yeah!" Felix grinned. "So that means you're only in underwear like... like"

"Fourteen." Felix's grin grew.

"Fourteen hours of undies for a fourteen year old. Well, almost."

"Well," Finn gulped as the door opened and Felix's mom came out.

"Having fun?" She asked, choosing not to ask why they all looked guilty. That was boys for you.

Despite saying it was time to go shopping, all three boys were herded inside and Finn was subjected first to a snack, which would have been fine if he had not had to wear a bib and drink from a sippy cup, and then potty time.

"The store only has big potties, so we'll take advantage of your extra special potty seat." Finn glared at the snickers, but realized that he needed to pee now to avoid being put in Pull-ups. It was hard to focus with the door wide open and Felix's mom deciding him being half naked was no reason not to try to tame his hair.

Successfully peeing, as always, was treated as a novelty

worthy of loud celebration, so he was nearly relieved when it was time to go out to the car.

"All snug and safe?" Felix's mom asked after buckling Finn into a carseat. He nodded. "Hold still." She said, fishing a hairbrush out of her purse to again force his hair into submission. "We are not coming home until this hair is cut."

"It's not that bad." Finn replied. She gave him a look.

"What do you want to listen to?" It was such a casual question, Finn automatically shrugged.

"Whatever." He said. He regretted it as the soundtrack of Captain Snuggle began to play.

Hitting every red light let them get through far too many of the songs before finally arriving. Felix's mom parked and looked back at him.

"Still awake? I forgot how many lullabies this movie has!”

“How could you?”

“And we're much too busy for a nap. Plus you're too big for naps, aren't you? No naps for Finny! " She kept a steady stream of one-sided chatter as she extracted Finn from the carseat and deposited him straight into a cart.

"Remember our list?"

"Think so." Finn replied, but she tapped her phone.

"I've got it all here, so that'll be our backup." She smiled and patted his cheek. "Isn't this great? You get to be right here so

I can always see my Finny." He must've frowned, because she laughed reassuringly. "Don't worry. I know your real Mommy is missing you a whole bunch, but we're still having fun, aren't we?" Before Finn could tell her exactly what he thought about that, the greeter at the door interjected.

"Welcome in, folks! Mommy-daughter shopping day?" Finn's head whipped around and he glared more intensely than he should have at a man around his grandpa's age.

"Oh, Finny's not my daughter." Felix's mom said.

"And I'm a boy!" Finn spat. The man laughed.

"Sorry, sir." He said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye that matched his overly patronizing tone.

"I'm watching him while his parents are on a trip to Antarctica actually."

"Oh! The son of explorers!" He chuckled. "Well, I have just the thing for a little guy about to explore the depths of the jungle!" Before Finn could object, he pulled a sticker out of his pocket and planted it right on his shirt.

"What do you say, Finny?"

"Thanks." The cart mercifully rolled away.

"See? Maybe that haircut isn't such a bad idea."

"But not at Funky Monkey. More like Stinky Monkey." Felix's mom was already laser focused on shopping.

Few things are as boring as back to school shopping. There's

very little fun to be found in pencils, notebooks, and other school supplies, plus each item hitting the floor of the cart was a death knell of summer. In past years, Finn had always stayed home or wandered the store while Mom or Dad handled the tedium, but he had no choice to sit there, idly dangling his legs.

"Alright," Felix's mom said after what felt like six hours. With any luck, Finn thought, Stinky Monkey's closed and we can just go to a normal barber or something. "We're all set on school supplies." She smiled down at Finn. "And I think we're good on your Pull-ups, aren't we?" Finn had no idea, but nodded to avoid the humiliation of the diaper aisle. "Ok, so we just need underwear and burritos." She laughed. "That doesn't sound very appetizing, does it? Are you hungry, Finny?"

"Huh? Uh, I guess a little?" He had had a napkin of Cheetos just before they left.

"We'll do lunch after this." Felix's mom decreed. The cart moved again and she once again resumed her monologue. "Let's see, all three of you should still be in the boys' department." Was this his chance?

"Uh" he said. Not a great start. "Can I... can I pick what I get?" She smiled.

"Of course, muffin." Relief washed over him. "A perk of being my special little helper."

