

# Luke & Liam

*by andlat*

The classic tale of a little boy and his brother.

The Costume Box

2026

*Chapter 1*

## Chapter 1: Fire Drill

“You should come over now that the day’s over and we’ll play” the voices faded as their owners left the locker room, leaving Luke alone in the locker room. He stopped pretending to text and began to undress, glancing over his shoulder every now and again. He would not have to go through all this if his mom would just buy him boxers! He grimaced as he saw the familiar sight of white cotton briefs, the only thing he ever wore. It sucked that this was keeping him from going home. After all, gym was the last period of the day, but he did not dare expose his tighty whities to his classmates.

“Why didn’t I open my locker first?” He muttered, struggling as he always did to remember the combination. Was fifteen before or after twenty-two? “Damn it.” He muttered.

“You’re still here?” He barely bit back a yelp as the gruff voice cut through the silence of the locker room.

“Uh, yeah. Had to wait for the showers to open.” He knew it was an obvious lie. His hair was dry as a bone. Coach Collins opened his mouth, but a sudden screech cut through the silence even more than his voice had.

“Fire alarm!” He declared. Luke tried to grab his gym shorts, but the coach had snapped into protect the student mode. “No time. Here.” He tossed Luke a towel. “Let’s go!” Luke tried to wrap it around his waist as the coach practically pushed him out of the locker room and into the hall, his bare feet

slapping on the floor.

“I can’t go outside like this!” He said, but Coach Collins would not listen.

“Even if it’s just a drill, we need to evacuate. You’ve got a towel, don’t you?”

“But it’s February” he shivered the second that they emerged from the school, wishing the towel was a beach towel so he could wrap it around his shoulders and still cover his embarrassing underwear.

“I’m sure it’ll only be a few minutes.” Coach Collins said as Luke could almost feel his feet freezing to the sidewalk. He pouted, but knew that there was nothing he could do. He pulled the towel up as high as he dared. Girls wore them wrapped around their chest. Did they use the same towels as the boys did?

“What’s this?” Luke spun around, but immediately regretted showing panic as he saw his brother Liam strolling toward him, a big grin on his face. “Where are your clothes, squirt?” Although they were brothers, there were very few similarities between them. Liam took after their dad and was the tallest seventh grader, towering over even most of the ninth graders, to say nothing of Luke, who still occasionally got confused for a seventh grader, if not younger. Liam had begged for permission to use the weight training room at school and used it as often as he could. He smirked and tousled Luke’s hair. “Well?”

“I was changing and the”

“Don’t try to deepen your voice.” Liam teased. “I know how you really sound.” Luke cleared his throat. He had not been, but saying that would only convince Liam that he had been.

“I was changing” Luke pressed on. “And the fire alarm went off.”

“Did it scare little Lukey lambikins?” Liam said. “Look, you’re shivering!”

“Only because it’s cold out here.” Luke said irritably.

“You could hop on my back so your feet are off the sidewalk. That’s gotta be making you cold.”

“What? No way!” Liam shrugged.

“Fine, get hyperdermia or whatever.”

“Hypothermia.” Eager to get away from his brother, Luke wondered if the grass would be any gentler on his feet than the cold sidewalk. He walked over, but Liam followed.

“Let’s get your feetie weeties off of the cold ground, Luke.” He said in a sugary sweet voice, scooping Luke up and cradling him as if he was only a child.

“Let me go!” Luke yelled, trying to get out of his brother’s arms.

“You’ll be warmer this way, itty bitty Lukey loo!” Liam said, chuckling as he struggled.

“What’s going on here?” One of the teachers asked, watching the unorthodox scene.

“My baby brother was changing when the fire alarm went off,

so he's a little chilly." Liam explained.

"I'm your big brother!" Luke protested.

"How's that make it any better?" Liam said, rocking him slightly in his muscular arms.

"How about I find something for him to keep him warm? That towel's pretty thin." She hurried off.

"Put me down now."

"No way. Once she comes back with something, maybe, but not until then. Your tiny little tootsies feel like ten little popsicles!"

"I'm so telling mom and dad." Luke snarled.

"And they'll thank me for doing what I could to keep you from freezing to death." Liam replied calmly, rocking Luke gently, almost without even realizing that he was doing it. "Bet you wish you'd agree to the piggyback now."

Luke did not answer, but he did wish he had agreed when the teacher returned with a fluffy baby blue blanket. She smiled at him, still sitting there in his brother's arms, seemingly unaware that Liam was holding him against his will.

"You hold him and I'll cover him up." She said, smiling at Luke. "Here you are, little guy. All toasty warm!"

"This'll be so much better than being out here in just your little undies, hmm?" Liam said, grinning down at Luke, playing the part of a paternalistic big brother, at least for the

moment. The teacher smiled, tucking the blanket around Luke so that all that showed was his head.

“He’s lucky to have such a nice big brother.” She remarked, completely oblivious to Luke rolling his eyes. “It’s a good thing I keep this in my trunk for emergencies. This is an emergency, isn’t it, little guy?” To his shock, she actually reached out and pinched his cheek.

“How can we thank you?” Liam asked, barely able to contain his delight at this whole experience.

“Oh, it’s fine. Just bring the blanket back when you can.” She smiled and strolled away, turning to wave goodbye to Luke.

“I am going to fucking kill you.”

“Watch the language. You actually passed as a sweet little boy, no point ruining it now.” Liam said. “After all, imagine if everyone knew I was holding my older brother in just his boys size 12 tighty whities like this!”

“I will murder you.” Luke growled. “Let me go.”

“This is a nice blanket. I don’t want it touching the dirty ground.” Liam said, squeezing Luke so he knew he had no way out.

The all clear was given and Luke tried to get out of Liam’s arms, but he held him firm. Rather than go inside, he turned away from the school.

“What are you doing?”

“School day’s over and I don’t got anything in there I need.”

Liam said. Luke felt him shrug. “Do you?”

“My clothes!?!” Liam tried to hide a smile, but failed miserably.

“You’ve got clothes at home.”

“You’re joking”

“Nope, you really do.” Liam chuckled at his own joke. “It’s only a few blocks.”

“But my keys, my wallet.”

“I’ve got keys, Lukey pooky.” Liam said, bouncing Luke slightly in his arms as he walked.

“What about my shoes?”

“You can wear your old ones or I can carry you to school or something.” Liam said nonchalantly.

“Un fucking believable” Liam stopped abruptly.

“Swear one more time and you’ll regret it.”

“How?”

“I’ll either spank you right here or I’ll make you walk the rest of the way home in just your baby boy undies. Your choice.” Luke wanted to call his bluff, but he knew that Liam was capable of either of those things. He fell silent. At least they were nearly home.

“Can you put me down now?” Luke asked as Liam carried him up the porch.

“Not yet. It’s still so chilly for little baby Lukies.”

“What is wrong with you?” Liam chuckled.

“Dude, c’mon. If the roles were reversed, you’d be doing the same thing.”

“Would not!”

“Well, we’ll never know, will we?” Liam shrugged again, rocking Luke as they walked inside.

After Liam closed the front door, he chuckled playfully and tossed Luke onto the couch. Luke yelped as he bounced slightly.

“Boys? Is that you?” Their mom walked into the room, her eyebrows rising as she saw Luke on the couch in just his underwear. “What’s going on?” Luke smirked. Liam would have to explain and then he would surely get in trouble for not allowing Luke to go inside and retrieve his clothes. “I see.” Their mom said pensively. “You did the right thing, Liam.”

“What?” Luke exclaimed as his brother looked smug. “He didn’t let me go back in to get my clothes!”

“Your younger brother doesn’t make your decisions for you.” She said wearily. “Did he ask to go back inside?”

“Well, he whined about it.”

“See? If you asked nicely, I’m sure” Luke growled and stormed off to his room, painfully aware that he was still in just his tighty whities. He locked his door and the entire

ordeal washed over him. He sniffled and rubbed at his eyes as he got dressed again. It was over. Liam could not do anything more to him. All that remained was to plan his revenge.

*Chapter 2*

## Chapter 2: Fire Drill 2

The peaceful stillness of Luke's morning was disrupted by the sound of his door flying open and Liam stepping in.

"Rise and shine!"

"Go away, Liam!" Luke pulled the blanket over his head.

"Let me sleep."

"Breakfast's on the table. Mom sent me to come grab you."

Liam moved further into the room, picking his way through books, small mountains of dirty laundry, and even a few half full bags of chips.

"Tell her I'll eat later." Luke groaned.

"Nope. It's a whole family affair." Liam strode over and picked Luke up, blanket and all.

"Let me get dressed first."

"You're late to breakfast. No time. You can just wear your blanket."

"Liam!"

"It's not like you're naked under there, is it?" He held tightly to his squirming brother and took a peek. "See? You've got your little undies on." He snickered at Luke's growl. "Little Lukey's tighty whities."

"Liam!"

“You can get dressed after breakfast.” An idea suddenly occurred to Liam. “Tell you what, if mom or dad tells you you can’t wear your blanket to breakfast, I’ll”

“What?”

“Don’t interrupt, little brother.”

“I’m not”

“God, Lukey’s cranky today!”

“Because you woke me” Liam just talked over him.

“Remind me to put you down for a nap later.”

“Put me down now.”

“Naw.” Liam carried Luke out of his bedroom, smiling down at him as he cradled him in his arms, much as he had done a few weeks earlier with that fire drill. “Like I was saying, if mom or dad tells you to get dressed instead of letting you eat breakfast, I’ll give you ten bucks.”

“Put me down!” Luke protested again.

“Do you want the deal or not?”

“Sure, but put me down.” He did not even care about how whiny he sounded. Liam, however, kept holding on to him.

“Would you prefer to go to breakfast in just your little boy undies?”

“They’re not little boy undies.” Liam wanted to make a comment about how Luke had to be the only boy older than

seven who still wore them, but figured he had antagonized the boy enough for the moment.

“Mom still buys them from the boys department, doesn’t she?”

“Same with yours.” Liam chuckled and Luke felt his stomach drop. Could it be? Naw, there was no way. Liam was his little brother!

“Someone was a little reluctant to get out of bed.” Liam said as they entered the dining room in their unorthodox fashion. “So I let him take his blankie along with him.” Luke blushed, but he could not hide his face without it looking even more embarrassing, whether he covered his face with the blanket or worse, buried his face in Liam’s chest.

“I guess that’s one way to motivate him.” Their dad said with a chuckle all too reminiscent of Liam’s. “Maybe we could use some pointers from you, Liam.”

“Dad!” Luke protested as Liam deposited him in his chair.

“Better be careful you don’t flash anyone your little undies.” He whispered before sitting down beside him. “Doesn’t Luke look cozy, mom?”

“He certainly does.” She said with an eyebrow raised. “But if it’s what it takes for him to come to breakfast, who am I to complain?”

They were all about to eat, but Luke became aware of his parents looking at him expectantly. His heart leapt. Could this

be them telling him to go get dressed properly? Liam was totally going to owe him ten bucks!

“Luke, aren’t you forgetting something?” Mom asked. Luke had hoped she had forgotten.

Just the night before, mom had come into his room while he was getting ready for bed. He turned around, ready to yell at Liam, but saw it was his mom.

“What’s up?” He asked. It was never a good sign for mom to pay him a visit.

“We’ve been thinking, Luke.” Mom said. She sat down on his bed and patted it to get him to sit down next to her. “Your father and I know that you are in a hurry to grow up, especially with how much growing Liam’s been doing.” Luke nodded, uncertain where exactly this was going. “But, we just want you to know that there’s no need to try to rush it. We love you just the way you are.”

“Uh, ok?”

“So, I wanted to tell you that, you don’t have to try to be the same as Liam.”

“What do you mean?” Luke’s confusion was written all over his face. Mom smiled and hugged him.

“Well, for example, just because he says mom and dad doesn’t mean you have to switch from mommy and daddy.”

“What? I haven’t said mommy or daddy in years.” Mom shook her head with a smile.

“No, I’m pretty sure I remember you calling me mommy just last week. We were in the store and you wanted mint chocolate chip ice cream and you said ‘mommy, please?’” She tousled his hair. “Don’t you remember?”

“No.”

“Well, fib all you want, but from now on, it’s mommy and daddy, understand?” She stood up as if the conversation was over.

“C’mon, I’m in ninth grade! This is crazy, mom!” She paused.

“What was that?”

“Mom, I’m not” She looked at him, puzzled.

“One more time, I didn’t quite understand that. It’s like I’m only hearing half the word? Isn’t that weird?” She giggled. Luke sighed.

“Mommy.”

“Good boy. Tomorrow at breakfast, I want you to say good morning to me and daddy, okay?”

“Okay.” She smiled.

“In fact,” she grabbed his wrist and pulled him down the hall to the master bedroom, where dad sat reading a book.

“I’ve got a little visitor who wants to tell us something before bed.”

“Oh? What’s up, Lukey?”

“I just wanted to say” Luke huffed, blushing. “Good night, daddy. Good night, mommy?” Satisfied, they sent him off to bed.

Returning to the moment, Luke knew what was expected of him. He sighed, toes curling as he summoned up the courage.

“Good morning, mommy. Good morning, daddy.” He heard Liam snort as the childish words escaped his mouth.

“Chew your food, Liam.” Dad scolded. “Honestly, your brother’s just being polite.”

The good mornings out of the way, breakfast passed largely without issue, although Luke had to endure quite a few comments from each member of his family about making sure not to get any food on his blanket. His parents seemed to keep bringing it up, as if to get him to say mommy and daddy a million times.

“I know, daddy.” Luke mumbled after what had to be the hundredth reminder.

At least Liam had stopped snickering every single time he had to say mommy or daddy.

“It might be a good idea for you to wash your blanket and sheets today.” Mom said thoughtfully. “After breakfast, I want you to throw that in the washer right away. Don’t go hide back in your room for three hours first.”

“But I’m not wearing anything under it.” Luke mumbled.

“Oh, well” Mom began. Liam knew he had to intervene.

“That’s a fib, Lukey. He’s wearing his undies, mom. I saw them!”

“Is that true, Luke?” Mom asked, looking as if she was about to look for herself. Luke quickly nodded to dissuade her. “I think we’ll all survive seeing you in your underwear while you get everything in the washing machine. Maybe you should even do the rest of your laundry today.”

“But mom!” She gave him a look. “Uh, mommy…”

“How full’s your hamper?”

“Not that full.”

“Is it because all of your dirty clothes are on the floor?” Luke mumbled something into his last bite of waffle.

“And everything else.” Liam mumbled, just loudly enough for Luke to hear.

“You should clean that room today, Luke.” Both Luke and Liam knew that when their mom or dad made a ‘should’ statement, it was nothing less than a direct command.

“Okay.” He mumbled dejectedly.

“And another thing you can do for” Her next chore for him was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell.

“Who could that be?” Dad asked, but Liam was already on his feet.

“That’s Michelle.”

“Who’s Michelle?” Luke asked, but Liam had already left the

room.

“Mom, Dad, Lukey.” He said a minute later. “This is Michelle.” He led a red-haired girl into the room who looked strikingly familiar. Was she in his biology class? She smiled and Luke realized as she waved shyly that she and Liam were holding hands.

“Is she your girlfriend?” To his horror, everyone in the room laughed at him and he felt self-conscious, which only grew worse as it sunk in that he was sitting there in a blanket, his underwear dangerously close to being exposed. If she had come just five minutes later, she might have even seen him in just his white briefs. His face turned red and he looked down at the small puddle of syrup on his plate.

“She might just be a girl who’s his friend.” Mom explained. “You’ll understand when you’re older.” Luke shot her a look of shock.

“It’s okay. Who is this little cutie?”

“Oh, that’s my baby brother Lukey. He didn’t feel like getting dressed, so I had him wear his blankie to breakfast.” He grinned. “He is kind of adorable, isn’t he?” Luke glared at Liam, but no one paid him any mind. “We’re going to the mall, mom, dad.” Liam said. “I’ll text you if we end up going anywhere else.”

“Still can’t believe he has a phone.” Luke muttered, but no one heard him as Liam and Michelle left.

“Alright, enough dilly dallying” Mom said, as if Michelle’s

arrival had been his doing. “Blanket off and put it in the washer.”

“What if they come back?”

“Why would they?” Mom said with a shrug. “Come on, scoot.” Luke sighed melodramatically. “Keep that up and you can load the dishwasher as well.”

“Ok.” He kept the blanket wrapped around him as he walked to the washer, but knew he would have to shed it before long. He shoved it into the washer and was about to start it when his mom poked her head in.

“You can fit your sheets in there as well.” Luke yelped and tried to cover himself. “Don’t waste water.” She rolled her eyes as he kept trying to hide his underwear. “I used to give you baths, mister.” Too embarrassed to speak, Luke rushed past her and went to his room to strip his bed. To his dismay, his mom followed him. “Look at this mess!”

“Mom! Get out!” Seeing her face, he sighed. “Mommy”

“This is my house, Luke. I can come in your room whenever I want. Look at this mess.” She looked around.

“You already told me to clean it.”

“And I expect you to.” Mom said. Luke grumbled and slipped past her, his arms full of his sheets. Why was mom treating him like a servant?

“Look at that hustle.” Dad said as Luke blazed past him.

“Huh?”

“Normally when you do chores, you’re dragging your feet, but” he smirked. “I guess being in just your underwear really motivates you, huh?”

“What?”

“Maybe you should always do your chores in your underwear.” Dad said thoughtfully. Luke felt like this was some sort of terrible nightmare.

“You’re joking, right?”

“What do you think, Wendy?” Dad asked as mom walked in.

“I was just saying that Luke seems to be a bit more motivated when he’s doing chores in just his underwear.”

“That is true.”

“Mommy! Daddy!” Luke looked from one to the other, completely oblivious to the fact that he was standing there in just his underwear, arms still full of his sheets.

“Tell you what, Luke.” Dad said. “Go put your sheets in the wash and then you can get dressed before you clean your room.” Mom nodded as if they shared the thought.

“If you can clean up your room in an hour, we’ll let you be, but if it takes you more than an hour, we’ll see how much quicker you move in just your underwear.”

“That’s insane.”

“Any responsible young man should be able to clean his room in an hour.” Mom said, leaving it unsaid what Luke would be if he did not succeed. “Do we have a deal?”

“Yes, mommy.” Luke mumbled, staring down at his toes. Maybe remembering to say mommy and daddy would buy him some leeway?

Taking his sheets to the washer, Luke ran into another obstacle. He had no idea how to work the machine!

“Hey, mom! Mom!” She was just in the other room, why wouldn't she answer? He poked his head around the corner. “Mom!” Why was she acting like she was not hearing him? He sighed. “Fine, mommy.”

“Yes, Luke?”

“Can you show me how to start the washer?”

“Can you ask nicely?” She was clearly enjoying this. He groaned.

“Please?”

“Complete sentence, Luke.”

“Can you please help me with the washer?” Mom smiled and followed him into the laundry room.

“Remember our talk from last night?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, because you seem to be forgetting. Mommy and daddy is an all the time thing, sweetheart. Whether we're at home or you're at school or at the store. Wherever. Understand?” The horrified teen could only nod dumbly. “How about we help you remember?”

“How?” He asked hesitantly.

“From now on, please and thank you aren't complete without including who you're asking or thanking. So, please mommy or thank you daddy.” She smiled. “Not only will you be a very polite little boy, but soon, saying mommy and daddy will become second nature to you.” That was exactly what Luke was afraid of. “How about you practice by asking me again?”

“Can you please help me with the washer, mommy?”

“Very good! I would love to!” She stood there and waited.

“Thank you, mommy.” Luke muttered. She turned to the washer.

“Now, this is blankets and sheets, so we'll do heavy load.” Rather than show him, she pushed a few buttons with her body blocking his view. “When you're doing the rest of your laundry, you can just ask mommy or daddy to do the buttons for you, okay?”

“Okay.” He mumbled.

“Okie dokie! Washer's running, so let's go see about that room.” Luke, eager to escape his mom's watchful eye, did not need to be told twice.

He hurried to his room, but sure enough, his parents followed.

“Get a shirt and pants on and then the clock will start.” Dad said.

“When was the last time you changed your undies, Luke?”  
Mom added.

“Yesterday.”

“Better change those too, especially since you’re doing laundry.”

“Ok.” Luke muttered. He knew better than to try to get his parents to leave, so he turned his back to them and quickly exchanged his briefs for a matching pair. He threw on a fresh t-shirt and pants.

“Alrighty, Luke. You all ready?” Dad asked.

“Yes”

“What was that?” Luke sighed.

“Yes, daddy!”

“Attaboy! One hour, starting now.” They stood there for a moment, smiling as Luke started gathering up his clothes into his hamper. He was so focused that he did not know how long it was before they left him alone. He tried to keep up cleaning unsupervised, but his mind soon began to wander.

Sitting by his bedroom door, he spied a pair of Toy Story clogs, one with Woody on it and the other with Buzz. They looked like the sort of shoes a preschooler would wear, but they were unfortunately his, fitting as if they were made for his feet.

The morning after the fateful fire drill, Luke had realized he

did not have any shoes to wear. He dug to the very back of his closet to find an old pair of flip flops.

“You are not wearing those to school. It’s far too cold!” His mom said.

“But I left my sneakers at school because Liam wouldn’t let me grab them.” Luke protested. “You know, the fire drill?”

“You really don’t have any other shoes?”

“No.”

“How’d you get home yesterday?” Luke blushed and sighed.

“Liam uh carried me.” His mom tried and failed to hide her smile.

“Liam, sweetie, would you mind carrying Luke to school today so he can get his shoes? I’m sure they’re still in the locker room or wherever you left them.”

“Yeah, the locker room.” Luke said. “Does he really have to carry me? Won’t it be colder for me to be barefoot than to wear these?” He held up the flip flops in a last ditch effort.

“I think you’ll be fine. It’s a short walk.” Mom said.

“You’re really going to let him carry me?”

“You better hurry if you want to get your shoes back before class starts.” Luke glared at her back as Liam scooped him up and set him against his shoulder.

“This is humiliating.” He muttered. Liam just chuckled.

“Remember, it was all mom’s idea.” He bounced Luke slightly. “At least it’s a short walk, hmm?”

“Never again.” Luke growled, his bare feet dangling. Liam chuckled and headed out the front door.

“Excited for school, Lukey poo?”

“Not like this.”

“You’ll get your shoes back and then you’ll be fine.” Liam said reassuringly. “We’ll go straight to the locker room. That’s where you left them, right?”

“You don’t need to come with me.”

“You can’t fly there, silly Lukey loo!” Liam chuckled. “I’m not letting you walk through the school barefoot. What if you hurt your precious little tootsies?”

“Shut up.” To his surprise, Liam actually listened and the remainder of the walk to the school passed in relative silence.

True to his word, Liam carried Luke directly to the locker room, but his shoes were not waiting for him. Liam kept Luke in his arms even as the boy squirmed and demanded to be put down, his higher voice echoing in the empty locker room.

“Inside voice.”

“Shuddup! Where are my shoes?”

“Look, we can go to the nurse. She always has spare shoes.” Luke bit back a pithy response. It actually was a reasonable

suggestion.

“Ok.” He thought about asking Liam to put him down again, but he knew that there was no chance of that. He settled for hiding his face. It made him look like a shy little boy, but it at least meant that there was less of a chance that someone would recognize him.

The nurse's office was on the other side of the school, but they finally arrived there after what felt to Luke to be a small eternity. She smiled as she saw the unorthodox sight before her.

“Do you want to stay in my arms or get down now, Lukey pooky?” Liam asked. She heard the smaller boy in his arms mumble something and watched as he was deposited on the bed.

“What can I help you two with?”

“Luke's misplaced his shoes.” Liam said, grabbing one of Luke's bare feet as if the nurse needed proof. “Oh, someone's ticklish. I forgot.” Liam teased as Luke squirmed. “Do you have any that would fit him?” The nurse looked at Luke's feet and her face wrinkled a bit as she thought.

“Most of them would be a bit on the big side for him, but” she went over to her desk and opened a drawer. “I thought I'd give these to my nephew since I didn't think we had any students whose feet were small enough, but I think” she held up a pair of Toy Story clogs, Woody on one shoe and Buzz Lightyear on the other. “These might just fit you perfectly.

Lukey, was it?" Luke was too distracted by the babyish shoes in her hands to answer.

"That's his name." Liam said proudly.

"Alright, let's get these shoes on you so that your big brother doesn't have to carry you everywhere, hmm?" Luke stared dumbly down at his feet as she slid the shoes onto them.

"What do you say, Luke?" Liam asked. Luke mumbled something that could have been a thank you. These were not his shoes! These were some preschooler's shoes! What had happened to his?

"Can't we go check the lost and found?" He asked Liam. Liam shook his head.

"School starts soon, kiddo. Maybe we can after school." The school day came and went, but Luke never got a chance to check the lost and found. Liam found him and carried him home, taking his new shoes off and carrying them. It became an everyday thing, being carried to and from school. When Luke whined about it, his mom had said it was either get carried or Liam would push him in a stroller. Luke did not think he could fit in the stroller anymore, but the last thing he wanted to do was give them an excuse to try.

Luke returned to the present moment with the sinking feeling that he had been daydreaming for a long time. He had to clean, and fast! He moved like a whirling dervish, trying to clean everything at once. Somehow, it only seemed to make things worse. With all of his dirty clothes off of the floor, his

hamper was filled to overflowing. He tried to push it down, but only succeeded in knocking over his hamper, spilling dirty clothes everywhere. He quickly dove on them to clean them up, but he heard the door creak.

“Time’s up, Luke.” His dad said, looking around the room. “It looks better in here, but I expected you to finish and this does not look finished.”

“I knocked over my hamper.” Luke explained sheepishly.

“A deal’s a deal, Luke.” Dad said. “Arms up.”

“What?”

“Who am I, Luke?”

“Dad. Dy.”

“Try that again, kiddo.”

“You’re daddy.” He mumbled.

“And Daddy says arms up.” Luke sighed, but complied. His dad was not done yet though.

“Why’s it important to listen to Daddy?” He asked. Luke did not know, so he remained silent. “Is it because Daddy’s in charge?”

“I guess.”

“You guess or you know?”

“I know.”

“What do you know?” Luke barely stopped himself from whining. Why was his dad driving this home so much?

“Daddy’s in charge.”

“Who else is in charge?” His dad asked, finally pulling Luke’s t-shirt over his head.

“Mommy.” Luke stammered as his dad slipped his fingers into the elastic of Luke’s shorts and tugged them down, leaving him in just his underwear.

“That’s right. Do you remember why Mommy and Daddy are taking away your clothes?” “To motivate me to clean.” Luke mumbled.

“That’s right. Once your laundry is done and your room is clean, you can put your clothes back on. Liam’s going to be home around lunchtime, so I suggest you get it done before then, okay?”

“Yes, daddy.” Luke whispered.

“Alright, I think mommy said your blanket and sheets are ready to be moved, so why don’t you bring your hamper to the laundry room?” Luke begrudgingly complied, grateful at least that the large hamper covered the front of his underwear. He knew that hurrying to the washer and dryer only served to prove his parents’ point, but he could not keep himself from doing it, exposed as he was. All it would take was for the neighbor to happen past the window and Luke’s shameful secret would be revealed.

“There you are.” His mom said as he came into the laundry room. “I got your blanket and sheets into the dryer for you.” She looked at him, clearly waiting for him to respond.

“Thank you, mommy.” He said.

“Go ahead and load the washer. Let’s do your whites first, okay?”

“Mhm.”

“Once you’re ready, come find me and I’ll start the washer for you, okay?”

“Yes, mommy.” Luke said, trying to gather up all of his white clothes as quickly as he could. He already did not like the increased attention his parents were giving him. He did not need this much direction! He knew, however, that telling them that would not accomplish anything, so he held his tongue, difficult as it was.

With the washing machine loaded, Luke went to find his mom, but she had apparently disappeared.

“Hey, dad, have you seen mom?” He asked, finding his dad in the living room. His dad did not look up. “Daddy.” Luke said with a sigh.

“Yes, Luke?”

“Have you seen Mommy?” Every time he had to say the childish words, his stomach twisted and he felt anger rising inside him.

“I think she’s in your room. Did you check there?” Puzzled, Luke went to his room and sure enough, his mom was there, cleaning his room.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh, just tidying up. Thought you’d like the help.”

“Uh, thank you, mommy?” Luke could not help feeling like there was something amiss. But what? He would have to investigate when she was not in the room.

“Why were you looking for me?”

“Oh, can you please start the washer for me? Mommy?” Luke felt as if his face must be red with rage from how much he was having to restrain himself.

“Of course, munchkin.” She said pleasantly. “How about you stay here and finish up while I get the washer going?”

“Ok.” Luke said, seizing the opportunity to try and figure out just what his mom had been doing alone in his room. He looked around the room, but nothing seemed amiss, other than there being fewer things on the floor. Maybe she really did just clean up a bit while he was loading the washing machine?

Determined to make absolutely sure his mom had not done anything, Luke checked every single drawer of his dresser. His heart skipped a beat as he realized the final drawer was his underwear drawer. Maybe, just maybe... his hand shook slightly as he pulled it open. He sighed as the all too familiar sight of a sea of white cotton came into view. He did not

know why he had gotten his hopes up. Mom had only bought him new underwear a few days ago.

The trip to the store had been the day after his fateful trip to the nurse's office, but mom was adamant that they would not be buying him new shoes.

"Please?" He begged as they crossed the parking lot, but mom remained firm.

"Those shoes are brand new still."

"But they're for toddlers!"

"They fit your feet. Are you a toddler?" Luke did not answer.

"I know you're not a toddler!" Liam exclaimed, picking Luke up and kissing his cheek. "Lukey pooky boo is a big boy!" Luke squirmed, but Liam held him to his chest as they walked to the store. "You can get down when we're inside." Liam decreed, giving Luke a loving squeeze.

"We're inside." Luke said the second Liam's foot crossed the threshold. He was not even surprised when Liam did not put him down.

"Almost there." He said, kissing Luke's cheek.

"Ew!"

"We're in public, Luke." Mom scolded. Liam carried Luke over to a cart and set him down in the little seat.

"Hey! Stop!" Luke protested as Liam buckled him in. "Get me out of this thing!"

“Liam, stop tormenting your brother.” Mom said. “But leave him in there while I get a picture.”

“Is that all?” Luke asked acerbically.

“Yep!”

“Fine.”

“Thank you so much for indulging me, your majesty.” Mom said, pulling out her phone.

“Ooh, me too.” Liam said, fishing out his own. Luke glared at both of them, but the photos that they showed him were of a little boy petulantly pouting in the cart.

“Can I get out now? Mom? Mom?” She began to push the cart.

“Don't kick me, Luke.” She said as he squirmed. “I think we'll keep you here so you don't get lost again. It was at this store, you know.”

“Yeah, like ten years ago! Liam was still in diapers!”

“It was last year, Luke.” Mom said, tapping his nose. “No time for fibbing little Lukes.”

“Don't call me that.” He muttered sullenly. He sat in the cart sulking as they did their shopping. Even when they came to the boys department to get him new underwear, he just rolled his eyes and muttered darkly as his mom held up a package of white briefs before placing them in the cart. He did not even respond when Liam pointed to a pair of Toy Story

pajamas, commenting on how they matched his new shoes.

“You sleep in your tighty whities, that’s right. You don’t need jammies.” Liam said with a grin, but Luke could have sworn he looked at the price tag before following them to the front of the store.

By the time the last load of laundry was in the dryer, Luke’s room was clean. It looked odd, almost un-lived in to him, but his parents were thrilled.

“Was that so hard?” His dad asked with mock severity, barely able to keep the smile from his face as he bunched Luke’s shirt in his hands.

“No, daddy.” Luke mumbled.

“Arms up.”

“I’m very impressed, Lukey.” Mom said.

“Thank you, mommy.” Had she just called him Lukey? That was Liam’s thing! The last thing the teenager wanted was for the whole family to start calling him that. He distracted himself by pulling on his shorts before either of his parents tried to help him.

“Bet you’re ready for lunch.” Mom said. Luke had to admit that he was. He followed his mom out of his room, deeply relieved that he was finally back in clothes again. Walking around in his underwear all morning had been, in a word, weird.

Lunch proved to be a peanut butter and jelly sandwich cut

into squares and a glass of milk. Luke privately pouted about the childish lunch, but knew better than to voice his thoughts, even as he glared at Liam's old Spongebob plate that had somehow found its way out of storage to serve as his lunch's plate.

"Liam should be home any minute." Mom said, smiling at him. "Here, wipe your face with a napkin." Luke took it and scrubbed his face. How had he got peanut butter all the way on the other side of his cheek? "I have an idea." Mom said. "Why don't you go open the door and surprise Liam?"

"Why?" Luke asked. He knew all too well that her suggestion was more of an order.

"Go on. He's coming up the driveway right now." Luke sighed and walked over to the door. He opened it just as Liam came bounding up the steps.

"Lukey!" Liam exclaimed, scooping him up without even breaking stride and kissing him as he kicked off his shoes effortlessly. "Ooh, little bit of peanut butter on your cheek, Lukey." Luke recoiled as Liam licked his thumb and wiped his cheek with it. "Did you have peanut butter and jelly for lunch?" Luke just looked away, furious that he was once again off the ground in Liam's arms. He felt Liam grab his chin and turn his face toward him so he had to look at his brother's, his little brother's!, gently smiling face. "How was your morning, little guy?"

"He was very productive. He got all his laundry done and even cleaned his room!"

“Wow!” Liam said. “How’d you get all that done in just a few hours?”

“Why don’t you tell him about our new motivator?”

“But mom!”

“That’s Mommy.” She said sternly. “Tell him, Luke. He’s going to find out sooner rather than later”

“But”

“C’mon, Lukey. You can tell me.” Liam said, sitting down on the couch, but keeping ahold of Luke no matter how he squirmed. “Not letting you go until you tell me.”

“I had to do them in just my underwear.” Luke whispered. Liam pulled him away from his shoulder, setting the boy on his lap and looking down at him in surprise.

“Mom and dad made you do your chores in just your undies?” Luke did not know if Liam was a spy for them or not. Was this a test? He could not risk it. Even if Liam was not a spy, he would probably make Luke say mommy and daddy.

“Mommy and daddy” he shuddered as Liam snorted. “They thought I’d move faster if I was embarrassed about them seeing me in my underwear.”

“Then why are you in clothes now?” Luke made an annoyed noise. Why would he not be in clothes?

“Cuz I earned them back by doing my chores.” Luke said

bashfully.

“Well, I think we should take a photo of you in your best big boy pose.” He set Luke down on the floor, smirking at the little boy before him. “Show me your big boy pose.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I know you’re tired from doing all your chores this morning, Lukey.” Liam said sympathetically. “So I’ll forgive your whining.”

“I’m not whining!” Liam just shrugged and fished his phone out of his shorts.

“Smile for the photo, Mr. Big Boy!” Luke tried his best to smile, but he had a nagging suspicion that Liam was planning something.

As if on cue, Liam picked up a large plastic shopping bag he had brought in with him. “In fact, I think you’ve earned the surprises I got you.” He smiled as Luke could not help showing his curiosity on his face. “How about you go get Mommy and Daddy so they can see too?” Luke felt his stomach drop. This could not be good. He patted Luke’s bottom. “Go on, kiddo, or do we have to strip you to your undies to motivate you? That’s what Mommy and Daddy think, hmm?” Liam grinned as Luke hurried away. He was too easy to manipulate sometimes.

Luke found his mom in his parents’ office, sorting some papers. He stood by the door, remembering that he was not allowed to enter their office without permission. Her back

was to him, so he tried to figure out some way to get her attention without it seeming like he was being rude. He made a small noise, but his mom did not seem to hear over the shuffling of papers.

“Mom?” He said softly. She did not react. “Mommy?”

“Yes, baby?” She turned immediately. Luke winced at the b word. “Sorry, Lukey. It slipped out.” Luke did not think she looked sorry at all, but he pressed on.

“Liam’s home and he wants to show us all something.”

“How exciting! I’ll be there in just a minute.” Luke turned to leave, but thought of something. “Um, do you know where Daddy is?”

“I think he’s in the backyard.” Luke turned to leave again, but he heard his mom clear her throat. “Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“No? Oh, thank you mommy.” She nodded approvingly and Luke headed toward the backyard to find his dad.

As Luke emerged into the backyard, he wondered just what it was Liam had to show them. The past few days, it had been impossible to predict anything Liam was planning. Everything had gone against him ever since the fire drill, it seemed.

Spying his dad, he hurried over to him. His dad was busy pulling weeds out of the garden and did not turn as the bare footed boy neared him.

“Hey, dad. Liam wants to show us all something.” His dad turned.

“Sorry, what was that, buddy?”

“Liam wants”

“No, I heard that. I was curious what you called me.”

“Oh, um daddy.” His dad nodded.

“Like we’ve told you, Luke. You don’t need to say mom and dad just because your big brother does.” He stood and groaned, stretching his back. “You should be proud to still be daddy’s little boy.” He smiled and picked Luke up, setting him against his hip. “There are sharp pebbles and bits of broken glass out here. Why are you out here in your bare feet?”