She parked the cart just outside the aisle. Finn half-lifted his

arms to be lifted out, but she instead walked a short distance away and bent over to find what she was looking for.

"I'll be right back, Finny." She said.

"But"

"I'm gonna find a few options and you can pick from those." No! That wasn't what he wanted!

"I... I" he tried to fight through his panic. The only thing close to him was a display of Capricorn boxer briefs that would be way too big for him. Could he get out? He squirmed and wiggled, making some progress.

"Excited little boy!" She said. "Well, I've got three options for you." He relaxed as he saw boxers in her hands. "Boxers for the big boys." She said, tossing them into the cart over his shoulder. "And for Finny's undies..." She displayed three plastic packages. "They don't have Thomas, but I think you want a change anyway." But these? Finn thought in horror. Baby Shark, Sesame Street, and Bunnydale?!

"I don't want any of these."

"Finny, these are all very nice-"

"I can't wear them to high school!"

"No one at school's gonna see your underpants. They go under pants, remember?" Finn took a deep breath. This was it, the moment of truth.

"I am fourteen years old." Remembering that she seemed to

stop listening, he tried to keep each statement short and to the point. "I'm in high school. I want- I need boxers." He gestured angrily at the closest pack. "I can't wear" he censored himself. "Baby Shark for gym class."

"These are your options, Finny."

"There are boxers right there!"

"I'm going to count to five and then I'll decide for you. One"

"Guess it's a standoff then." He sat there, staring with disdain at the so-called options as she counted.

"Five. Alright, buddy. Baby Shark it is." Finn tried and failed to stop them from landing in the cart, right next to Nate and Felix's boxers. "Finny Shark, do do do do do do." She sang, seemingly unbothered by the steam Finn was certain was coming out of his ears. "Maybe a nap would've been a good idea. Overstimulated little boy."

It'll be okay. Finn told himself as he tried to calm down. I can just use my shirt to hide them and once she realizes I'm going to Midtown, she'll let me dress myself and probably even buy me boxers. Just gotta make it a few more days. A few more days! Besides, it's dumb to be on the verge of tears about fucking underwear.

"I know you like to be just like the big boys, but maybe you can try to chew with your mouth closed." Felix's mom said as they ate lunch, she a salad and him chicken nuggets. Something about the way she said it, without the usual little kiddy tone, made Finn pause and focus on chewing quietly.

“Someone must've been hangry, hmm?”

“I still don’t want those… those things.”

“I know for a fact your daddy calls you shark fin, so Finny Shark seems perfect.”

“Why don't you call him and ask?”

“Maybe we can call them and show them your new 'do?” She looked at her phone. “Though I can never remember what time it is there versus here.”

After they finished eating and Finn had been brought into the women's room to pee and wash up, there was nothing standing between him and Funky Monkey. He grimaced as he saw the sign.

"I do not want my hair cut here."

"Haven't you been before?"

"I usually go to the same barber as my dad and Nate."

"Then you're in for a treat!"

"I don't want to do it here!" How could he be more clear? Felix's mom frowned.

"I hate to do this, but if you come in and be a good boy for your haircut, we'll get ice cream at that ice cream parlor after, okay?" She brushed hair out of his eyes as if to drive home that he needed a haircut. "Or we can go buy you a dress and rename you Finnomina."

"What?" She laughed and tickled his sides until he couldn't fight it anymore and squeal-laughed.

"I promise, I won't let them cut off your ear or anything like that." All Finn could do as he walked in holding her hand was hope that something, anything would stop this from happening. What are you even worried about? He asked himself as they draped a cape with comets and rockets over him. It's a haircut.

"Hi there, my name's Gina." The stylist said once he was set. "What brings you in?"

"This is Finny." Felix's mom said. "And he's starting at Midtown on Monday!" Finn's eyes widened and he almost looked over his shoulder at her in disbelief.

"Oh, wow!" Gina patted his shoulder. "You're gonna be going to Midtown High, huh?" Oblivious to the wink in his excitement, he nodded, hardly even caring what might happen now that he could rest assured that Felix's mom knew. Gina chuckled. "Well, what are we thinking for Mister Finny Fish then?"

"Just a trim." That was what Finn always said to the barber, but that wasn't good enough for Gina. She looked to Felix's mom, who had pulled up a photo on her phone.

"I think we'll do this. Keep it a little long over his ears."

"Oh, for cute. He'll look so handsome!" Finn craned his neck, trying hard to see.

"I think Finny wants to see." Gina said with a laugh.

"No." His voice trembled as he looked at a smiling cherub-faced toddler with a bowl cut. "Absolutely not!" He tried to get up out of the red pleather chair, but Gina restrained him with a hand.

"Uh, big feeling alert!"

"Stop! Let me go! You can't send me to high school with hair like that! You can't!" Felix's mom pushed a pacifier into his mouth.

"He's had a lot of excitement. His parents are on an expedition"

"Oh, really?"

"So I have him and his brother until December and it's been a big adjustment, especially starting at a new school and all that." Gina nodded. "And we just got done with school shopping, so I think it's feeling real for him and you know how little guys struggle with, well, like you said, big feelings." Finn realized he was sucking on the pacifier. Spitting it out would almost certainly get him in trouble, but maybe he could just pull it out? He tried to get a hand out from under the billowing cape.

"We get it a lot at Funky Monkey. Once we get started, he'll probably calm down."

"I don't want a bowl cut!" Finn whined. "You gotta listen! I'm fourteen years old, I can't go to school looking like a baby!"

"Finny." Felix's mom said. "Behave." He glared at her, but Gina had a job to do. Finn's glare faded into a look of disbelief as the smiling stylist chatted with Felix's mom, each lock of hair falling to the floor seeming to seal his fate more and more. Even if she insisted on him wearing those Baby Shark undies, he could hide those. Walking into high school with a fresh bowl cut? That was pretty much a death sentence. I... I guess she'll probably chew the school a new one when I get bullied?

"I don't want this." He whimpered, but the toddler in the mirror was the only one who seemed to hear, tearing up in sympathy.

"Nearly done. You've been so good, Finny." Gina said. Felix's mom leaned over and whispered in her ear. "Oh, well, we don't do that too often, though it's definitely a trend with the older boys. You can see the prices up there."

"I think it'd look so sweet."

"What?"

"Oh, definitely. I'm almost done here, then we can do that." Gina looked at Finn's reflection as if she had only just noticed him. "You're going to look just precious."

"What happened to handsome?"

"Alright, Finny, I'm gonna go get something." Felix's mom almost immediately took her place behind him, admiring his new haircut. He glowered. Somehow, even being in just Pull-ups did not make him look as babyish as this haircut. Maybe I

can be one of those guys who never takes off his hat. He turned his head from side to side, trying to imagine how that would look.

"I think he likes it!" Gina cooed as she returned. Realizing he did look llke he was admiring it, he stopped and stared down at his lap. "I keep telling them, we should do before and after photos so you can really see the improvement." She set whatever she had on a small table. "Alright, buddy. This stuff will really sting if it gets in your eyes, so I'm gonna need you to sit super still, okie dokie?"

"What is it?"

"It's something for your hair! Your- what does he call you?"

"We haven't really figured something out yet. He calls me Felix's mom, Felix is my son."

"Ah! Well, we both think this will really make you the cutest little guy in all the world! Most popular kid at Midtown, for sure." Finn's brow furrowed. They both seemed well aware he was going to high school, but didn't seem to think it was weird that he had a bowl cut and a pacifier in his mouth. Something wasn't adding up.

Gina ran a comb through his hair and applied something cold to his head. Finn watched closely, trying to figure out what it might be. He usually didn't even bother combing his hair, so the whole world of haircare was mysterious to him.

"Geez Louise, this stuff stinks." Gina murmured. Finn's nose wrinkled as he got hit with a whiff of it. It smelled like a

pool! "His hair's so fine, it shouldn't take too long, but you keep holding still, bud, okay?"

"What's going on?" Finn asked.

"You'll love it." I doubt that!

"Alright, now it's got to stay in your hair until we hear the beep. Hold very, very still!"