“Oh, I forgot.”

“You have those nice new Toy Story shoes. You should’ve slipped those on or asked Liam to help you.” Luke bristled at the notion that he would need Liam to help him put on those dumb clogs. “Well?”

“Yes, daddy.” He mumbled.

“Attaboy. You’re Daddy’s little boy, aren’t you?”

“Yes, daddy.” Luke mumbled as he carried the tiny teenager into the house.

“We’re coming, we’re coming.” He called as they walked toward the living room.

“Oh, I’ll take him.” Liam said, holding his arms out for Luke. Luke felt his face grow even more red as his dad handed him off to his brother without even a second’s hesitation. Liam set him on his lap and smiled at him. “We’ll get to your presents in a sec, but first” he opened a blue plastic tub of baby wipes. “Let’s get our messy little boy all presentable.”

“Liam!” Luke whined as he took a wipe and started wiping his face.

“I gave you a napkin, Lukey.” Mom said. “Not Liam’s fault you were not thorough enough.”

“Thorough means wiping everywhere.”

“I know!” Luke protested as Liam gave his face a very substantial wiping.

“Now for your hands. Little Lukey’s fingers get so sticky!”

“Liam!” Luke protested again, squirming on his brother’s lap. “Stop! This is embarrassing!”

“Getting clean shouldn’t be embarrassing, Lukey pookie.” Liam chided. “But tell you what, let me wipe your fingers and then we’ll give you your first present. Mom, I think the one I showed you first, don’t you?” Luke looked at her inquisitively as she nodded. “May I wash your hands, Lukey?”

“Sure.” Luke muttered. He stared down at his hands as Liam wiped them with the baby wipes, noticing just how much his hands were dwarfed by Liam’s. Why was his little brother so much bigger than him? It did not make any sense. They had

the same mommy and daddy. Mom and dad, Luke quickly corrected. Were they getting to him?

“All clean!” Liam exclaimed, kissing Luke’s cheek. “Ah, now it doesn’t taste like peanut butter. It tastes like what, Lukey?”

“Me?”

“That’s right! It tastes like a clean little boy!”

“Hey!”

“Alright, ready for your first present?” Liam asked. Luke nodded. “Close your eyes, Lukey!” Luke knew that this had to be a trap, but he complied. “And open your mouth in three, two, one.” Luke again obeyed and felt something rubber plunge in. His eyes flew open and could just barely see the shield of the blue pacifier that now sat in his mouth.

“What the?” He tried to spit it out, but Liam held a finger over it.

“You’re supposed to suck on it, Lukey.” He said gently.

“It’s a pacifier!” He turned to look at his parents, but neither of them seemed to think anything was amiss about a teenager sitting on his little brother’s lap, sucking on a pacifier.

“That’s right, Luke.” His mom said. “We think it’ll help you calm down when you’re in a mood.”

“But”

“From now on,” Liam said. “Whenever Mommy or Daddy or I put that in your mouth, you’re going to suck on it. If you

don't, you'll be in trouble, okay?"

"But"

"Shh," Liam cooed. "Suck on your new present while I get you clean for your next present."

"What? I'm clean!"

"You were outside barefoot, weren't you?" Liam said. Luke grumbled. "Shh, suck on your pacifier while I wipe your feet off, okay?" Luke glared daggers up at him, but he did not seem to notice, shushing Luke gently while he wiped his feet off with another baby wipe. "Lukey's got ticklish tootsies, yes he does!" Liam teased as Luke squirmed.

Once Liam was absolutely satisfied with Luke's feet, he kissed the boy's forehead, smiling as the pacifier remained in his mouth.

"Alright, what's the next present?" He wondered out loud. He smiled and pulled out a light blue t-shirt and matching shorts. The t-shirt had Woody, Bullseye, and Buzz Lightyear on it. "Just like your shoes!"

"Are those pajamas?" Luke asked the best he could around his pacifier. He hated it, but he knew spitting it out would only make Liam and his parents mad.

"Not quite." Liam said. "You sleep in your undies, remember?" Liam unfolded them. "Let's try them on and then I'll explain what they're for." In no time, he had Luke stripped back down to his white briefs, planting a swat on his

bottom for his attempts to fight Liam's undressing of him. "You're almost too cute to cover up your little undies." Liam remarked, smiling at his older brother in just his juvenile underwear and the pacifier. "But we need to make sure everything fits!"

The first thing Luke noticed about the shorts was that they were far shorter than the pair he had just been wearing. Those had covered his knees, but these? They came to mid-thigh, if that.

"They're too small."

"No, I think they fit you perfectly." Mom remarked. "They cover your underwear, don't they?"

"Why do I need pajamas?" Luke demanded, looking from face to face.

"They're not jammies, Luke. You'll still sleep in your undies." Liam said. "These are your comfy clothes. You'll wear them around the house and places like that. Basically, you're going to have school clothes and not school clothes, understand?"

"What?" Liam chuckled and pulled Luke back into his lap.

"Every afternoon, you'll come home with me. We'll take off your school clothes and then you'll wear your comfy clothes until bedtime, see?"

"But why?"

"Cuz your school clothes aren't very comfortable. You'll

have a lot more fun playing in these.”

“I don’t want”

“Lukey, this is a very nice gift. Liam spent a lot of money on you.” Mom scolded.

“Thank your big brother, Luke.” His dad interjected. He could not believe his ears! They were okay with this? More than that, they seemed satisfied somehow. Did they want him to be a baby?

“Thank you” he muttered, feeling terribly defeated. He could feel tears welling up in his eyes. “Thank you for my presents.” As he saw in the bag that there were a few other pajama sets, each as childish and colorful as those he was wearing, it proved too much. He sniffled and began to cry.

“Oh, Lukey.” Liam cooed, hugging him and gently rocking him in his arms. “I know, I know. It’s a lot to take in, but trust me. This will be good for you.”

“I’m not” Luke choked out around his tears and sobs. “I’m not a little boy!”

“Shh, shh, big brother’s here, Lukey loo.” Liam cooed. “Go on and cry out all your confusion.”

“Liam! I am not a” The pacifier tumbled from his mouth, but Liam picked it back up.

“Here’s your pacifier back, Lukey. Maybe it’ll help you remember your inside voice.” Somehow, the pacifier being pushed back into his mouth calmed Luke, but he still felt so

terribly confused.

“Liam, stop! This isn’t funny! I am not”

“Shh, don’t start crying again.” Liam said. “I promise you’ll like your next present a lot more.” He took a baby wipe and cleaned up Luke’s face, although it was still red from crying and embarrassment. “This one will be the best. I promise.”

“What is it?” Luke asked, feeling worn out from his breakdown.

“Close your eyes!”

“It’s not another pacifier, is it?”

“Close your eyes, Lukey pookie.” Liam said. Luke rolled his eyes before closing them. “Three, two, one.” This time, instead of a rubber pacifier, Luke felt a soft something brush his hand. “Open your eyes, Lukey!” Luke opened them to see a smiling ursine face looking back at him.

“A teddy bear!”

“Your new best friend!” Liam announced happily. In addition to his smile, the bear had a blue and white striped bow tie.

“I don’t”

“Shh, suck on your paci.” Liam said. “From now on, this bear is going to be your responsibility, Luke. You’ll sleep with him, you’ll play with him, you’ll tell him about your day. Every morning, you’ll tuck him into bed before you go to school and right after school, you’ll give him kisses and hugs because that’s what teddy bears eat.”

“I’m fourteen years old, for gods sakes.”

“He doesn’t mind, Lukey. He loves you all the same. And I bet when you want to pretend to be big, he’ll pretend right along with you.” Luke stared at Liam.

“You’ve lost your mind.”

“You can think on it for a bit.” Liam said. He shifted Luke against his shoulder and stood up, holding the bear against his back. “But for now, I think our fussy little boy needs a nap.”

“Nap?” The pacifier fell from his lips, but his dad skillfully caught it before it hit the floor.

“What do you say, Luke?” His dad asked.

“Thank you, daddy.” He muttered as Liam snickered.

“That’s one sleepy little boy.” Dad said as he watched Liam carry Luke out of the living room.

“I am not taking a nap.”

“You are. You and your teddy bear. I expect you to give him a name by bedtime, by the way.”

“Liam, you can’t keep doing this.”

“Can too.” Liam said as he set Luke down on his bed. “Aw, look. Your blankie and sheets are still warm from the dryer. You’ll be so cozy!”

“Liam, seriously!”

“Lukey, I am going to give you one last freebie before you

start getting in trouble for spitting out your paci.” He put it back in Luke’s mouth. “Lukey’s nookie.” He teased. “Now let’s get your comfy clothes off.”

“What?”

“Well, you were the one who was so adamant about not wearing jammies, weren’t you?” He pulled Luke’s shirt off. “Can you take off your shorts like a big boy?” Luke grumbled into the pacifier as he complied. “And now into bed you get!”

“I am not taking a nap!” Liam shrugged and lifted the boy into the air before depositing him in the bed.

“You always take naps on the weekends, Lukey. Just like you take a nap every day after school.”

“You’ve really lost your mind.”

“I’ll stay here with you until you drift off to sleep. Here, take Teddy.” He pulled the blanket over the nearly naked little teenager, tucking the teddy bear in next to him. He smiled and lay down on the other side of Luke. “Your new bear and I made a Lukey sandwich!” He teased. He brushed a strand of hair off of Luke’s forehead. “Close your eyes and suck on your pacifier. The sooner you’re asleep, the sooner I’m gone.” He kissed Luke’s cheek. “Sweet dreams, little Lukey. Your big brother loves you oh so very much.”

*Chapter 3*

## Chapter 3: Soccer Stars

"Why is the sun so bright?" Luke whined.

"It's called being out in the daytime, Lukey loo." Liam said, taking Luke's hand before they crossed the street.

"I don't need to hold your hand every time."

"I can always carry you." Liam replied mildly. Luke grumbled. At least they were almost to the soccer fields.

"Still think it's dumb that I have to go to your soccer thing with you."

"Practice, Luke."

"Well"

"And you have to go because you're starting to get pale. You've been hiding inside for so long, you're almost as white as your briefs!" Luke grumbled.

"Shuddup." Liam laughed.

"I love my baby boy."

"I am not a baby!"

"Geez. I bet you wouldn't be so fussy if I had put you in your comfy clothes."

"I wouldn't be caught dead in the park in those Toy Story pajamas."

"They're not pajamas." Liam said patiently as they neared the field. "They're your comfy clothes. You sleep in your little undies, remember?" Luke growled. "Alright, we're here. Why don't you sit down on the bench? You should be able to watch from there and see everything, don't you think?"

"Can I have my juice?"

"Not yet, kiddo." Liam set a Paw Patrol backpack down at Luke's feet. "We'll have that in a little bit. Otherwise, you'll have to go peepee before I even start practice." Luke rolled his eyes. He hated how much control Liam had over him now. It was not fair! He was the older one, but it felt like he was the only one who remembered that. There had to be some way to remind Liam, to remind everyone about that. But how?

Liam stood on the field, watching his players get warmed up. He had volunteered to coach the peewee soccer team not only because it was fun, but because he wanted to do research. If he figured out how actual little kids acted, he would know better how to make Luke into one of them. He smiled as he saw the boy sitting over on the bench, swinging his legs back and forth without even realizing he was doing it. He really did look like he would fit in with the soccer players. Maybe he was a bit taller, but his face, his proportions, his Toy Story clogs, everything seemed like a little boy.

"Say hi to Coach Liam, Marcus." Mrs. Woodard said, leading her son over in his baby blue soccer shirt.

"Hi there, Marcus! Are you ready for soccer?" Liam said eagerly. Marcus nodded, grinning up at him in a pointed

fashion. Liam immediately saw why. "Oh! Did you lose a tooth?"

"Mhm!" Marcus said. "The tooth fairy brought me a whole dollar!"

"Wow! You're rich, huh?"

"Yep." Liam held out his hand for a high five, smiling as he realized that Luke's hand felt so similar to Marcus's

"You go over there and get warmed up with Coach Trevor, okay?" He turned his attention to Mrs. Woodard.

"Hey, Mrs. Woodard."

"Oh, call me Barb."

"Sure thing, Barb. You see that little guy over there? That's my brother Luke. He's a little shy since it's his first day. Would you mind going over and helping him get into his soccer stuff? I put a shirt and shorts in there for him, but he was a little sloth this morning, so I ran out of time to dress him."

"I sure can!"

"He might fuss a bit, but in that bag by him, you'll find something to soothe him if it comes to that, okay?" She nodded and headed over.

Luke squinted into the sun, but a shadow fell over him. He looked up to see a smiling auburn-haired woman over him.

"Hi there, Luke. My name's Mrs. Woodard. I'm Marcus's

mommy."

"Ok."

"Your brother wanted me to help you get ready for your first day of soccer."

"My first day of what?"

"Soccer, sweetheart." She said with a smile.

"No, I'm not"

"Oh, I know you're shy, but trust me. It'll be fun. Look! Your big brother put all your gear in your backpack for you." She smiled as she pulled a baby blue soccer t-shirt and matching baby blue shorts. "Oh, you'll match and everything!"

"What? I need to go talk to Liam."

"We can go over there after you're ready. C'mon, no one's looking, so let's get you undressed right here. It'll be quick."

"But" She had started lifting his shirt up over his head.

"I have four sons, Luke. I know every excuse a little boy like you can come up with." Luke shivered as she pulled the shirt over his head, the gentle summer breeze brushing his shoulders. "My! Your hair's getting long, hmm?" She used her hand to smooth his mop of hair over his head. Luke was almost certain she had never met him before, so how did she have any idea how long his hair normally was?

He waited for her to put the other shirt on him, which left him completely unprepared for her to tug down his shorts. He was

standing there in the middle of the park in just his underwear.

"Oh, look! You have soccer balls on your undies!" Luke's eyes widened. He had forgotten Liam had put those on him that morning. He had totally planned all of this, even before Mom and Dad told Luke to go with him to soccer practice!

Luke simply nodded, hating that he had actually thought they were at least more mature than plain white briefs because he knew Liam, and this mom, saw them as the opposite.

"They're absolutely darling!" Mrs. Woodard said, looking them over. "Maybe we can see if Coach Liam will let you play in just them, huh?"

"Give me my clothes back!" Luke said, growing more and more humiliated as he saw some boys about his age coming down the walk.

"Oh, I forgot. Liam told me you get fussy." Reaching into the Paw Patrol backpack, she pulled out Luke's pacifier. He rarely went more than an hour without it in his mouth and he hated that he knew its taste before it even touched his tongue. "There we are. That's much better, hmm?"

Luke did not want to admit that the pacifier calmed him down and maybe it was more calming that this random lady dressed him in the t-shirt and shorts pretty quickly, even if she left him in just the shirt and his underwear while she packed up his other clothes before holding out the baby blue shorts for him to step into.

"There, all done!" She smiled and patted Luke's cheek

affectionately. "Gosh, you're just the cutest, aren't you? Your brother's a handsome young man, but you're just the cutest little cupcake!" Luke hoped that she would take the pacifier out of his mouth, but she instead took his hand and led him over to Liam. Like it or not, Luke realized he had just made the peewee soccer team.

## *Chapter 4*

# Chapter 4: Thunderstorm

Luke jolted awake as the thunder shook the house. He groaned and rolled over, pushing away the teddy bear Liam still forced him to hug every night. What time was it? Out of habit, he looked over at the nightstand before remembering that Liam had taken away his clock after he threw a fit about being put to bed so early each and every night. He groaned as the memory came back of standing there in just his underwear as Liam kissed his nose and promised that 'big brother' would keep track of time for him from now on.

Listening to the rain outside, it quickly sunk in that it was not just the thunder that had woken Luke up. He needed to pee. Kicking off the blanket and smirking a bit triumphantly as the teddy bear tumbled to the floor, Luke grimaced at how his Buzz Lightyear briefs seemed visible even at night, glowing almost fluorescently white and blue. He got out of bed and pondered getting dressed. Wearing Toy Story pajamas at least seemed marginally less embarrassing than walking around in his underwear.

He dressed, wondering again just what time it was. As far as he could tell, he had been asleep for a couple hours, so everyone else in the house should be in bed. It was hard to tell with the rain pounding on the roof and the thunder rumbling. They could still be up, he realized with a groan. His bedtime was so ridiculously early now, after all.

Avoiding his reflection as the lightning illuminated the room, Luke opened the door and listened for a moment. All he could hear was thunder and rain, so it was difficult to tell if his parents and brother were still awake. It felt so late that they could not be, right? He stifled a yawn, disappointed in himself. He hated any reminder that he was getting used to a little boy's bedtime. Before all this, he had regularly stayed up until one or two in the morning.

Luke peeked around the doorway toward the stairs. No light. They must be in bed. Of course they were. It had to be midnight, right? Luke set his sights on the bathroom. Was the door closed? He did not see any light coming from under the bathroom door, so he tested the knob. It turned easily, so in he went.

Luke gasped as he walked in on Liam standing before the mirror, wearing nothing but a pair of blue camo boxer briefs. He turned in surprise, his gaze going over Luke's head before adjusting downward to meet his shocked expression. He grinned at Luke, but confusion remained in his hazel eyes.

"Lukey? Why are you in your comfy clothes?" Seeing the embarrassed boy about to close the door with a stammered apology for walking in on him in just his underwear, Liam crossed the bathroom and pulled him in. "I asked you a question, bud. I put you to bed in your undies, so why are you in your comfy clothes? Did you get chilly?"

"No! I just didn't wanna walk around the house in my"

"Undies." Liam finished. "Well, I'm walking around the

house in just my boxers, so why can't you be in just your undies?" He lifted Luke up and set him on the bathroom counter. "There, now we can talk a bit more easily. Now, what are you doing up? It's so late."

"You're still up!"

"Yes, but I'm getting ready for bed. I put you to bed a while ago, didn't I?"

"I needed" the house shook and the lights flickered as another rumble of thunder struck. Liam smiled knowingly.

"Ah! The thunder scared you and you were coming to sleep with me."

"What? No!" Liam covered Luke's mouth.

"Keep your voice down, Luke! What do you think mommy and daddy will think if they find you out of bed so long after your bedtime?"

"You're the only one who cares about all that!" Luke said defiantly.

"Oh, that's not true at all." Liam said. "We went to the early showing of Slugman last week and why?"

"So we'd be home in time for me to go to bed..."

"That's right. And who was it who suggested that? Not me!"

"It was Dad."

"Lukey." Luke groaned. He was too old for this! Why did

Liam insist on treating him like a little boy?

“Daddy.”

“Very good.” Liam gave Luke a hug. “Now, let’s get you to bed.”