Boredom quickly set in, replacing his apprehension about what they were doing to his hair. Finn sucked on the pacifier and felt his eyelids start to droop. He was not about to fall asleep! It was the stupid pacifier's fault. He always had it put in at bedtime, so now his brain associated it with being sleepy. He pinched his thigh just above the knee as hard as he could and felt the sleepiness retreat, but for how long?

He was up to eleven or twelve pinches by the time Gina finally began to rinse his hair. All at once, he wondered if Felix's mom had remembered Felix half-suggesting Finn get a green mohawk, half-asking for it himself and had decided to try to win him over by dying his bowl of hair green. That's ridiculous, he thought a moment before the chair swiveled and he looked at his reflection for the first time. The muscles in his jaw seized.

“What did you do?” Finn launched out of the salon chair, ripping the cape off and glaring at both Gina and Felix's mom. It was her fault, after all.

“Big feeling-”

“Stop! You… you ruined my hair!” He gestured up at his now bleach blonde bowl cut. “I am not some dumb little toddler, I am a-” Felix's mom moved just as quickly as he had, trying to intercept him mid-tantrum. “No, stop! Listen!” Finn tried to run, but he was soon cornered and wrapped in Felix's mom's arms. “No, no!” He pushed against her, but it was no use. He gasped for breath, completely overwhelmed, tears pouring down his cheeks. “I… I don't want this!”

“I am so sorry.” Felix's mom said, but she was talking to Gina and everyone around them, not the wailing boy in her arms.

“No worries.” He heard Gina say. “You tend to him and I'll take your card up front.”

Felix's mom rubbed his back and cooed, but there seemed to be a stiffness under her typical warmth. She was mad!

“Let’s go to the car.” Felix’s mom picked him up. “Again, I am so sorry. I think it’s just been a lot for him.”

“Can-” Finn tried to calm down as she buckled him in. “Aren’t we gonna get ice cream?” He froze as he saw her expression. He was so used to her smiling and treating him like a baby, her face now terrified him. No wonder why Felix seemed so timid after his talking to! She sighed and seemed to soften.

“Your behavior doesn’t warrant ice cream, Finny. You want me to treat you as a big boy; big boys need to accept that misbehaving has consequences.”

“What’s consequences?” Finn asked as cutely as he could

manage, a last ditch attempt to get her to change her mind. She sighed again and they drove home in silence.

“Boys! Come help unload!” She called as they pulled into the driveway. “Now!” Felix and Nate came pounding out of the house, laughing and joking with each other.

“Dude.” Felix nudged Nate in the side and pointed at Finn being lifted out of the car. Finn whimpered and nearly started crying again as he saw their dumbstruck faces.

“Grab and carry.” Felix’s mom said. “I’m not in the mood, boys.” She turned her gaze back to Finn. “And you, you’re getting quiet time.”

Quiet time was almost a relief because the last thing Finn wanted was to hear Felix and Nate cackle about his hair. He avoided mirrors, but any time his blonde bangs caught his eye, he groaned.

He was a bit surprised how long he was able to avoid the inevitable, but at dinner, he could no longer hide from them.

“What?” He spat.

“Dude.” Nate said gently. “What… what happened?”

“She happened.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“I did!” He sniffled. I can’t cry in front of them! I can’t!

“Well,” Felix said softly. “Maybe… a lot of guys are doing the bleached buzz cut, so we could salvage it?” Nate nodded

eagerly.

“Do you guys have clippers?”

“Naw, but we can borrow some from Jaycen, I’m pretty sure. We’ll be going over there tomorrow night, so we’ll get your hair fixed before school.” Finn grinned. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad! Then again, even a day or two of a blonde bowl cut was a day or two too many.

“Seriously, Finn.” Nate said with a loud sigh of disbelief. “You look-”

“He looks handsome, doesn’t he?” Felix’s mom said. How much had she heard? “He’ll be so grown-up for our special errand tomorrow!” She grinned at Finn as if she expected him to bounce with excitement. Bring back the dragon lady from this afternoon, Finn thought, though he immediately regretted it.

“What errand?” He asked. She smiled knowingly and he lost his appetite. What more could she do to him? It made him feel sick knowing, for better or worse, he would find out tomorrow.

Over the course of the evening, Finn tried to trick her into telling him. She would only smile and say that she was glad he was excited. He gave up before long as he had other concerns. There was something about his new hairdo that was bothering him and he had to check, just to be sure. He whimpered softly as he found the book on the bookshelf and confirmed his fears.

"Careful on the stairs!" Without even acknowledging Felix's mom, he charged upstairs to Nate and Felix's room.

"What's up, Finn?" Nate asked, lounging on the lower bunk.

"Look!" Finn held up A Quiet Night for Tugboat Teddy. "She made me look like him!"

"We're gonna fix it, Finn." Nate said as Felix turned his back to Finn to hide how funny he found it. Finn really was the spitting image of Tugboat Teddy, though one boy wore a big dopey grin and the other looked as if the world was ending. "I promise."

"Is this a no girls allowed party?" Felix's mom asked. "Finny, leave the big boys alone. I'll read that to you. Oh, actually, why don't you read it to me? We'll get jammies on!" Finn stared at her, worried tears might well up again. In this stupid pajamas, he'd look even more like Teddy the Cabin Baby!

Bedtime reading gave him another few opportunities to try to get Felix's mom to reveal her secret. She held firm. Whatever it was, she deemed it so important, she told him he would be going to bed early tonight. He had a suspicion that it was also a punishment for today, but at least sitting in the dark, he did not have to be constantly reminded of the bleached monstrosity on his head. Maybe it would be less horrible in the morning, he thought as he drifted off to sleep.

~ F ~

It wasn’t.

“Today's the big day.” Felix said cheerfully.

“Do you know what she's talking about?” Finn asked.

“Do you?” Nate said, just as curious.

“Naw, mom's still mad at me about” he raised his eyebrows at Nate, who snorted. Finn sighed. Everyone kept secrets from him!

“Well, whatever it is, we're gonna get the clippers.” Nate said, leaning over to whisper conspiratorially. Finn didn't like that the same brother who had gotten him in the mess was now acting as if he had always been on his side.

“Maybe you can ask her?” Finn suggested.

“About getting the clippers?”

“No, Felix. About where she's taking me!”

“Geez, blondie. Calm down.”

“Stop!” Finn stretched it out to draw Felix's mom over.

“Yelling must mean you're done eating breakfast, Finny?” She said, wiping his face with a napkin almost immediately. He ate a few more bites, staring pointedly at Felix and Nate. Though they always seemed to know what the other was thinking, neither picked up on his telepathic message.

I should've known something was suspicious about breakfast in pajamas, Finn thought as he was taken to the bathroom following breakfast. It was bath time.

“I wanted to give your hair plenty of time for the bleach to set.” Felix's mom said, tugging down his shorts and Pull-ups in one swoop. “Do you want your bath toys, Tugboat Finny?” Finn glared at her. “Aww, Tugboat Teddy is only half as cute as you are, Finny Fin.”

“I don't like it.” He said. Short sentences got through more often, after all, and surely she'd pick up that what he meant was ‘I can't believe you did this to me’.

“It's still new. New things are always tough.” She replied.

“Gonna get beaten up on Monday.” He said, figuring it would be best to not give her any hint of his plan to have this dumb bowl cut shaved off by then.

“If Nate or Felix hurts you, you tell me right away.” She moved him around as if inspecting him for bruises.

“Not them. They don’t even go to my school anymore.” He said. It was true. They’d be at Washington Middle School, Finn was practically counting the minutes until he was at Midtown.

“You’re really excited for school!” You have no idea. “Well,” she gasped and covered her mouth. “I nearly ruined the surprise!”

“What surprise?” Finn whined.

“I promise you’ll love it.”

Finn’s doubts about that only grew after she wrapped him in the frog towel and made him hop back to his room. He stood

in the middle of the room, back to the mirror, as she picked out clothes for him.

“No sharks!”

“Of course not!” She said. “We’re saving those for the new school year.” She flopped a red and blue pair of Thomas briefs at him as if to prove it. He sighed. With his hair, he looked like the sort of toddler who wore those. They’re gonna fix it. He thought, part of him still refusing to believe that he was actually relying on Nate and Felix to help him. “Alrighty, some nice pants, a shirt, I think we’ve got everything we need to make you a handsome young man.”