“But I really do need to pee!” Liam grinned broadly at how whiny Luke sounded.

“Oh, that’s right. Alright, well, go ahead and pee, but” he kept Luke on the counter for a second. “I think we should take your comfy clothes off first, shouldn’t we?”

“Why?”

“To help you learn there’s no shame in being in your undies.” Liam replied. “I mean, you’ve eaten breakfast in just tighty whities lots of time, haven’t you?” Luke glared at him, holding back his retort that he had on Buzz Lightyear briefs, not tighty whities. He wished he could wear boxers like Liam so he did not have to constantly wonder if tighty whities or Buzz Lightyear briefs were more childish.

Liam undressing him pulled Luke from his thoughts, shivering as the cold night air touched his bare skin. He blushed as Liam slipped his hands into his soft, smooth armpits and set him down on the floor. He could not help but notice just how much hair Liam had under his arms. Sure, it was not as much as their dad who looked almost like Bigfoot with how hairy he was, but it was far more than Luke had. Even his legs only had what could be considered downy peach fuzz.

“Alright, buddy. I know you know how to go pee-pee all by yourself.” Liam said, standing by the sink as he nudged Luke toward the toilet. “You know, that’d be fun, Luke. Instead of saying you need to go potty, you should say ‘pee-pee’ or” he paused. “What’s a good word for number two? You’d get in trouble if mom or dad heard you say anything that sounds vaguely like a swear word, so...” he looked at Luke. “Go pee-pee while I’m thinking, Lukey pooky poo.” Luke considered insisting Liam leave, but it terrified him to imagine just what Liam would do to prove who was in control, who was always in control. He might never get to use the potty, no, the bathroom alone again. Besides, much as he hated to admit it, Liam saw him naked several times a day

Taking a piss, Luke thought defiantly as Liam watched him. Sure, he would have to verbally play along, but Liam did not have any way of reading his mind. He could swear as much as he wanted in his head, couldn’t he? Then again, their parents had been so adamant about training Luke to say mommy and daddy again that he worried Liam would start getting serious about training him to use all the toddler words Liam wanted him to. Luke shuddered as he imagined himself talking completely like a toddler as his family smiled and cooed at him. Was that what they wanted?

“All done, Lukey lambikins? You look like you’re about to fall asleep right here at the potty!” Liam came over and pulled Luke’s briefs up over his privates. “Now let’s wash your hands.” Luke walked over and turned on the faucet. “Oh, no, Lukey. Use the stool, remember?” The stool was not

necessary, but it still made Luke just that much closer to Liam's height, helping to remind him just how itty bitty he was compared to his younger brother.

"Done." Luke said, feeling as if he was on display standing there on the bright red stool.

"Perfect. Now let's get to bed." Liam yawned extra loudly, stretching his arms up high above his head. As he brought his arms down, he wrapped them around Luke and picked him up. "Oh! That was some loud thunder, hmm?"

"Put me down."

"I know the thunder scared you, but that's no reason to be a rude little buddy."

"Put me down. Please."

"Alright." Liam set him down, but followed closely behind as Luke tried to run to his room, hoping to lock Liam out before he could get there.

"Good idea!" Liam said. "Grab Teddy before we go to bed."

"Huh?"

"Remember? The thunder scared you, so you were coming to sleep with me!"

"I was no" Luke growled as Liam grabbed the pacifier from his pillow and pushed it into his mouth.

"Do you want to wake up the whole house?" Liam asked sternly. "Suck on that pacifier and get rid of all your loud

yelly thoughts, okay?” He did not seem to notice Luke’s fiery glare as he picked up the bear. “Give Teddy a big hug and a few baby kisses.” Baby kisses was a term their mom had come up with for Luke touching his pacifier, held in his mouth, to Teddy’s face. It had come to her one day when Liam was out with friends and mom decided to have Luke practice keeping his pacifier in almost all day. He shuddered as he remembered just how awful a whole day of little kid pajamas and hugging a teddy bear had been. Was that what they wanted for him all the time?

“Alright, let’s go, Lukey loo.” Liam said, grabbing his hand. Heading down the hall in just underoos, sucking on a pacifier with a teddy bear in one arm, his other hand held by his younger brother, Luke felt almost overwhelmed. He was fifteen years old, yet anyone who saw him would see a kindergartener, if not a complete baby!

They reached Liam’s bedroom and Luke groaned as he realized he would have no choice but to actually sleep in Liam’s bed with him.

“This is ridiculous.”

“Sleepy little boy mumbles.” Liam replied, scooping Luke up and cradling him in his arms. Luke remembered back to that fire drill, the first moment when it had really sunk in just how outmatched he was compared to Liam. Had that been how this had all started? Sure, Liam had been taller than him for most of their lives, but Liam had never really realized it, it seemed. Luke was older, so therefore, Liam deferred to him.

Until recently, at least. “We’ve got Teddy, and Lukey, and Liam. We’re all set.” Liam said, climbing into bed and kissing both Teddy and Luke on the forehead. “All snug and safe and sound, hmm?” Luke lay there, feeling the warmth of his brother’s body against him. What was he going to do? Sleep came before he could come up with something.

*Chapter 5*

## Chapter 5: Time to Get Up

"Luke! Wake up! We're gonna be late, sleepy head!" Luke snapped awake, but that still did not make him quick enough to avoid Liam, who lifted him out of bed. "Give Teddy a good morning kiss."

"What time is it?" Luke squirmed in Liam's arms. Liam snapped the waistband of Luke's briefs.

"Give Teddy a kiss." Luke groaned and kissed the stuffed bear. "It's time to leave for soccer practice. It starts in like ten minutes."

"What? I overslept? Why didn't you wake me up?"

"It's my responsibility to wake my big brother up?" The way he said 'big brother' left no doubts just how much he doubted Luke's big brother status.

"You know what I mea" before Luke could even finish his irritated sentence, Liam had pushed a pacifier into his mouth.

"There's my baby brother." He cooed and kissed Luke's bare chest before blowing a raspberry into his tummy. "Ooh, what a happy, ticklish baby boy I have!" Even after however long it had been, Luke still could not get used to Liam cooing over him and holding him in nothing but his underwear. "Alright, we'd better hurry, hmm?" Luke gave only the slightest nod, not daring to talk around his pacifier. He hated his pacifier and he knew everyone in his family knew it, but that never

stopped them. The slightest outburst, the even most vague hint of an attitude meant shoving a pacifier into Luke's mouth. He could not prove it, but he swore he had more spit in his mouth now that he almost always had a pacifier in his mouth.

"Let's go potty." Liam said. How had they reached the bathroom, Luke wondered. Had he been that out of it, lost in his own mind?

Luke bit the bulb of his pacifier irritably as Liam set the Mickey Mouse potty training seat on the toilet. Of course he would have to use that. Why did he expect any different?

"Now do you need to go pee-pee or poo?" Liam asked.

"Pee-pee." Luke tried to enunciate around the pacifier, but that did not change that he was being treated completely like a baby. Liam tugged down his briefs and set him on the Mickey Mouse seat.

"Hold onto the handles." Liam instructed, even though Luke had done it out of habit. Ever since that thunderstorm where Luke had accidentally walked in on him, this had been how Luke used the potty each and every time. Liam wondered if Luke even could pee standing anymore. He was pretty sure he could, but he did not want to find out. This was just too fun.

"All done?" He asked, as if he could not hear Luke's pee stream stop. Luke nodded. "My baby boy doesn't even try to use his big boy words, does he?"

After washing Luke's hands for him, Liam carried him back

to his bedroom, where he wasted no time changing Luke's underwear.

"Good baby, not trying to cover your doodle." Liam praised, holding out Luke's soccer briefs. Luke usually wore white since they reminded Liam of diapers, but for soccer practice, only soccer undies would do. In no time, he had Luke fully dressed in his baby blue peewee soccer uniform. Thinking back to how Luke used to be, Liam could not help wondering how he would feel if he saw himself all dressed to play soccer with literal preschoolers.

"Alright, we should make it in time. They can't start without their star player!" He smiled and, taking Luke's wrist, made him high five. "I still can't get over how tiny your hands are, Lukey loo." Liam said. "Aren't they tiny?" He pulled the pacifier from Luke's mouth, wiping the string of drool off of his chin after it disconnected from the bulb. "So tiny, hmm?" Luke knew what Liam wanted him to say. He had drilled it into him about a million times.

"I'm tiny because I'm a baby and big brother Liam and Mommy and Daddy helped me accept it."

"That's good." Liam said softly, returning the pacifier back to Luke's waiting mouth as he picked him up. "We gotta get going, silly baby! You're distracting me with how cute you are!"

Carrying Luke, Liam bounded down the stairs. He had put the Paw Patrol backpack by the door with Luke's socks and shoes in it. He had contemplated taking Luke all the way to the park

in just his undies and dressing him there, but figured that might be too much. He smiled as Luke did not even try to get out of his arms as they stepped outside.

"I think we'll take our bikes." Liam said. "That'll get us there real fast." For a moment, Luke mulled over the word 'bikes'. That was plural, which meant he might just get to look big again, riding his bike. As they entered the garage, however, his face fell. There was Liam's bike and on the back, there was a little grey seat, almost like a car seat. He sighed into the pacifier. "Isn't it great? You'll have to thank Daddy for putting it on my bike for you. You'll be arriving in style, baby!" Luke bit the bulb of the pacifier again. He was a teenager, that was meant for a baby. Against all odds, he knew he would fit even before Liam lowered him into it. The last few months - years? - however long it had been, he had learned quickly just how many baby things fit him. He had made the mistake once of letting Liam overhear his disbelief.

"That's because you're a baby." Liam had cooed to him. "And you'll be my baby boy for a long, long time." Luke lifted his chin to allow Liam to buckle the strap of his new Winnie the Pooh helmet under it, the memory of Liam's words echoing in his ears. "You'll be my baby boy for a long, long time."

*Chapter 6*

## Chapter 6: Harvest Festival

"It's very important for you to learn to listen and obey, Luke." Liam said gently as he held his brother in his lap, feeding him his breakfast. "Do you know why?"

"Why?" Luke tried to say, getting a mouthful of cereal for his trouble.

"Don't talk with your mouth full." Liam grabbed the bottom of Luke's bib and wiped his chin with it. Since Luke insisted on wearing his clothes for breakfast today, he sat there on Liam's lap in an orange Paw Patrol shirt, orange shorts, and a baby blue bib. Anyone who saw him would definitely see him for the toddler he had become thanks to Liam and their parents.

"Not my fault." Luke muttered. "You're the one feeding me."

"That's right! And why am I doing that?"

"Cuz"

"Cuz?"

"Cuz I'm a baby."

"You are." Liam agreed, albeit much more cheerfully than Luke did. "So, why's it so important for you to listen and obey?"

"Cuz I'm tiny like a baby."

"Yes, but I mean more," Liam paused. "What happened the last time you made your own decisions?" Luke shrugged adorably. "Well, remember way, way back when there was that fire drill? You had to think for yourself and you ended up outside the school, in nothing but your undies, hmm?" Luke nodded bashfully, figuring it did not matter that he had had a towel as well. "Or were they your Pull-ups?"

"I don't wear Pull-ups!"

"Remind me. Were they boxer briefs like big brother Liam wears?"

"No." Luke replied sullenly.

"What was that, mister mumbly mums?"

"No, they weren't"

"Oh? Then what were they?" Luke groaned in that way he did when he knew what Liam wanted him to say. He bounced Luke a bit, as if to jog his memory.

"They" he sighed. Liam never showed his impatience, but he still prodded Luke.

"C'mon, Lukey. You used to scamper around in just them even before the fire drill. I know you know what undies you wore."

"They were tighty whities like you used to wear when you were little. Like me."

"Oh, that's right! I remember now. And you're still in those,

aren't you, Lukey loo?" Luke only nodded. "That must mean you're still little, hmm?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I'm still a little boy."

"So little boys like you don't make decisions. That's for mommy and daddy, big brother, and all those other grown-ups."

"Hey now, I don't know if you count as a grown-up, Liam." Dad said.

"I am compared to Luke." Luke stared in disbelief as his dad considered this and nodded. "Even five year olds are grown-ups to you, Lukey." Liam whispered as he gave Luke's face a final wipe with the bib. "Alright, what's on the schedule for today, Luke?"

"The harvest festival."

"That's right!" Liam hugged Luke. "Let's get your shoes on!"

"Wait, I'm going like this?"

"Well, we'll take your bib off, though I do want to pack it for lunch." Liam said.

"No, I mean"

"Luke, remember you're supposed to listen and obey. You're perfectly fine the way you're dressed. You have a top, a

bottom, and we both know you're wearing undies. What more do you need?"

"I might be chilly?" It was a pathetic excuse, but he would do anything to avoid being seen dressed like this. He had hoodies and jeans and all that. Liam just refused to make him wear them when it was hot. Well, it wasn't hot anymore!

"That's why we're bringing your snuggly new blankie." Liam said, carrying Luke toward the bathroom. "Remember, you've got a big brother making the decisions. You're in good hands." Luke fumed and it only got worse as he realized how quickly he had gotten used to Liam pulling down his shorts and underwear before plopping him down on the toilet. "Go ahead and make your pee-pees."

"I don't need to go." He tried to remain calm and mature, but it still came out sounding a bit too much like a grumpy little kid for his tastes.

"You should try." Liam said.

"If I need to go, I'll go there."

"Try." Luke sighed. "There you go, buddy. Using the big boy potty."

"I remember when you were potty training."

"So? Doesn't mean you can't brush up on the basics. Plus this is so much safer." Luke huffed. "Do you really think I want to be hovering over you when you're" Liam smirked. "Going poo-poo?" Luke rolled his eyes again. "Better be careful."

We're going to the festival as a family. Do you really want Mommy and Daddy to see you rolling your eyes?"

"Maybe they'll finally accept I'm fourteen!"

"C'mon, Luke. They know how old you are." Liam said reassuringly. "Up come your undies!" He smiled as Luke stood there, no longer even trying to help. "They know how old you are, just like they know how much help you still need. Really, you're pretty much the only one who doesn't know that. Isn't that right?" Luke stayed silent. "Tiny little nose, tiny little toes. Tiny little baby in tiny little clothes."

Still steadfastly refusing to speak, Luke let Liam lead him over to the sink and wash his hands. He hoped that Liam was done teasing him, but as if by cue, Liam spoke up again.

"What was that thing mom said to us last week? Something about how happy she is we both get our hands clean when you wash your hands?" Luke grunted. It had been something like that. He did not feel like responding.

"Time to go out to the car!" Liam announced once he had Luke settled against his shoulder again.

"Can't you talk to me like normal?"

"Luke, you've been a little guy for so long now, this is normal." Luke did not like how right Liam seemed.

"Can't I at least walk?"

"Lots of can't today." Liam replied, setting Luke down. "Can we do your shoes?" Luke remained silent as Liam pushed his

Toy Story clogs onto his feet. “Now that it’s getting colder, we might have to buy those cool shoes we saw in the store, hmm?”

The shoes in question had velcro instead of laces and even lit up. Luke thought they had to be the most babyish shoes imaginable, which surely meant he would end up with them. He just remained silent as Liam stood him back up.

“Can you be a big boy and carry your”

“Liam! I’m older than you.”

“So that’s a yes? You’ll be a big boy today?” Liam handed Luke a bag that seemed a little too much like a diaper bag for his tastes. Liam claimed he did not see it, but Luke knew it was obvious to anyone with eyes. Technically, Liam called it Luke’s goody bag, but it still made him apprehensive.

“Why’s it feel heavy?”

“I packed it while you were still sleeping.”

“That’s not an answer.” Liam did not seem to hear, his hand placed between Luke’s shoulder blades as he pushed him toward the front door and their waiting parents.

“Oh, god.” Luke murmured as he saw his dad waiting by the open passenger door. Sitting inside was a recent addition to Luke’s life: a car seat. He had forgotten about that.

It had arrived right around the same time as Luke learned he now rode to and from soccer practice on the back of Liam’s bike and Luke had been put to bed early that night due to the

enormous fit he had thrown. Even after he calmed down, the car seat remained.

“I’ll take that.” Liam said, effortlessly lifting the bag out of Luke’s arms with a single hand.

“And I’ll take you.” Their dad said cheerfully as he lifted Luke up. “Up, up to the sky!” He announced, holding Luke above his head. “And down into your snuggly car seat. Do you want Daddy or Liam to buckle you?” Seeing the thought forming on Luke’s lips, he quickly added. “No, you can’t do it yourself. Remember, you tried and it was too complicated?”

“Only cuz Liam kept trying to help.” Luke muttered, but he knew that that only mattered to him.

“Aren’t we forgetting something?” Liam asked as he buckled the straps between Luke’s thighs.

“Fine. Thanks for helping me buckle up.”

“Good manners.” Liam said. “But I meant we’re forgetting someone, aren’t we?” Luke stared at him. They were all in the car, weren’t they?

“Who?”

“Who? C’mon, buddy. You’re such a comedian. Where’s Teddy?” Luke sighed.

“Inside. On my bed.”

“You don’t think he wants to come to the harvest festival?” Mom asked, looking back at her sons.

“I can go grab him. If you want.” Luke did not want Teddy, but he knew they were not leaving until he had the stuffed bear.

“Liam.” He said through gritted teeth. “Can you please go grab Teddy?” Liam paused and Luke knew he was considering making Luke ask more nicely. “Pretty please?” He added, trying to sound at least a tiny bit more like a little kid.

“Go on, Liam.” Mom interjected. “Lukey’s already all buckled.”

“And I want to get to the craft booths before it gets too busy.” Dad added. Liam nodded and got out of the car, making a show of dashing into the house.

“Be sure to thank him when he comes back, Luke.”

“Ok.” Luke mumbled.

“Ok, mommy.”

“Ok, mommy.” Luke said, trying his best to hide his irritation. He was way too old to be saying mommy, to be buckled in a car seat, or any of this! It was so unfair. Why not just stick him in a diaper and make him a complete baby? He shuddered at the thought. He would rather die than wear a diaper.

Pushing the thought aside, Luke saw Liam emerge from the house, teddy bear in hand. He watched Liam, wondering just what he was saying to the stuffed bear. He was clearly talking

to him. Luke shuddered again as he realized he probably did not want to know.

Liam got back into the car and handed the bear to Luke, watching him expectantly.

“Oh! I suppose you can’t really give him baby kisses until you have this.” Liam fished in the pocket of his hoodie. “Good boy, opening your mouth for your paci.” Luke sighed and touched the pacifier to the bear’s muzzle. “Aw, you missed Teddy, didn’t you?” Luke remained silent. At least the pacifier gave him an excuse not to answer.