“Other than my hair.”

“Your hair’s the most important part, Finny.” She said. “I bet by tonight, you’re gonna be too excited to even think about your cutie patootie hairdoodie.”

“Hairdoodie?”

“Step into your undies!”

As she dressed him, Finn tried to get some clues about where they were going. Pants and a button-up shirt, however, told him very little. He studied the robin’s egg blue socks she put on his feet with a critical eye, but they were made of cotton and knew nothing about the destination.

“And for something extra special,” she said. “We need to make a good impression!”

“Where?” She only smiled, like always, and busied herself

putting a bow tie, blue with green frogs, on his shirt. She jostled it a bit to confirm the clip would hold.

“I think we’re set, mister handsome!” She kissed his cheek, gently pushing a strand of hair back into place before steering him in front of the mirror. “Froggies for Finny!” She announced. “Even though you’re in nice clothes, hop, hop, hop!” He rose up onto the balls of his feet a few times to satisfy her.

“Dork alert.” Felix whispered to Nate. The pair sat together on the couch, close enough that there would have been room yet for Felix’s mom to sit and for Finn to lie down fully.

“Doesn’t Finny look handsome?”

“Sure.” Nate grinned at Finn. “Where are you going all spiffy like that?”

“She won’t tell me.”

“He’s so excited even without knowing.” She said with a smile. “Finny, come have some juice and a little snack. But no crumbs!” It had only been forty minutes at most since breakfast, but the snack was little more than a half dozen cheese crackers. With that, she took his hand and led him out to the car.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s very kind of you to offer to drive, Finny.” She said. “But I’ve got it.” Finn grimaced, first at her and then at the reflection he caught in the window as she closed the door.

He watched cars, trees, and buildings go by, still unsure of where they were going. The park was to the left, but they went to the right. Washington Middle School was just down Jefferson Street, but they wouldn't have any reason to go there. They turned left and things started to look very familiar. Finn looked ahead of them and craned his neck, watching as Felix's mom turned into the parking lot of a building he knew quite well.

"Midtown Elementary!?" Was she confused? "No, I'm going to Midtown High!"

"Silly Finny. What else does the sign say?"

"Kin-" His mouth felt dry as he realized what their special errand was. "Kindergarten Round-Up." It couldn't be.

Panic gripped him as she parked, but he tried to calm down. This was fine. It would be embarrassing, sure, but how long could it possibly take for them to notice that he was not a kindergartener? Gina didn't notice, a nagging voice told him. And now you're a blonde baby, Tugboat Finny! He pushed the thought away. There was no way Felix's mom could enroll him. He had gone to Midtown, this Midtown, from kindergarten through fifth grade. The system would show he had done all this a decade ago.

"Decided we're at the right place?" Felix's mom asked, not quite able to fully hide her surprise when he hopped out of the car. "You're going to be a kindergartener!" Yeah, just let yourself believe that, Finn thought smugly.

They followed the sign on the door to a bright classroom. It took a moment, but Finn realized that this was the same room he had attended kindergarten in. Perfect. Even better, the smiling woman in the patchwork vest at the sign-in table was none other than Miss Simmons, his kindergarten teacher. They'd be done in no time.

"Hello!" She said, smiling at Finn without even acknowledging the woman holding his hand. "What's your name?"

"Finn Mercer." He said at once, expecting her to gasp in recognition.

"And you're going to be in kindergarten, huh? So exciting." She beamed.

"Uh, well,"

"Don't worry. We'll let your adult take care of the boring paperwork. How about you go on over to the activities? You can do a puzzle or investigate the sensory bins or even play with play-doh. It's just a sampling of all the fun we'll have in kindergarten this year."

"No, I'm Finn Mercer." Her smile dropped slightly and she laughed, attention shifting to Felix's mom.

"You must've drilled first name, last name with him, huh?"

"Go explore, Finny." Felix's mom said reassuringly. "Looks like I've got some papers to fill out." Confused, Finn wandered away. How had she not recognized him? It had

been nine years, but there weren't that many Mercers around… his hair! That had to be it! Well, it was only a minor setback. There was still no way he was going to be enrolled.

"What do they even need on those forms anyway?" He wondered out loud. Finding out seemed completely preferable to doing any of the activity stations, so he pretended to be looking at a shelf of books while trying to eavesdrop.

Finn quickly realized the flaw in his plan. The room was full of kids and parents, so overhearing what Felix's mom was saying to Mrs. Simmons was almost impossible. They seemed to be chatting back and forth and Finn realized that there wasn't a computer or anything, so how would they check the system for duplicate students? It must just go to the office or something.

I have to hear what she's saying, he thought, curiosity getting the better of him. He casually strolled around the room, slowly making his way to the other side of the table.

"-quite the tantrum yesterday, not to mention he seems to be forgetting words in quite a few sentences. He's very verbose most of the time, but sometimes it seems like he's completely forgotten sentence structure." What was she talking about?

"What about sleep?"

"He sleeps through the night. I watched him a few times over the summer and we did naps then, but the last few days, I've tried to wean him off of them since kindergarteners don't take

naps.”

“Right.”

“So there’s the adjustment of his parents being away and the lack of naps, but I just can’t help feeling like he’s still struggling with regulating his emotions.”

“Every kid’s different. What do his tantrums look like?”

“Crying, yelling. He hasn’t been violent that I know of, but he does seem to think that if he asks for something more loudly, I’ll give it to him.”

“It’s a difficult situation, especially with his parents being away until when?”

“December.” Mrs. Simmons nodded and, turning, saw Finn.

“Finny, aren’t you exploring?”

“Uh.”

“None of the activity stations seemed interesting?”

“Well, there’s a lot of kids around them all.”

“Did you try asking if you could play?” Mrs. Simmons asked.

“No, but” the two women exchanged a look.

“Come here, Finny.” Felix’s mom took his hand and led him back over to the table. “Finny, how do you feel about kindergarten?” He looked at Mrs. Simmons. Hair or not, how did she not recognize him?

“How about we phrase it this way, Finny?” Mrs. Simmons said. “Do you want to come here every day? You’d still go home in the afternoon, but you’d be spending the day here, playing and learning-”

“I know what kindergarten is.” Finn replied.

“He’s very smart.” Felix’s mom said. “He just needs to work on the social side of things.”

“I do not!” Mrs. Simmons nodded and handed a brochure to Felix’s mom. “What’s that?” He asked. Something felt off.

“Let’s go, Finny.” Felix’s mom took his hand and led him away.

“What was all that?” Finn asked. Felix’s mom gave his hand a squeeze, but even she seemed unsure about something.

They returned to the car, Finn growing more and more confused. Did this mean he was getting out of kindergarten?

Finally, with Finn buckled in, she looked him over and adjusted his bow tie. Well, if she wasn’t going to start, he would.

“I don’t want to go to kindergarten.”

“You’re not going to, Finny.” She said. He grinned, but then she added. “Not this year at least.”

“What? What’s that supposed to mean?”

~ F ~

“Can’t believe Jaycen’s dad wouldn’t let us borrow the clippers.” Nate said, walking along as Felix tried to balance on the edge of the sidewalk. “You’re gonna fall and get hit by a car.”

“Well, you shoulda told him what for.”

“And have him call your mom?”

“It’s suspicious otherwise.”

“He was suspicious of you. He still thinks you wanted to burn down his tool shed, remember?”

“I was just talking about it as an experiment.” Felix wobbled and his foot landed in the gutter. “And what could I really do with some clippers other than cut hair?” Nate shrugged but he could not help but feel Jaycen’s dad might have been right to be wary about Felix.

“What are we supposed to do now?”

“About what?”

“Finn’s hair. He’s my brother and I… he can’t go to high school with that hair!” Felix shrugged.

“He’s the one who should just tell my mom that he’s not a baby.” Nate sighed.

“Well, we… maybe we coulda done more for him.”

“It’s Saturday. School starts day after tomorrow. She’ll figure it out, then he can get his hair fixed or whatever.”

“Yeah, guess you’re right.” Nate shrugged it off. “Race you inside!”

Felix and Nate came bursting through the door and into an unexpected scene. Finn stood in the middle of the living room, sniffling slightly in shorts and a white polo.