He would never admit it to anyone other than Teddy, but he actually liked the look of his car seat. Sure, the idea of having to sit in it made his blood boil, but at least it looked kind of cool and futuristic. If Liam was not sitting right next to him, watching him, he might even pretend like he was piloting a spaceship. He swung his legs a bit almost out of habit. Thanks to the added height of the car seat, his feet did not touch the floor.

“Oops!” Liam said, almost catching one of Luke’s clogs as it slipped off his foot and fell to the floor. “Well, I guess Lukey loo wants his shoes off, hmm?”

“No, stop.” Luke mumbled around the pacifier. Why was he so unwilling to spit it out? He knew he stood very little chance of getting away with it, but still. He squirmed as Liam removed his other shoe, stowing them both in the goody bag.

“Well, what do we have here? Two ticklish little Lukey feet?”

Luke tried to pull them away, but Liam held firm and tickled his feet. “Goochie, goochie goo! Itty bitty Lukey loo!” He said in a goofy voice. Luke squirmed and squealed, still keeping the pacifier in his mouth.

“Someone’s happy!” Mom said, smiling back at him. Luke tried to tell her it was just Liam tickling him, but he knew she knew that.

“I can’t resist.” Liam said. “Lukey’s just got such tiny feet.”

“And why are they tiny?” Luke’s eyes widened as he heard his dad ask. Was he really going to have to say it in front of all three of them? Again?

“I’m tiny because I’m a baby and big brother Liam and Mommy and Daddy helped me accept it.”

“You’re still a baby.” Liam whispered to Luke. “Imagine that. Almost fifteen and still a baby.” Luke looked at him, feeling tears well up in his eyes. Liam rubbed his thigh. “But that’s why it’s good you have me and mom and dad, right?” Luke nodded, sucking on his pacifier for comfort, fighting the urge to hug the dumb stuffed bear to his chest.

“We’re here!” Dad announced as they pulled into the parking lot. Luke could not help but breathe a sigh of relief. He could get out of the car seat and maybe, just maybe feel almost normal. Being out in public surely meant the baby comments would be kept to a minimum, right? He knew he was only fooling himself. They made him ride in the cart at the store, so why would they restrain themselves here?

“Are you sure you’ll be okay on your own, Liam?” Mom asked. Luke’s eyes widened in surprise. Liam was going off alone? He felt his stomach twist as he wondered if that meant Liam would be taking him with him. Surely Liam would only baby him more away from Mommy and Daddy. Mom and dad, he corrected himself, but it bothered him how strange that sounded to him now.

“Of course. I’m just worried about you two and this little terror.” He chuckled and tousled Luke’s hair.

“I’m sure we’ll survive.” Mom said with a smile.

“What’s going on?” Luke asked, feeling completely outside the loop.

“Don’t you worry, Lukey loo.” Liam said. “All you should focused on is getting out of your car seat.” Luke knew from experience he had no way of unbuckling himself. The release was out of his reach.

“Can you please unbuckle me, Liam?” He asked. Liam smiled and nodded.

“Of course I can, little guy. We need to get you ready for the festival anyway.”

“Ready?” Liam did not say anything. He got out of the car and came around to Luke’s side, unbuckling him. “Stay there, Lukey.”

“What? Why?” Liam was unzipping the goody bag. That could not be good. “What is that?” Luke asked, feeling nearly

panicked as he saw what Liam had pulled out of the bag. “Is that a diaper?”

“No, Luke.” Liam said. “It’s a pull-up.”

“What? Why?”

“Well, mister inquisitive. The only potties here are the icky porta potties, right?” Luke nodded. “And even if they weren’t icky gross” Liam paused. “Can you say icky gross potty?” He gave Luke’s foot a tickle.

“Icky gross potty.” Luke forced out between giggles. Why was he so ticklish?

“Even if they weren’t so gross, it’d be hard for mommy or daddy to fit in there with you to help you go pee-pee or poopy, right?”

“But why the diaper?”

“It’s not a diaper.” Liam replied patiently. “Now let’s get your shorts and undies off, kay?” Luke wanted to say no, but he knew there was no point as Liam maneuvered him around until he was naked from the waist down. “Don’t whimper. I’ve seen your doodle and bum bum a million times, haven’t I?”

“But we’re in public.”

“Luke, I once carried you from school to home in nothing but your tiny size 12 tighty whities, didn’t I?”

“I had a blanket.”

“So you do remember.”

“Well, I’m naked now.”

“You were practically naked then!” Liam retorted.

“This is different.” Liam smiled.

“Then we’d better hurry and get your Pull-ups on, hmm?”

“I don’t want to wear a diaper!”

“It’s not a diaper.” Liam replied patiently. “They’re cool! See, they have Buzz Lightyear on them! It’s a pull-up and it’s a lot like your tighty whities.”

“Is not.” Luke muttered sullenly.

“It’s not?” Liam asked. “Alright then, we’ll call it a diaper then. Come on, Lukey, slip your feet into your diaper.” Luke slid off of the car seat and stood there, still naked from the waist down before Liam lifted the Pull-ups up and over his thighs. “There. Now if you need to go pee-pee or poopy, you can go in your diaper.”

“Pull-ups.”

“Too late for that, Luke. You picked diaper, so that’s what we’re going with.” Liam grabbed his brother’s shorts, leaving his underwear on the floor of the car in plain sight, as if to remind Luke that he no longer wore them. “And here are your shorts. So comfy, hmm?” Luke eyed his crotch, trying to see how obvious it was that he now wore the underwear of a potty training toddler. “Look! You almost have a bulge for

once!” Liam teased.

“We’re all set, Liam.” Luke heard his mom call. Liam picked Luke up, handed him Teddy, and then carried him to the back of the car, bare feet dangling in the air. Liam changed Luke’s position in his arms so quickly that he barely even knew he was sitting in a stroller as Liam buckled him in.

“Surprise!” Dad said. Luke stared up at them in confusion. A stroller?

“We’re going to be here all day.” Mom explained. “So we just want to make sure you don’t get tired out with all the walking.”

“What? No.” Luke whined into his pacifier. “I, I”

“And if you do get tired, you can nap right here in your stroller.” Dad said, pushing the stroller back and forth gently, as if to test its wheels and Luke’s weight.

“Speaking of which,” Liam reached into the bag again and pulled out a fluffy baby blue blanket. It was not the same one that he had held Luke wrapped in that day of the fateful fire drill, but it was a near match. Cooing gently, he draped it over Luke, tucking it in around him so that the only thing visible on Luke was his head and the pacifier in his mouth. “Cozier and cozier, hmm?”

“It’s a shame we couldn’t find that teddy bear sleeper in his size.” Mom remarked. “It’d be the perfect thing to keep him all warm and snuggly.”

“We might mix Luke and Teddy up though.” Liam said with a laugh. “Anyway, I better get going. Have fun, Lukey! Be a good little boy for Mommy and Daddy!” He reached down and pulled out the pacifier. “Promise?”

“Yes.”

“And you promise to tell mommy and daddy if you use your Pull, I mean diaper?” He looked up at their parents. “Luke decided diaper fit his new Pull-ups better.” Luke groaned.

“I promise.” The only reward he got for playing along was the pacifier back in his mouth.

“How do you just keep getting cuter and cuter?” Liam mused. “The perfect baby brother.” Luke growled into the pacifier, but Liam had already walked off.

“Alrighty, where to first?” Luke bit down on the pacifier as he felt the stroller begin to move, making him feel all the more like a captive to his parents’ whim. Surely they would take it easier on him than Liam, right? They never did anything to make him feel his age, sure. But more than anything, they just let Liam do whatever without actually offering up any ideas. At least, Luke assumed the stroller had really been Liam’s idea. Without him there, how bad could the day be?

Luke almost immediately regretted it as he realized he would be spending the day looking at people’s butts. The only ones at his level were small children, who either ignored him or smiled at a kid they perceived as even smaller than them.

“Someone’s cozy!” More than one mom said as she gazed

down at Luke. He wiggled and tried to at least shift the blanket down to free his arms, but Liam had somehow managed to tuck it into the straps on the stroller so that Luke felt trapped in a fleecy cocoon.

“Where are we going?” He asked, growling in frustration as he realized he still had the pacifier in his mouth. He spat it out, grinning as it tumbled down the blanket and onto the ground.

“Oops!” His mom suddenly appeared and scooped it up. For a split second, Luke worried she might put it back in his mouth. “Let’s get you a new paci, hmm?” She smiled at him.

“No, I don’t need”

“You do.” Mom said.

“But” he stammered as she disappeared from sight. He tried to turn his head, but he could only hear her rummaging behind him.

“I think that’s the dirty pacifier pocket.” He heard his dad say. “So clean ones must be there.” She reappeared. “What do you say, Luke?”

“I’m not going to thank you for treating me like a stinking baby.” He said, or at least wished he had said that. Instead, he docilely said just what she expected. “Thank you, mommy.” She smiled. “Where are we going?”

“What’s the rule?” Luke groaned. He had just called her mommy, hadn’t he?

“Where are we going, mommy?” He tried to sound annoyed, but the way the pacifier made him mumble caused everything to come out the way a toddler would speak.

“We’re looking around. We’ll go to the craft tents first, I think.”

“If you feel sleepy” he heard his dad say behind him. “You can doze in your stroller.”

“I’m too old for this!” He reminded them, but neither seemed to hear him as the stroller began to move again.

The craft booths proved terribly boring for Luke. All he could do was sit there as the stroller slowly moved along from table to table. If he strained his neck, he could see what was on the tables, but what was the point? It was all boring. The only thing he had to do was try in vain to get his arms free, Teddy’s head wobbling to and fro from the effort.

“Look at the baby, mama!” Luke glared at the little girl even before he noticed she was pointing directly at him. She was the baby, not him! He did not have dumb sparkly stars painted on each cheek like she did, he thought sullenly.

“Don’t point, Emma.” Her mom said. “He’s cute.” He could tell that the mom was confident he was not a baby, but as the stroller happened to pass by a mirror on the ground leaning up against a table, Luke realized just how babyish he looked covered by the light blue blanket, pacifier in his mouth, teddy bear on his lap. He growled and looked away. Of course now the stroller was not going to move for twenty minutes, he

thought angrily. He had to get out of this!

Luke scrunched his toes and groaned as he remembered he was barefoot under the blanket. Where had Liam put his shoes? The bag, he thought. It was under him, but it might as well be on Mars for how unlikely it was he would reach it.

“Hey, daddy?” He said as he came into view. “Can I put my shoes on?” He hated asking for help like this, but desperate times meant desperate measures. “Please?”

“You’re not wearing shoes?” He lifted the blanket as Luke tried to ignore how embarrassing it was to have his dad kneeling there to talk to him. “What happened to them?”

“Liam took them off in the car.”

“And he forgot to put them back on you?” Luke nodded. “Well, we’ll have to remind him it’s important to dress you all the way, won’t we?” He lifted the blanket more. “At least he remembered to put your shorts back on, hmm?” Luke nodded again. What was he up to?

Luke bucked as he felt his dad’s finger brush against the very innermost part of his thigh. What was he doing?

“Sorry for startling you, Lukey.” He said, only sounding somewhat apologetic. “Figured I’d check your diaper while I was down here.” Resituating the blanket over Luke, he stood back up, Luke’s shoes all but forgotten. “He’s still dry.” Luke heard him say to his mom. Why were they acting like this was so normal? He had not worn Pull-ups before now for nearly ten years, except for the occasional long car trip. He

was a teenager!

In his frustration, he tried to get free from the blanket and the stroller by any means necessary. His efforts were so disruptive that his parents could not help but notice.

“Do you need to go potty, Luke?” His mom asked.

“No! I want to get out of this stupid stroller!”

“You’re safe in there.”

“I don’t care! I’m not some dumb little kid!” His mom grabbed the paciier that had tumbled from his mouth, but did not move to put it back in. Realizing that she was letting him vent, Luke continued. “This is ridiculous! I want to walk around and do stuff! Liam gets to and he’s younger than me! It’s not fair!” His mom nodded.

“Well, Daddy’s almost done with what he’s doing and then we can do something for you, okay?”

“And I can walk around?”

“You don’t have your shoes, Luke.”

“They’re in my goody bag. Liam put them there.”

“Would you really have fun holding mommy or daddy’s hand all day long instead of sitting in your stroller?”

“It’d be better than this!” Luke insisted.

“You’re grouchy, that’s all”

“I’m not, mommy!” She smiled, pleased that even when he

was throwing a fit, he still said mommy.

“Shh” she cooed, leaning in to hug him. “Here’s your paci back. At least this one didn’t fall on the dirty ground. How about you close your eyes for a bit?” She pulled the stroller’s canopy out over his head and kissed his forehead. “Oh, I suppose it’s a little noisy for a nap, isn’t it?” With the canopy extended, Luke’s vision was even more obstructed, so his mom vanished completely from sight until she suddenly popped back in, holding a pair of lime green and orange headphones. The colors were so bright and garish, Luke knew they were meant for small children. “Here we go! These are your new naptime headphones. Aren’t they cool?” Cool was the last word Luke could think of to describe them.

“Where did they come from?”

“Oh, I ordered them for you. I saw an ad for them and just knew they’d be perfect for outings.” She slid them onto Luke’s head and the world went silent. “There,” her muffled voice said. “Close your eyes and get some sleep while mommy and daddy are shopping.” Luke sighed as she placed a warm hand over his eyes. He jumped a bit as a lullaby began to play in the headphones. Of course, he thought. All the same, he listened to the music, the only thing he could really hear other than the soft muffled sounds of voices around him. He hugged Teddy, the pacifier moving to the music. He fought back a yawn and realized it was too late.

No! He was not going to fall asleep! He fought it, tried to lift his heavy eyelids. The lullaby stopped and he knew he had

won. He opened his eyes again and squinted at the bright sunlight. When had they left the craft tents? The sun had not been that high a second ago.

“Oh, look who’s awake!” He heard Daddy say, appearing before him. “Did you have a nice nap?”

“I didn’t nap.”

“Oh, he’s shouting.”

“He’s wearing his naptime headphones still.” Daddy removed the headphones and smiled at Luke.

“You were asleep for nearly an hour, kiddo.” Luke stared at him in confusion, leg twitching as Daddy slipped a finger up his shorts again.

“Was not.” Luke said. “That’s impossible.”

“Is it?” Daddy said. “It’s almost lunchtime.” He showed Luke his watch, as if the tiny teen could read the hands of an analog clock.

“Quit playing around.” Mommy said. “Here, Lukey. We’ll prove it.” She opened up her compact and held the mirror toward Luke. He gasped, pacifier tumbling from his slack jaw and into Daddy’s waiting hand

“You” he stammered, voice cracking even though it had still not deepened. “You painted my face?”

“We thought you’d wake up, but you were sound asleep, Luke.” Daddy said. “Do you like it?”

“I’m a tiger.” Luke said, dumbfounded.

“That’s right! Our ferocious little tiger!” Mommy cooed. “The nice lady did it in your stroller and everything since you were asleep. Show him the photos! You were so cute!” Daddy pulled out his phone and showed Luke photo after photo of his face being painted as he slept.

“But” he did not even know what to say. In a day of bewildering, confusing things, this seemed especially so. How was it even possible that he had slept through a face painting? What parents thought that was a normal thing to do to their teenage son?

“Don’t worry. Now that you’re awake, we’re going to do another Lukey thing.” Daddy said.

“Do you need to go potty, ferocious little tiger cub?”

“No.” Luke said, a bit more forcefully than he had intended. The pacifier found its way back into his mouth.

“Well, if you do.” Mommy said. “You can use your diaper, remember?”

“It’s not a diaper.” Luke muttered. He looked down at Teddy, a bit betrayed. How on earth had he slept through a face painting? It made no sense at all! Did Liam drug his breakfast, he wondered as the stroller began to move again. No, that was impossible. Liam had fed him from his own plate.

“Look! That’s where we’re going next, Lukey.” Daddy said,

pointing toward a fenced off area. Luke saw the sign.

“Pony rides?”

“That’s right! Hopefully your ferocious face doesn’t scare the horsies.”

“Why do they keep talking like that?” Luke asked Teddy. The smiling bear did not answer.

“We should find Luke’s shoes.” Daddy remarked over his head. “We wouldn’t want him to accidentally step in horse mess. That would be icky, wouldn’t it, squirt?”

“Sure.” Luke muttered noncommittally. The stroller stopped right by the pony ride and Luke saw the sign as his parents found his shoes. “Look, it says ages eight and under.” He said.

“We won’t tell if you don’t.” Dad said, slipping Luke’s clogs onto his feet. “Don’t kick too much. You know how easily these come off your feet.”

“Which pony do you want to ride, Luke?” His mom asked.

“None of them.” Luke glared at the sign. So that confirmed it. His parents clearly thought he was a little kid!

“I know it’s scary, but we’ll be right here.” Mom replied.

“I’m not scared!”

“That’s my brave little guy!” Mom cooed, whisking the blanket off of him. Luke looked down at his Paw Patrol outfit. He had forgotten he had that on! He groaned as Mommy unbuckled him. At least he was getting out of the stroller, he

thought. She lifted him up and handed him off to his dad.

“Here we go!” Luke squirmed, but knew he stood little chance of getting to walk. Did he even want to willingly walk over to the lanky man in a straw hat running the pony ride? At least this way he could say he was literally forced to do it.

“Someone want to go for a ride?” The man asked, smiling warmly at Luke. There was something about him that made Luke think of a scarecrow. In fact, his hat matched the scarecrow’s leaning up against the fence post.

“Yep.” Dad replied. “Ready, Luke?” Luke only grunted.

“Here, I can take him.” Luke’s eyes widened as his dad handed him off to this stranger like they were running some sort of Luke relay. “Maybe a familiar face will keep Buttercup from panicking about this ferocious tiger.” Luke rolled his eyes as both men laughed. “Alrighty, bud, up you go!” He expertly placed Luke on the back of the chestnut pony. “Pretty high, huh?” Luke simply nodded. The pacifier was still in his mouth, so he figured there was not much expectation about him talking. “Now hold nice and tight on these.” The man handed Luke the reins. “If you get scared or feel like you’re going to fall, my name’s Hunk, kay?” Luke nodded, hoping this would be over as soon as possible.

“Wave, Lukey!” His mom called from the fence, holding her phone up. Just what he needed, photographic proof of his latest embarrassment.

“Here we go!” The pony began to move under him, a strange

feeling that somehow reminded Luke that he had Pull-ups instead of his usual underwear on.

“Whee!” Mom and dad called in unison from the fence, seemingly having more fun than Luke himself was as Hunk leisurely led the pony around in a circle. How could anyone find this fun?