“Is that…” Nate asked, immediately recognizing the uniform. “Are you…”

“She’s making me” was all Finn got out before bursting into tears.

“Making him what?” Felix asked.

“Hello, boys.” Felix’s mom said, walking in. “Oh, Finny. What’s wrong?” She looked accusingly at Felix and Nate.

“I… I… I don’t wanna!”

“Shh, shh.” She said, rubbing his back. “It’s not until Monday and, remember, it’s just for during the day.”

“That’s not what I mean!” Finn wailed.

“What’s going on?” Felix asked.

“Well, I took him to Kindergarten Round-Up yesterday.” Felix’s mom said.

“You did?” Nate asked in surprise.

“That’s where he’s supposed to go, right? He keeps talking about Midtown and it was at Midtown. Well, turns out, he’s not quite ready, so I signed him up to do High Five at

Growing Minds.”

“And have you talked to my parents about this?”

“There’s a big storm apparently, so calls aren’t getting through. Might be days or something.” Finn wailed louder. “But I'm sure mommy and daddy are fine!” She said.

“So wait.” Felix whispered to Nate. “Does that mean Finny’s in daycare?”

“Preschool.”

“Kindergarten prep.” Felix’s mother said pointedly.

“Yeah, it’s preschool.” Nate confirmed soto voce. Felix snorted.

“I’m s’posed to… to… be in high school!” Finn bawled. His cries were so loud, neither he nor Felix’s mom noticed as first Felix, then Nate, began to laugh.

~ F ~

Finn held out hope that somehow, everything would go back to normal even as Felix’s mom parked at Growing Minds. It certainly felt like a bad dream as he held her hand and walked inside, almost wishing he had managed to persuade her to let him wear the Baby Shark undies he had hated so much just a few days ago. They were better than the Pull-ups he wore ‘just in case’.

“Good morning! Finny’s here for his first day.”

“Morning!” The woman wore a pink t-shirt with a big name

tag that identified her as Miss Stacy. “Uh, Finny’s not three, is he?”

“No!” Finn said indignantly.

“Oh, I could’ve sworn it was lamby white for the older kids.” Felix’s mom said.

“Lamby white for the little guys, duckling yellow for the big kids.” Miss Stacy explained with the tone of someone who did not mind explaining, but had done so countless times. “Not to worry. Mr. Greg will take care of you, Finny!”

“Do I really have to stay here?” Finn asked. There was no point mentioning high school now. First bell had rang twenty-five minutes ago and he was standing in a preschool on the other side of town. Felix’s mom kneeled down and gave him a big hug.

“You’ll have fun. I promise.” She said. “Go on with Mr. Greg. He looks nice, don’t you think?” Unsure of what else to do, Finn checked if there was any hope of making a run for the door before following Mr. Greg into a side room. Judging by the changing table, this was where the kids in diapers got changed. This was not even remotely Midtown High.

“Arms up, Finny! We’ve gotta get you in the right uniform.”

“I can do it myself.” Finn said, pulling the shirt over his head, though it got stuck.

“Oops, gotta do these buttons first. Polos can be tricky.” Mr. Greg got the shirt off of him. “I see your Pull-ups.” He said in

teasing sing-song. “That’s ok. Part of High Five is becoming a potty pro. Do you wanna be a potty pro, Finny?”

“I already am. I was potty trained like” he gagged slightly as the duckling yellow shirt came down and ended up in his mouth on its way down his torso. The white polo, other than its Growing Minds logo, had reminded him of the sort of thing his uncle wore on the golf course. Duckling yellow was a soft, pale shade that seemed to only exist in baby clothes. “This is really the big kid shirt?”

“It is.” Mr Greg traced an X across his chest. “Now, c’mon. You can do free play until circle time where we’ll go over everything you’ll need to know about preschool!” He led Finn back out to the main room. Finn had missed it on the way in, but right next to the side room’s door was a wall of photos under the heading ‘Our students are a garden’. Each flower had the photo of one of the kids in it. Finn spied his third from the left, blonde bowl, the smile Felix’s mom had tickled out of him, and all. Shuddering, Finn looked toward the check-in table and then out into the parking lot. Felix’s mom was gone. Finn was in preschool.