Every time they came close to his parents, Luke thought the ride was done, but around they went again and again. Was he going to be stuck up on this pony for the rest of the day? He had rolled his eyes at first, but he felt terribly high, as if he was on display in his Paw Patrol outfit, with his painted face. He whimpered into the ever-present pacifier as he realized there was no way to make him look more like a toddler. Unless I start crying, Luke thought, fighting back the tears welling up in his eyes. I’m too tall to be a toddler, he reminded himself. If only he believed it.

Seemingly as soon as the pony stopped, Hunk lifted Luke off of Buttercup and handed him to his dad, who deposited Luke right back in his stroller. As Mommy placed Teddy on his lap, he looked around for the blanket.

“It’s gotten warm, so I put your blankie away.” Mommy said. “We’ll bring it back out if you doze off again, but we need to get you some lunch, don’t we?” As if on cue, Luke’s stomach grumbled. He had been so distracted by the ordeals of the day that he had completely disregarded his hunger. He whimpered as he realized again that he had actually, honestly slept through getting his face painted. How was that even possible?

“Alright, I’ll go get us lunch.” Dad announced. “You get Luke ready to eat.”

“Ready?” Luke asked. Mom nodded.

“What do you need to eat, Luke?”

“Fork? Knife?”

“You know Liam handles that stuff. Plus Daddy’s getting you a hot dog and fries, so” she smiled. “But you wear something special, don’t you?” She lifted Luke out of the stroller and set him on her lap. “What is it? What is it?”

“God, mommy, I’m not a baby.” He could not help but giggle as she tickled his little love handles, drawing the attention of a mop-haired toddler who grinned at the other baby.

“What do you wear for numnums?” Mommy asked, tickling him. After all, it was how Liam got his brother to cooperate.

“My bib.”

“Oops, let’s get this pacifier out of your mouth. You won’t need it to eat anyway.” She deposited the pacifier in the dirty pacifier pouch of the goody bag. “So what do you wear for lunch numnums, Luke?”

“My bib, mommy.” He mumbled, squirming. “Can I sit on the bench next to you?”

“Between me and daddy?” He nodded. “Hmm, I suppose so. That way you can’t escape, right?” She kissed him and kept him on her lap. He would have to remind her, he thought.

As they sat there waiting, Luke could not believe how empty his mouth felt without the pacifier in it. Did he miss it? No, but he was used to it. He sucked on it practically all day and Liam often even made him sleep with it in his mouth.

“Here comes daddy! Wave to daddy!” Mommy grabbed Luke’s hand and made him wave. “Look how excited you are!”

“Can I... may I please sit next to you now, Mommy?”

“So polite.” Mommy cooed approvingly. That was my plan all along, Luke thought. She set him down on the worn wooden bench just as Daddy slipped in on his other side.

“Are we having a Lukey sandwich for lunch?” Daddy teased, distracting Luke as Mommy tied his bib around his neck. He smiled weakly as she snapped a photo of him, knowing he could not have looked more like a toddler if he tried.

“Your diaper’s still dry, Luke?” Mommy remarked. “It’s not good to hold it all day.”

“I just don’t need to” He said. Being between his parents made it impossible to keep an eye on the both of them. He almost regretted asking.

“I got you a hot dog and french fries and we have apple sauce in your bag for after.” Daddy announced. Luke looked down at the hot dog, already cut into bite size pieces. As for the fries, they ended up in front of Mommy.

“I’ll feed you the fries. We don’t want you choking.” She

explained. Like that'll happen, Luke thought. I know how to eat. Did he though? Liam fed him for every meal now. He dismissed the thought. Of course he knew how! He was fourteen! He could remember Liam being fed baby food, for goodness sakes, even if that memory came more from home movies than his own recollection.

“And the hot dog? Uh, mommy?”

“Use your fingers. Your bag has some wet wipes for cleaning your fingers. Just try not to mess up your cool face!” Luke nodded glumly. At least he could feed himself for once.

He quickly realized that it was not much better. After every bite or two, he had to turn his head to take a bite off of the fry his mom held out for him. Even after he finally finished the hot dog and fries, he had to sit there as Daddy took his turn, putting spoonful after spoonful of apple sauce into his mouth.

“Wasn't that a good lunch?” Mommy asked as she took his bib off. Luke nodded. “I asked you a question, Luke. Can you use your big boy words?”

“Yes, mommy.” He said. “Lunch was yummy.”

“Let's get you back into your stroller and then you can drink your bottle of Pediasure.” A bottle? Here?

“Uh, I'm full.”

“You always have Pediasure after lunch, Luke.” Mommy said. “I can either hold you and feed you it before we get moving or you can hold it yourself and drink it as we look

around.”

“You’re always insisting you’re a big boy.” Daddy remarked, missing the irony of pointing out that Luke was a big boy while buckling him into his stroller. “So I’d suggest the big boy choice.” Which is that, Luke wondered.

“I’ll hold it, mommy.” He said, taking the green baby bottle from his mom.

“Keep suckling on that or Mommy or Daddy will have to take over.” Mommy said, eyeing him until he put the nipple in his mouth and began to half-heartedly suckle. “Good boy.”

As they returned to the craft booths, Luke came to a stark realization: he actually preferred Liam to his parents. At least Liam did not spend hours - freaking hours - looking at boring crafts. How many tables of clocks could there be in one place? He looked down at his feet in boredom and noticed something. The strap of the stroller. It was loose!

Tucking the bottle down by his side, he touched the buckle. Yes, he could undo this with ease! He peeked out at his parents. They were so distracted, he could get away! Could he though? His clogs were not as good as his soccer shoes. He remembered running “drills” in the backyard with Liam, something that amounted more to him running around in a circle until he got dizzy. His foam clogs were so ill-fitting, he slipped and slid and fell so often that Liam had teased him that he clearly wanted to crawl.

“We could strip you down to your undies. They look like a

diaper.” Liam said, pulling Luke’s shorts down enough to expose his entire white cotton-clad bottom. “And so cute!”

Luke forced himself back into the present moment. If he was going to escape, he needed to work with what he had. The clogs were fine, as long as he just walked fast and did not try to run. Walk with purpose, he thought, as he undid the buckle with trembling fingers. Both his parents were distracted. He took a deep breath and then a second, just to fortify himself. He pushed out of the stroller and began to walk, sighing thunderously in relief as he did not immediately hear his parents call after him.

Where to now, he thought, looking around. He felt nearly giddy, but he needed a plan. It was hard to see what there was around him with so many people. He could not stop walking for fear of being jostled by someone. There were so many people! From his stroller, he had not really noticed. Where had they come from? He kept walking, stumbling a bit from his treacherous clogs. He had to keep from being overwhelmed. Maybe he could go find a ride or something. They were free, weren’t they? He could not remember his parents paying for the pony ride or even to get in. No, they had paid to get in. He remembered seeing the sign that said kids in strollers under 3 get in free and knew without asking that that would apply to him.

He looked around, seeing face after face. A concerned woman made eye contact with him and he quickly hurried along before she could come over and try to help him. Nosey adults! He thought grumpily. There were so many people. He

looked back over his shoulder and could no longer even see the craft booths he had left. Had he walked so far that they were out of sight? No, it was just all the people! Luke was definitely feeling overwhelmed now and he even wished he had his pacifier to mumble his frustrations into. His mouth felt so empty without it! Why was he so used to having a pacifier? He was big! He was a teenager!

Luke rubbed at his eyes, trying to get rid of the tears. He had stopped walking, but he could barely even see with the tears in his eyes. He whimpered, his lip began to tremble. No, no, he was not going to cry. He refused to. He was not going to cry like a little...

The wail erupted out of his chest, from some deep primeval place he did not even know he had. Tears poured down his cheeks as he could no longer hold panic back. He could not say if he was trying to speak or just vent his frustration, panic, and fear, but he wailed again.

“Mommy? Daddy? Mommy?” He called out, knowing how dumb it was. They were nowhere to be found. He was completely, totally lost. He rubbed at his face and his hand came away slimy. Oh, god. He had snot all over!

Luke wailed again and every adult in the immediate vicinity turned to see a little boy in orange Paw Patrol clothes, face painted like a tiger, stricken with panic.

“Sweetie, are you okay?” A woman asked, swooping in and gently touching his shoulders. He tried to speak, but could only whimper as tears continued to pour down his face. “Are

you lost?" He nodded, rubbing at his eyes even though tears kept coming. "Alright, well, who did you come with?"

"Mommy and daddy." He scolded himself, but those were the words that came to his mouth. When he thought about it, he could say mom and dad, but mommy and daddy became more and more of a reflex by the day.

"Lukey?" Luke looked up to see Liam standing there. He tried to hide his relief, but it was too late. His face had lit up and his tears had slowed. He rubbed at his eyes again, trying to get rid of the last of the tears.

"Is that your big brother?" The woman asked, keeping her hand on Luke's shoulder. He was still struggling to breathe, so he simply nodded. "Are you sure?" He nodded again and she let him hurry over to Liam's waiting arms.

"What were you doing, Lukey loo?" Liam asked. "You can't be wandering off on your own! That was scary, wasn't it?" He hugged Luke to his chest, rubbing his back to calm him down. "Thank you so much. I'll take him back to our parents and his stroller." He kept patting Luke's back as he walked. "I bet they're over at the crafts." He did not ask Luke. Luke was so little, he probably did not know. He did have one question though. "Why did you wander off, Luke?" Luke calmed down and knew he had to answer.

"I was trying to go," Luke sighed. "Peepee." At least the baby word made his lie seem more believable.

"Oh, Luke! That's what your diaper is for!"

"I'm not," Luke sputtered. "It's a Pull-up."

"You said you wanted to call it a diaper." Liam replied. "And I put it on you for a reason. No potties here. You can either hold it until we get home or use your diaper."

"I'm not gonna use it!"

"I won't be mad if you do." Liam said gently as he wiped at Luke's face with the wet wipes he had just so happened to stow in his pocket. "And neither will mom or dad. If you need to go peepee or even poopy, you can use your diaper." He kissed Luke's cheek. "If you want." He tapped his cheek. "Where's my kiss?" Luke rolled his eyes and pecked his brother's cheek. "Maybe we should have you start doing that whenever I pick you up."

"Ew."

"It's not like it's on the lips, weirdo." He smiled and kissed Luke's cheek again. "You can give me a baby kiss when you have your pacifier in your mouth." Luke sighed and touched his pacifier to Liam's face. "Now let's go find mommy and daddy. And something for you to drink. It's warm and I'm worried you're getting dehydrated." He brushed a bit of hair from Luke's forehead. "Dehydrated means really, really thirsty." He patted Luke's bottom and stopped. "Wait a second." Luke felt Liam's finger slip into his shorts. "Lukey, you fibber! You did use your Pull-up. Just a little bit." Luke felt his heart skip a beat. When? It must have been during his meltdown. He had wet himself like a little toddler? Luke whimpered, ashamed. "Don't start crying again, buddy. Big

brother's here. You know, your tantrum ruined your face paint."

"Good." Luke said grumpily.

"It's not good." Liam said with a smile. "But now that big brother's here, let's set things to rights, hmm?" Luke grumbled. "Did you even know you lost a shoe?" He tickled Luke's bare left foot. "We'll find it. I know how much you love your Toy Story shoes." Luke rolled his eyes, trying to fight his relief that Liam had found him. "But I think you've lost shoe privileges for the next few days."

"Shoe privileges?"

"Shoes make you think you can wander off." Liam explained. "Though I bet you'll be pretty clingy after your scary ordeal, hmm? No shoes means you'll have to be carried. Everywhere."

"Everywhere?"

"Well, not at home. But if we go out, you won't be able to walk. Unless you want an ouchy booboos on your tiny little foot."

"There's my shoe." Luke spied it out of sheer luck. Liam laughed.

"How about that? What a helpful baby brother I have." He kissed Luke's nose. "I know you're about to say you're not a baby, but that little fit you threw proves that you are. Actions speak louder than words, Lukey."

“Where was he?” Mommy asked as Liam came over with Luke in his arms.

“Oh, he went exploring.” Liam said. “Luke! You never even finished your bottle!” Shifting Luke into a cradled position, Liam pushed the bottle into his mouth, feeding Luke as he related the whole story to their worried parents. Luke could do nothing but listen as Liam exaggerated his helplessness. He had definitely not soaked his... Pull-up and he had not cried nearly as hard as Liam claimed. He had had a few tears, that was all! He absolutely did not have snot on his face, he thought as he felt the phantom sensation of his slimy hand. No. Liam was lying and making him sound like a total baby and all he could do was lie there and drink his Pediasure even as Liam asked Mommy to put his shoes away in the goody bag.

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to make sure he doesn’t get out of his stroller again.” Dad remarked.

“Yeah, but first I want to get his face painted again. It kind of got all messed up by the scared little Lukey.”

To Luke’s dismay, the face painter remembered him perfectly and even commented that it was nice to meet him awake now. As he sat in Liam’s lap for the re-do of his tiger, the face painter explained to Liam that Luke had been fast asleep for the whole first go.

“Guess we better think about naps more often.” Liam remarked, bouncing Luke slightly. “Thank the nice lady for redoing your face paint for free, Luke.”

“Thank you.” He mumbled around the pacifier Liam had returned to his mouth the second the bottle was empty and he had been burped.

“And roar for her.” Liam pulled the pacifier out so Luke could give his very best roar, dangling there in Liam’s arms, bare feet kicking. Liam smiled and took Luke back to his waiting stroller.

Even with Liam back, Luke felt horribly bored in his stroller. Liam had tucked the blanket back around him and even popped his naptime headphones on his head, but all Luke could think about was his embarrassing attempt at escape and his aching bladder. He tried to get the attention of his parents, hoping they would be more willing to let him use the portapotty they were passing, but no one seemed to notice. He groaned and sighed. He knew what he would have to do, but could he? They had to be going home soon, but he could not ask when he could barely even hear his family’s conversation. They had to be, he could even see the front gate.

Just as Luke thought that, the stroller suddenly swerved over to a pile of hay bales and pumpkins. A photo shoot? He groaned into his pacifier. He needed to pee! He nearly wet himself as he saw Mike Cranell standing there, camera hanging around his neck. They were in the same class!

“Hi there, folks!” He said, walking over to Luke and his family. “Looking for” Luke could barely hear the conversation, but he could not get his arms free to remove the headphones he still wore. Did Mike recognize him? How

could he not? Because your face is painted and you're in a stroller, he reminded himself. His bladder ached and he hoped he could just hold it a bit longer.

Sound returned to the world as Liam removed his headphones, lifting him out of the stroller and handing him Teddy. He smiled as he carried Luke over to the hay bale.

"We'll put him between two pumpkins." Liam explained.

"I need to pee." Luke whispered, but Liam did not seem to hear, retreating back to the photographer.

"Smile!" His parents and Liam said in unison. Luke forced a smile around the pacifier. Were they done now? He felt a final twinge of his bladder and just gave up. He had already wet it once, but this time, it felt dirtier because he was willingly doing it.

"Alright, now let's do" Liam lifted Luke and sat him down on his lap. "Smile, Luke!" Did Liam know what he had just done? The Pull-up felt warm enough that he had to know, but his face did not seem to show it, no matter how much Luke studied it.

"Aw, that's cute! He's gazing up at his big brother." Mike said. "That's definitely the one to go with." Luke felt numb as Liam returned him back to his stroller.

"Ready to go home?" Liam asked, kissing Luke's nose again before covering him with the blanket.

The trip home was thankfully uneventful, even if Liam

ignored Luke asking to have his underwear back.

“So fussy.” Liam remarked. “Might be bedtime when we get home.” Luke fumed, but did not argue. Arguing would only prove Liam’s point.

“We’re home!” Mom announced and Liam busied himself getting Luke out of his car seat.

“You can’t walk, remember?” He said as he set Luke against his shoulder and carried him inside.

“Now can I take this thing off?”

“Your diaper?” Liam remarked. “That was my first thought, but I need to pee first. Some of us had to hold it.”

He made Luke wait outside of the bathroom while he peed, for which Luke was grateful. The last thing he needed was a reminder that Liam got to pee like a normal guy. At last, Liam let him in and had Luke lie down on the bathroom rug as he removed his shorts and examined his Pull-up.

“So you did use it.” Liam remarked.

“Yeah.” Luke grunted.

“Aw, it’s okay, buddy. You wore it for a reason.” Luke knew that Liam would be finding every excuse to make him wear Pull-ups moving forward. “But I know you’re big and can use the potty most of the time.” Liam said, rubbing Luke’s thigh before tearing the sides of the Pull-ups. “Let’s get you cleaned up. And you promise to not try to potty in your big boy undies?”

“I promise.” Luke said through clenched teeth.

“Didn’t sound very genuine.” He tickled Luke’s foot.

“I promise!” Luke squealed.

“That’s a good baby brother.”

Liam finished cleaning Luke up and picked him up, setting him on his feet. Luke blushed, confused.

“Dinner will be ready soon, so I don’t think it’s worth running upstairs to grab your tighty whities.” Liam said.

“Huh?”

“You’ll be fine in just your t-shirt. I’m sure Mommy and Daddy won’t care about seeing your doodle and bumbum.” He patted Luke’s soft bottom. “And with a bumbum this ready for a swat, you might just be a good little boy for me.”

Blushing, Luke left the bathroom with Liam close behind. Somehow, wearing nothing but a shirt made him feel even more exposed than if he had been completely naked. Sure enough, neither his mom nor his dad said a word as he emerged. And also sure enough, it was only maybe fifteen minutes before Luke found himself wearing a bib and sitting on Liam’s lap as he fed him his dinner.

“No one else is eating?” Luke asked, confused again.

“Well, on a night like tonight, we’ll have our dinner after you’re snugly off to dream land on the sleepytime express.” Liam explained, pushing a bit of broccoli into Luke’s mouth.

Luke mulled it over. Was this going to be an all the time thing too? It was all so confusing and concerning.

Luke's head seemed to reel as he realized they could not have been home for more than an hour and he was already being tucked into bed. At least he had underwear on now, he thought as Liam wrapped his arms around him and fed him a final bottle before bedtime. He could not shake the feeling that he was being rushed into bed, as if the family wanted to be rid of him.

"We'll be starting the movie in a minute." Mom said, poking her head into Luke's bedroom.

"Be right there."

"Good night, Luke." Mom said, smiling at him.

"Movie?"

"Yep. We're watching a grown-up movie." Liam said. "It'd be boring for you."

"Nuh-uh!"

"Trust me. Plus, it'd run past your bedtime, so you wouldn't even see the ending."

"What? No! I wanna watch!"

"Hush." Liam pulled the covers over Luke. "You need to sleep."

"But"

“No buts. Off to bed, Luke. You can watch it when you’re bigger.” Liam turned off the light and closed the door, leaving Luke alone with his thoughts about how unfair it was. He considered sneaking off, but his eyelids grew heavy. Maybe Liam was right, maybe he... Luke fell asleep, his thought unfinished as he drifted into a dreamscape filled with faceless crowds and Liam coming to rescue him.

*Chapter 7*

## Chapter 7: School

“What’s the rule, Luke?” Liam pulled his tiny brother into his lap.

“But we’re at school.”

“I don’t see why that matters.” Liam replied. “I’m still big brother, you’re still my little Lukey loo, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” He mumbled.

“And are you still little, Lukey?”

“Yeah...”

“How little are you?”

“Tiny, like a baby.” He cringed to think that anyone in the crowded lunchroom was hearing this. There was so much noise, he could only hear Liam thanks to being right on his lap, but he still worried.

“That’s right. Which makes you?”

“Too little to feed myself.”

“That’s right!” Liam gave Luke a squeeze before taking hold of both his hands with just one of his own. “So, open wide and here comes your lunch!”

The next few minutes seemed to stretch into an hour with Liam feeding him every bite. He even held the carton of milk

to Luke's lips and made him drink at a slow, prolonged pace.

"That was very good, Luke! Keep it up and maybe we can even do away with sippies and bottles at home." He smiled. He knew Luke was very aware of how much food he had on his face, smeared all around his lips and cheeks and down his chin. Liam wondered for a moment if he could send him away from lunch just like that before thinking better of it. It was so important to show himself as a fully capable big brother and caretaker to make sure no one tried to stop him from keeping Luke just how he wanted him. The best version of Luke he can be, Liam thought. "Let's get your face clean, baby. What happens after this?" Luke sighed.

"Recess."

"For me or you?"

"For me." Everything had worked out perfectly where the transitory period from high school to Luke's afternoon was the second half of recess for the very smallest kids: the kids who wore the same uniform as Luke, the kindergarteners.

Luke was still confused about the situation. A week before the start of school, the whole family had gone to the principal's office. Luke had sat, or rather been sat, on the floor at Liam's feet, headphones on his head so all he heard were lullabies and the others' muffled voices instead of what Liam had told him afterwards was a boring grown-up conversation. The gist was simple: Luke attended ninth grade in the morning until lunch, at which point, he then joined kindergarten recess and stayed with that class for the rest of

the day. Liam had originally told him he would be a teacher's helper, but he had quickly learned the truth: he was a part-time kindergartener. Even his parents had not explained it beyond that it was better for him and less of a strain. Like it or not, Luke was stuck.

"Alright, Lukey. Let's go to the bathroom to get you all cleaned up and then it'll be time for recess." Liam led Luke by the hand to the nearest bathroom, giving his face a wash with the coarse paper towels before they entered a stall and Liam made a show of lifting his brother up onto the toilet. "This is a big potty! Don't fall!" He teased.

"Liam."

"Focus on going peepee." Liam said. "We don't have much time before you gotta be where you gotta be." He chuckled. "Gotta peepee before you gotta be."

It was only after Luke had peed and had his shorts pulled back up that Liam finally removed the bib from around his neck. It was difficult to say which was better: if Luke had forgotten it was there or if he just knew it wasn't his place to take off his bib. He smiled and gave Luke a kiss, glad the boy no longer pulled away from random acts of affection.

"All set for recess?" Luke only nodded. "Hey, we gotta wash your hands first, don't we?" Luke again nodded silently. "Well, do you want my help or can you do it yourself?" That could not be answered with a nod.

"I'll do it myself." Liam knew that was coming, so he made a

big show of stepping back and letting his brother walk over to the sink. He came up behind him and took his hands. “Hey!”

“Better safe than sorry, plus we gotta get you out to recess!” Luke fumed, but knew there was no point in fighting his brother.

“What’s the rule for recess?”

“Stay in the kindergarten area.” Luke intoned. Last weekend, Liam had given him a ‘treat’ by taking him to the big part of the playground, but it had all been a ruse to go down the slide with Luke securely in his arms and then force him into one of the baby swings for photos.

“That’s where all your friends are anyway.” Liam said. He said that every day, Luke thought, hating how routine this had all become.

Recess was never really that bad. Even in the first days when he had sulked, he usually got pulled into a game with ever-changing rules. Kindergarteners never took no for an answer. They were knights, they were superheroes, they were whatever the game’s leader that day wanted them to be. It was what came after recess that Luke dreaded.

“How come you’re only ever here half the day?” Petey asked as he and Luke hid from the bad guys.

“Huh? Oh, cuz...” he searched for an answer.

“My cousin used to only go to kindergarten half the day, my daddy says. He said Billy had trouble being away from home

and his mommy. Is that why?"

"No!"

"Well, you're always brought here by that guy. Is he your daddy?"

"What? He's like twelve. He's my brother."

"Then why are you only here half the day? I think it is cuz you're scared to be away from home."

"Is not!"

"That would explain why you always take a nap and never do quiet reading time."

"What?" Luke glared at him, scandalized. This kid was five. What did he know?

"Time to come in, kids." The playground monitor called. Luke sighed. He was not going to take a nap today. He promised.

Despite his determination, the moment they were inside the kindergarten classroom, brightly colored despite half the room being dark and set up for naptime, Miss Melanie, one of the helpers, pulled him and a few others out of the line as the teacher, Miss Anderson, addressed the bulk of the class.

"Raise your hand if you want to take a nap today." Luke was already sitting on a nap mat as Miss Melanie removed his shoes.

"I don't want to nap today."

“Shh.” She whispered. “A nap will be good after your busy morning.”

“No! I’m going to read today!” He stood up, but Miss Melanie knew what she was doing. Luke seemed to be lying down with a blanket over him before he even knew what had happened.

“Just close your eyes. You don’t want to disturb the other nappers.”

“Ninth graders don’t need naps!”

“Shh, it’s quiet time” was the only response he got.

“I’m not”

“Luke! You need to be quiet. Close your eyes and try to rest. You’re obviously overexcited.” Luke groaned. The one time she talked to him as an almost equal and it was to tell him he was taking a nap whether he liked it or not.

The one nice thing about naptime at kindergarten was it had a set time limit. When Liam made him nap on the weekends, Liam and only Liam got to decide when it was over.

“Did you have a nice nap?” Jonny asked as Luke took his place next to him at the tables they had instead of desks.

“Yeah.” Luke grunted.

“I don’t need to take naps anymore, but I think my big brother might make my middle brother Jimmy take them soon.”

“Middle brother?”

“Yeah. Jack’s the big brother, I’m the little brother, Jimmy’s the middle one!” Luke nodded and focused on Miss Anderson. “The funny thing is, Jimmy’s actually”

“Jonny, we need to be listening and not talking with our friends.” Miss Anderson said. Luke rolled his eyes as she went back to the lesson about the alphabet. “A. Apple. Aaa”  
“A. Apple. Aaa.” The class recited back.

“Don’t be shy, kids! B. Book. Buh!” As the class dutifully parroted her, Luke wondered if he would survive. Didn’t they go over all this yesterday? Unfortunately, he could not get up and leave without Miss Anderson or Miss Melanie catching him. There was only one solution.

“Yes, Luke?” Miss Anderson asked, seeing his hand go up.

“I... can I please go to the bathroom?”

“Of course.” She pointed to the bathroom in the corner. Luke stood up and walked over, wondering if they would even make it to P before he finished peeing.

He hated that it was so, but the kindergarten bathroom was the only place where he was allowed to pee normally. No one hovering over his shoulder, no Liam making him sit and holding him in place. He could even wash his hands without anyone trying to ‘help’. He just wished the face looking back at him in the mirror didn’t fit in so well with the kindergarteners outside. Whose brilliant idea was it for the kindergarteners to have white polos anyway? Half the kids

out there had stains on their shirts. Just last Friday, Liam had gotten ketchup on Luke's polo. He swore it was an accident, but Luke was pretty sure he relished pulling off Luke's polo and putting a spare on him right there in the lunchroom.

Luke dried his hands and turned from the mirror. There was only one obstacle between him and feeling totally mature. He opened the door to Miss Melanie's ever-present smile.

"Did you remember to wipe and wash your hands?" Luke nodded, but he knew he had to answer. Kindergarten was weirdly strict about these little things.

"Yes, Miss Melanie." He returned to his seat. Luke had become used to the teacher and teaching assistants being very blunt with their questions. His first day, when he had still foolishly believed he might actually be a teacher's assistant in the kindergarten, the teacher had come right out and asked Liam if he needed diapers.

"Nope. Pull-ups on long car rides, but he has no problems holding it. You love your big boy undies, don't you, bud?" It had become immediately apparent, as if that first day had not been filled with proof. Liam had somehow convinced everyone that Luke needed high school during the day, kindergarten in the afternoon. That was why he had the elementary uniform instead of the 'big kid' one. He had been downright terrified the first day that someone would comment, but everyone accepted him in his white polo and elastic banded shorts, just like they had accepted the Toy Story clogs on his feet every day since that fire drill so long

ago.

Sometimes, he would daydream in World Lit class about just what he would do if someone did call out how weird his situation was. Probably use them as proof to Liam that he needed to stop this. It had gone on for too long though. Luke knew he had become a very little boy in the eyes of Liam and everyone else and all he could do was be glad he still got to go to World Lit and other high school classes.

It felt like an hour before they finally reached the end of the alphabet and moved on to their next activity: moving around the room to stations with different things to play with. This at least was better than learning the alphabet, even if one of the stations had them trace letters with a marker. Jonny was super excited, leading Luke by the hand from place to place as if he did not know how to get there on his own. He knew Jonny was just being friendly, but it still felt demeaning.

"Alright, everyone. It's time for music class. Everyone disco dance over to the music corner!" Miss Anderson moved her arm with one finger outstretched back and forth to show the kindergarteners what she meant. Luke felt a little silly, but everyone else was doing it, so why not? "What should we start with today?" Miss Anderson said. "Does everyone remember Johnny Works With One Hammer?"

"Yes!" The class said in haphazard unison. Luke really did not mind singing in a group. Enough of the kids yelled rather than sing that no one would be able to hear him.

The first few days, he had mouthed along, just to be safe,

fearful that his voice would stick out in the chorus of high pitched voices. The last thing he wanted was for a ninth grade voice to come through under all the sopranos. Miss Anderson must have caught on because one day, she split the class into groups of three and had them sing Row, Row, Row Your Boat in a round. Luke got put with two boys he was pretty sure he had played peewee soccer with and had to stand there, their arms around each other's shoulders in a line as they sang the song. Luke was last, which meant he ended up singing alone at the end of their group. After that, he accepted that his voice fit the class perfectly, for better or worse.

"Alright, let's start working on songs for our winter concert, kids. Does everyone know Rudolph?" For the rest of music class, Luke wondered what she had meant about a concert. Singing in class was one thing. Singing for an audience? That sounded like too much. Since music class was at the end of the day, they usually did end up having an audience as parents arrived to take their kids home. Liam was always one of the last to arrive, so Miss Melanie had Luke sit down at his place and handed him a worksheet to practice writing letters of the alphabet. He groaned, but made a show of doing it every time she looked in his direction.

"Luke, look who's here." He looked up to see Liam standing in the doorway. Miss Anderson walked over to Luke. "Luke, is that your grown-up?"

"Yes."

"You're sure? Who is he?"

"Liam, my brother." He knew it was a safety thing, but still!

"How was school today?" Liam asked as he led Luke out of the school by the hand.

"Uh," Luke thought for a moment. Had he told Liam about what had happened that morning at lunch? No! "Oh! In World Lit, Mister"

"Lukey loo." Liam scooped Luke up and gave him a kiss on the cheek before settling him in his arms to continue walking home. "You know what I meant." Luke sighed.

"I took a dumb nap again."

"You know, Luke, you really should stop fighting naptime." Liam said. "You need an afternoon nap or you get cranky."

"Well, everyone else gets to choose nap or quiet time. I get there and they want my shoes off right away so I can lie down for a nap."

"I know it's just you being you, but" Liam fished a letter out of his pocket. "We understand Luke is a special case and keeping his best interests in mind, yadda, yadda, yadda, if he continues to have difficulty with the transition between his morning activities and our classroom schedule, we may recommend full time kindergarten for the next semester." Full time kindergarten? They couldn't. He was in high school!

"But that's not fair."

"It's not your decision to make, Luke."

"I don't belong in kindergarten."

"You certainly blend in in your first day of school class photo." Liam said with a laugh. "All those kids in their polos and shorts. Which one's Lukey?"

"But Liam! I don't belong in kindergarten."

"We've discussed this, Luke. You're too little to make decisions. Your job is to obey the decisions grown-ups make. If grown-ups say you need full time kindergarten, that's what'll happen." Liam gave Luke a squeeze. "But we can work together to make sure it doesn't." Luke frowned.

"It's awful wearing this uniform in class!"

"Why? Everyone else wears it, right?"

"Not in the morning!"

"That's just in the morning. You fit in perfectly in the afternoon. We'll take your school clothes off as soon as we get home. How's that sound?" Luke did not answer. He knew all too well it would happen no matter what he said.

"I think Teddy missed you a whole bunch, Lukey." Liam said as he pulled the boy's shorts down. Luke nodded, staring over at the stuffed bear. Liam wondered if Teddy ever said things to Luke. "Go give Teddy a hug." The smaller boy crossed the room in just his briefs and hugged the bear. "I bet Teddy wants to hear all about kindergarten today." Luke rolled his eyes. "Do it or you won't get your comfy clothes. It'll be Lukey in his tighty whities all night long."

“Better than Doctor Seuss pajamas.” Luke muttered.

“Comfy clothes.” Liam corrected. “Go on, tell Teddy five things you loved at kindergarten today.”

Liam listened in as Luke began to detail his day to the bear. It was amazing how much more forthcoming he was to a stuffed animal than to his own brother. He would have never gotten Luke to tell him about the little kid game he played at recess, but the bear heard it all.

“Oh, and we started work on our concert.”

“A concert? That’ll be fun.” Liam said. Luke looked over to him as if he had forgotten he was there. “Anything else you did today?” Luke shook his head. “Ready for comfy clothes?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, we need to do your bath first, don’t we?” Luke’s nose wrinkled. “Yes, you have to.” Luke sighed, so Liam scooped him up.

“Tiny little nose, tiny little toes, tiny little Lukey in his tiny little clothes.” He said before setting him down on the bed. “But Lukey loo doesn’t need undies in the bath, do you?” He pulled Luke’s underwear down and tossed them over his shoulder into the waiting hamper. Liam’s clothes went into the gray hamper, Luke’s went into the one shaped like a teddy bear’s head. “Two points for Liam!” He picked up Luke once again and gave him two kisses, one on each cheek. “Off to the tub we go!” He felt a little goofy as they left the room they shared. “All kindergarteners to the bathtub, all

kindergarteners to the bathtub.” He said as if over an intercom. I’m in ninth grade until lunch, Luke thought as they neared the bathroom, but he knew all too well that he had a lot more in common with the kindergarteners than anyone his age.

*Chapter 8*

## Chapter 8: Winter Concert

"Do you see our house, Luke?" Liam asked. Luke nodded, though even that was tough in his restrictive outfit. Ever since fall had turned to winter, Luke had been dressed in a green and blue snowsuit every single time they went outside. Liam insisted it was to help him stay warm and it certainly accomplished that. Luke felt warm each and every morning standing at his locker while Liam unzipped him and extracted him from it, blushing as everyone around pretended not to notice the adorable scene. The end of the day was only slightly better since Liam brought the snowsuit to the kindergarten classroom where Luke spent his afternoons. "Bet you're excited to get home." Luke nodded again. Pointing out how unfair it was that Liam got to wear a light jacket and a stocking cap while he was so bundled, only his face showed had gotten him told that pouting babies are the cutest. "Besides," Liam had said. "It's much more appropriate than running outside in your tighty whities."

Liam clearly loved that he had basically won and Luke was permanently stuck in a second babyhood. Even when report cards came, Luke had sat on Liam's lap like a toddler as he was given a good job sticker for getting an A in Biology. He had hoped it would translate into being allowed to grow up, but all he had gotten was time on the floor in his comfy clothes, playing with his farm set as Teddy and Liam looked on. He almost felt relieved that he was still in kindergarten,

terrified that Liam might push him down in preschool or daycare!

"Whatcha thinking about?" Liam asked, having taken advantage of Luke's quiet contemplation to get him stripped down to his kindergarten uniform.

"Nothing."

"Oh, alright." Liam paused as he spied a recent addition to the entryway: their school photos. Liam did not really like his. His hair looked bad. Compared to the one next to it, though, Liam could not deny that at least he exuded maturity. Whereas Liam sat in front of a boring background, Luke stood in front of a chalkboard that read one word: kindergarten. Liam scooped Luke up and held him next to the photo. "Hmm, did I bring home the right kindergartener?"

"Liam!"

"Well, you know my name, but..." he looked from the annoyed boy in his hands to the smiling one in the photo. "I'm just not sure if you're my Lukey." Luke squirmed, but it was no use. He gave in and tried to smile just like in the photo. The photographer had not accepted his normal, slightly shy smile, cajoling him into an enormous, toothy smile that made Luke's face hurt. Liam smiled and put his brother down.

"Perfect! That's my Lukey." He chuckled at Luke's muttering, one of the few signs of defiance he seemed to show anymore. "Let's go to our room so you can get out of your school

clothes and tell Teddy your exciting news!" He smiled as Luke took the opportunity to get ahead of him, though he stopped at the stairs. "What's wrong, Lukey?"

"Um" Liam waited patiently, nodding approvingly as Luke sat down on the first step and raised his feet up. "Can you please take my socks off so I don't slip on the stairs?"

"Very polite!" Liam praised. "And I need to do it because?"

"I'm a baby." Luke mumbled.

"Can you show me how baby Lukey goes up the stairs?" Luke nodded and began to use his arms to pull himself up each step, his bottom landing on each one before moving on to the next. Liam had had to stop Luke from crawling up the stairs once he realized Luke was making a game out of seeing how fast he could do it. That was not very safe, so this slow, deliberate process became the new rule.

"Alright, here we are!" Liam grabbed the pacifier sitting right by the door and pushed it into Luke's mouth. Had it just been his imagination, or had Luke had his mouth open and waiting? "Did you miss your paci?" Luke was unsure what the right answer was, so he nodded. "Well, maybe we can ask if you can start using it at school." He walked into the room, sitting down on his bed and gesturing for Luke to come over. "Oh, actually, do you want Teddy to come help you get undressed?" Luke knew the answer to that. "Where's Teddy?"

"In my..."

"Where's Teddy?" Liam asked once again. He could see the

stuffed bear, but it was important to get Luke used to saying the word.

"He's in my crib, ok?" Luke managed to keep the pacifier in his mouth even with his outburst, a hand flying up to hold it in place.

"Oh, Lukey. There's no need to be ashamed of your crib. You told me yourself that you're too big to sleep with me, so we got you your very own crib to keep you safe, right?" Both of them knew that was not entirely how it happened, but Luke also knew that there was little point in fighting. He walked over to his crib and grabbed Teddy, feeling better as he went through the ritual of hugging the bear and touching his pacifier to his sewn smile. One of the family's favorite photos was a candid shot of Luke's cherubic smile as he gave Teddy a baby kiss. "Tell Teddy all about your day."

"Today in kindergarten," Luke began, trying his best to mention everything that had happened as Liam undressed him all the way down to his green and black briefs with Buzz Lightyear and the Little Green Men floating through space. Liam smiled as Luke beat around the bush before finally getting to the biggest news of the day. "And our holiday concert is coming up."

"And guess who the star's gonna be, Teddy?" Liam said excitedly. "That's right! Our very own Lukey!"

"No, I'm not." Luke protested.

"Well, how about me and Teddy decide that?" Liam took the

bear from Luke and sat down on the edge of his crib. "Sing us one of the songs!" Luke knew better than to argue.

"Um, which one?"

"What's the one your friend Jonny was singing when I came to pick you up?" He could tell by Luke's face that he had hoped he would not pick that one. All the same, he put his thumbs against the sides of his head to make his hands into antlers.

"You put your antlers in, you put your antlers out." He sang. "You put your antlers in and you shake 'em all about. You do the reindeer pokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about!" The second verse involved sticking his 'hooves' out, which seemed to be both his hands and feet. Then came the reindeer's red nose and finally, Luke shook his 'fluffy tail' all about, much to Liam's delight.

"Are you really getting to shake your tushie at the audience like that?" Liam asked after he had applauded and pulled Luke into his lap. "I bet you and Jonny giggle about that, huh?" Luke meekly nodded. "He's such a good little boy and a great role model for you, isn't he?" Luke made a noise. "Oh, you don't think he's a good little boy?" He teased.

"He's a good boy." Luke allowed. Liam chuckled.

"So, I was thinking in Mr. Ladd's boring class – you're so lucky that Kindergarten is always fun – that you should make tickets for Mom and Dad for your concert. Isn't that fun?"

"Uh"

"It will be! I'll get you some slips of paper and you can make a ticket for Mommy, a ticket for Daddy, and who are we forgetting?"

"You." Luke said as Liam shifted him off his lap and onto the mattress of his crib.

"And who am I?" He walked over to the dresser to grab Luke's comfy clothes.

"Big brother Liam."

"And how much do you love big brother Liam?" Luke's arms were already spreading out.

"This much!" He said.

"Now do you want to wear pajama comfy clothes or a nightie?" Liam held up a pair of Hot Wheels pajamas in one hand and one of his old shirts with a faded Spider-Man on the chest.

"Um... that one." Luke pointed to the t-shirt. Liam chuckled.

"You sure?" Luke looked so adorable as he nodded, holding Teddy on his lap, that Liam felt his heart melt.

"Kindergarten really is good for you." He murmured as he pulled the shirt over Luke's head. "Now let's go make some tickets!"

Liam smiled as he got Luke situated, marveling at the idea that he had set his older brother to work, teddy bear by his side, to make tickets for his kindergarten concert while

dressed in an oversized t-shirt. Even when he had been outside the school, wrapped in a blanket, wearing nothing but his underwear, Liam had never dreamed how easily and naturally Luke would slip into a state of little boyhood. Clearly it was meant to be. Clearly, he needed it.

He sat down a short distance away, smiling as Luke pulled the large shirt back up over one slender shoulder. He looked so cute, it was almost impossible to focus on his homework, but he knew he needed to.

“Oh, we'll have to make sure to tell Luke's morning teachers he'll be absent on Friday.” Liam mused. The concert wasn't until 10, but that was still early enough that it seemed easiest to make Luke a full-day kindergartner, just for that day. “Might have to figure out lunch.” He shrugged. Being a big brother meant thinking of these things. Luke seemed to be having enough trouble deciding between green and blue markers over at the coffee table.

Liam tried to focus on his homework, but his mind kept wandering to Luke. Not so much to the kindergartner making tickets, but to the old Luke, which confused him. He would never see that Luke again. After all, it would be years before Luke was allowed even some aspects of the big boy status he had once had. Even kindergarten seemed almost too mature for him, given that his teacher had mentioned she sometimes just let him keep napping while the class resumed schoolwork. Liam shrugged, figuring that he would forget about big Luke before long. Little Lukey was all that mattered.

He stood up and walked over, smiling as Luke quickly hid his work from him.

"Oh, you want to keep it a surprise?" Luke nodded, but seemed embarrassed. "Ok." Sitting down on the floor by his brother, Liam tapped his cheek and Luke touched his pacifier to it. "Oh, what a nice baby kiss!" He cooed. "You know, maybe you should ask your teacher if you can wear your nightie to the concert. Wouldn't that be cute?"

"No." Luke lisped around his pacifier.

"You're right. It's too close to showtime to change things up, huh?" He gave Luke a kiss. "Are you just wearing your kindergarten uniform for the concert? I hope so." Luke mumbled something under his breath. "What was that? Lukey, is someone being mean to you about your uniform?"

"No." Liam hooked a finger around the handle of Luke's pacifier to pull it out, a sure sign he expected more information. "It's the snowsuit!"

"Is someone teasing you about your snowsuit?"

"No." Luke admitted. "But it's still embarrassing! Even the kindergartners don't wear them!"

"The other kindergartners," Liam said. "Might wear them once it gets colder. They might not have big brothers who love them so much, they want to keep them warm and safe."

"I have a winter coat. That should be enough." Liam teased Luke's lips with the pacifier, figuring he really did not need to

know Mom had donated his winter coat almost a month ago. All he had was his snowsuit. Even if he didn't, it was the only thing Liam planned to have him wear.

"You don't get to make those big decisions, Lukey loo." Liam said gently. "That's for grown-ups. Who are the grown-ups?"

"Mommy, daddy, and big brother."

"And who are you?"

"Luke."

"That's right! Little baby Lukey, cutie patootie!" Liam gave him a big hug, smiling as Luke instinctively nuzzled into his shoulder. Even if he didn't always admit it, Luke clearly craved being the baby. "I don't think it's healthy for you to compare yourself to the other kindergartners." Luke looked up at Liam in surprise.

"Why's that?" He asked. It was never a good sign when Liam, or Mommy or Daddy, talked to him as if he was big. It usually meant he was about to become even littler.

"Well, they're like halfway to first grade, so they're becoming big kids." Yep, Luke thought. This isn't good.

"Sure?"

"And yeah, you're obviously the smartest little boy in kindergarten, but you're still a little boy. You sleep in a crib, I dress you, you're not a big boy, are you?"

"...no." Luke admitted after a minute.

“Exactly.” Liam gave Luke another kiss. “Now, focus on your tickets. I’m gonna go put that casserole in the oven. I’m sure you want to be done before Mommy and Daddy get home, right?” Luke returned to work.

“I don’t even like casserole.” Luke muttered only after Liam left the room.

Mom and Dad came home not long after Luke finished up the tickets, hiding them. He knew everyone knew the concert was happening on Friday, but they would still feign surprise when he handed out the tickets. Why’d I pick a nightie? He wondered, feeling like comfy clothes would have at least made him look closer to his actual age. He pulled it back up onto his shoulder before running to his arriving parents to give them hugs and kisses, as was expected of him.

From the moment they got home, Luke's feet did not touch the ground. Dad carried him from the entryway into the dining room where he set his small son down on his lap while Mom put his bib on him.

“Thank you, mommy.” Luke lisped around his pacifier.

“And why do you wear that?” Dad asked, bouncing Luke on his lap.

“So my nightie stays clean while big brother feeds me.” That earned him a kiss on the cheek, Dad's face pressed against his feeling scratchier than Liam's. Will I still be a baby when Liam needs to start shaving? Luke wondered, panicked. He was older, but he remained as smooth as the baby he was seen

as. I gotta figure out some way to be big again! But how? He had been this way for months! Liam was right, the school year was at least half over and Luke had been a part time kindergartener this whole time!

Once Liam joined them at the table, Luke was handed over to him. His pacifier sat on the table as a forkful of casserole came toward him.

“Can't I feed myself? Just one forkful.”

“No.”

“But why?”

“I let you try last week and what happened?”

“I dropped the fork. It was an accident!”

“But it was at school, so I had to go all the way to get a new fork.”

“So?”

“So I think that means at least five months of being fed before you can try again.”

“Five mmf” the fork silenced him.

“You'll get the hang of it sometime.” Mom said to Luke. “Maybe we can get some play dishes and he can practice.” To Luke, that sounded horribly demeaning, which probably meant it would happen. They love me. He reminded himself. And it wasn't all bad. Kindergarten really was a lot less stressful than a full course load of high school would have

been. He just wasn't really sure how he would graduate. Liam sure didn't make it sound like he would be going to first grade next year! And good! Luke thought.

“Time for a sippy of milk.” Liam said, pulling Luke from his thoughts. “Milk makes your bones nice and strong!” Luke dutifully drank his milk.

“It would go quicker if it wasn't in the sippy cup.”

“But then you'd spill.” Liam said. “What do we do when we're done eating?”

“Wipe my messy face.” Liam undid Luke's bib.

“Wipe your messy face,” he sang. “Wipe your messy face! Rub and scrub and rub and scrub, wipe your messy face!” He went through the song one more time before setting Luke down on the floor. “Go get your special surprise.”

“Special surprise?”

“Luke finished his homework early, so” Liam chuckled as Luke came back with the tickets. “How about you start with Mommy?”

“Mommy, would you please come to my concert?” Luke asked, handing her a ticket.

“I'd love to!”

“Daddy, would you please come to my concert?”

“Did you make these all by yourself, Lukey loo?” He pointed to the front of his ticket. “And I assume this is you singing?”

“It was Liam's idea.” Luke said, only then remembering he had made Liam a ticket as well, proof that he had done more than Liam had suggested. “Big brother, would you please come to my concert?”

“Wouldn't miss it for the world.” Liam took the ticket and smiled as he noticed the other surprise Luke had put on them. “Oh, but I gotta pay for this.”

“Oh, that's right. It says they cost two kisses.” Dad said with a chuckle. Liam picked Luke up, planting a kiss on each cheek before passing him on to Dad, who repeated it. Mom took him with a smile.

“I only have a five.” She said, giving him five kisses in rapid succession. “So that means you gotta give me three back.”

“Mommy!” Luke whined. That didn't even make sense.

“I'm waiting on my change.” She said.

“And a certain baby's got an appointment with the tub, I bet.” Dad added. Luke's smile faded. He hated when his parents called him the b word. Liam I get, but when Mommy and Daddy say it... he distracted himself with kisses.

“That was a very cute surprise.” Liam said as he bathed Luke. Even with how babyish he looked most of the time, sitting naked in water that barely reached his waist as Liam washed every inch of him had to be his most babyish state. “I think they really liked it.”

“It was your idea.”

“You know I didn't tell you to do all of that. Humble little Lukey.” Liam kissed the top of his head. Luke did not answer, sitting still as Liam finished bathing him.

After he was dried, Luke was taken out to the living room in his towel, held in Liam's arms to give good night kisses. Then it was up to their room to put on his Pull-ups and get tucked into his crib.

"Just think, Lukey. You used to scream bloody murder if I walked into your room while you were shirtless! And remember that time you were wandering around the house in your undies, so scared of the thunderstorm? Now look at you. Lying in your crib in my room in nothing but your Pull-ups, sucking your pacifier, hugging Teddy. You're such a good baby, aren't you?" Liam leaned in and gave Luke what had to be his hundredth kiss since school. “And I love my baby brother.”

The next day, Liam went with Luke to all of his classes to make sure Luke told them that he would be out of class on Friday for his concert. Well-apprised of Luke's unique situation, they were all smiles and nods. Luke did not understand how Liam was able to escort him to class without being late for his own, but asking Liam would only result in him saying big brothers have their ways.

Friday came and Luke felt nervous as soon as he remembered today was the day of the concert. He knew the songs, but to perform them in front of everyone? Especially the Reindeer Pokey!

“Are you absolutely sure you don't need to wear a special outfit?” Liam asked. “Should we put you in your bow tie and suspenders, just to be safe? Everyone goes crazy for babies in suspenders!”

“Just my uniform.” Luke mumbled, but Liam was already digging through his backpack to find a note.

“Aw, Lukey!” Liam said, holding up a picture Luke had drawn and stuffed into his backpack before Liam came to pick him up a few days ago. “My family.” He admired the three tall figures and then Luke right in the middle. “Which one's me?”

“I wrote your name right there.” Luke pointed. The names were too cleanly written for a kindergartener, though they were still written in green crayon.

“We'll have to flatten that out and put it right on the fridge, Lukey cukey.” Liam said with a chuckle. “But we need to get you dressed first!” He walked over to the dresser and grabbed Luke's uniform. “Uh-uh, leave your Pull-ups on.”

“What? Why?”

“Today's an extra special day. We don't want you running off stage to pee in the middle of your song, do we?”

“But”

“No buts. You'll be back in your super duper cool little boy underpants tomorrow. I'll even let you choose, but today, you're in Pull-ups.”

Though Liam loved to make his formally painfully bashful brother squirm and giggle like a toddler when he was in a state of undress, a pouty Luke was easier to dress. In no time, Luke reclined on the living room floor, feet high in the air for Liam to put his socks and snowsuit on.

“You're gonna sing nice and loud, right?” Liam said.

“Miss Anderson says we need to sing like lions, not mice.”

“Well, you better be the fiercest lion cub up there.” Liam said seriously. Luke, unsure of what else to do, nodded. Liam lifted Luke to his feet and zipped up his snowsuit. “Are you nervous?”

“A little.”

“You'll be fine. Mommy and Daddy and big brother will all be there to see you sing and dance.” He made a silly face until Luke giggled just a bit. “And wiggle your butt!”

“Wow!” Jonny exclaimed almost the second Liam led Luke into the kindergarten classroom. “I forgot you were gonna be here all day today!”

“It's a very special day.” Liam said, kneeling down to undress Luke. “Do you like Lukey's snowsuit, Jonny?”

“Uh-huh! I think I had one just like it when I was little.” Jonny said. “But I think mine was orange and blue, not green and blue.”

“Uh-huh.” Liam said, extracting Luke from his snowsuit. “Jonny, can you grab Luke's shoes out of his bookbag?”

Jonny eagerly zipped it open. “And Lukey, can you go sit down so Jonny can put your shoes on for you?” Liam had time before homeroom, so he was more than happy to watch. “What do you say, Luke?”

“Thank you, Jonny.” Luke said. Jonny threw his arms open wide and Luke bashfully hugged him.

“Alright, you two have fun. I’ll be back for your big concert!” He remained just a little bit longer to watch Jonny drag Luke by the hand over to where they all sat in a circle to start the day, explaining every little detail to him since he wasn’t normally present for morning circle.

“I could never go back to kindergarten.” Liam murmured. “It’s baby stuff.”

Luke felt as if he had been thrown into the deep end. Everyone else was so used to their morning routine while Luke had never done any of this, so he followed Jonny closely. It was almost a relief when it came time for gym class. He knew gym.

He thought he did at least. Funny running was something he had never done before, but how hard was it to run from one end of the gym to the other like a robot or a turtle or whatever the friendly gym teacher called out? He could not help but beam proudly when she gave him a high five for how good he was at bouncing like a kangaroo. Even the obstacle course afterwards involved crawling, hopping, and spinning, all things Luke could do. It was only when he got to the bottom of the blue plastic slide that was the grand finale that he

realized his Pull-ups were poking out of his shorts. Had anyone seen? He hoped not.

“Alright, kids.” Miss Anderson said when they were back in the kindergarten classroom. “It’s time for our concert. Everyone form two lines. Jonny? I don’t think Luke was with us when we went to the auditorium a few days ago, so would you mind holding his hand?”

“All I’d have to do is follow.” Luke mumbled, but he allowed Jonny to take his hand.

“Who’s coming to see?” Jonny asked. “My brothers and my mom and dad are coming.”

“My brother Liam and my mom and dad.” Luke answered. He had followed Jonny’s example, but it felt very strange to say mom and dad.

“This will be fun.” Mom said for probably the tenth time as they sat in the auditorium.

“Aren’t they only doing three songs?” Dad said.

“Hush. They’re little.” Mom hit his arm with her program before leaning in and whispering. “And we’re pretty lucky to get three kindergarten concerts with two boys.”

Liam grinned and it only grew as the kindergarteners came in. Luke blended in so well that Liam found Jonny and then Luke. Were they holding hands? Very cute!

“Loud like lions.” Miss Anderson whispered loudly enough for the entire audience to hear.

"Thank you for coming to our concert." The kindergarteners chorused. Liam and his parents waved at Luke, who smiled in spite of himself.

The songs were downright adorable. Liam could hear Luke singing, but his voice was not even slightly out of place amongst the kindergarteners. The first two songs were fairly standard winter fare, but Liam was not the only one who buzzed with excitement when it came time for the Reindeer Pokey. Clearly it was the favorite of kindergarteners and parents alike.

More than once during the 'turn yourself around' parts, Liam was certain he saw Luke's Pull-ups poking out and wondered if anyone else saw. He could not take his eyes off of Luke, feeling a swell of pride as he did not even hesitate to turn and waggle his bottom at the audience with everyone else amidst chuckles. Liam knew Luke well enough that the fact he was wearing Pull-ups under his uniform was obvious, but he figured it wasn't that noticeable or even out of the ordinary for a five year old to wear them. Adorable regardless, he thought as the song ended.

"That concludes our concert." Miss Anderson said, stepping out of the way for proud parents to take photos of their kindergarteners bowing. "You are all welcome to come congratulate your little singers before we return to our school day." Liam did not need to be told twice.

"Thank you, mommy. Thank you, daddy. Thank you, Liam." Luke said from Liam's arms, planting kisses on every cheek

he could reach.

“It was a very nice performance!” Dad said. “You waggled like a champ!” Liam chuckled, having forgotten that Mom and Dad had not been treated to the sneak peek like he had.

“We're very proud.” Mom kissed Luke's cheek and he reciprocated. He was far from the only kindergartener kissing and hugging his family.

“Alright, kids. Let's all go back to school!” Miss Anderson called. Jonny walked over to Liam.

“C'mon, Luke. I'll help you so you don't get lost.”

“That's very helpful.” Liam said, setting Luke down and relinquishing him to Jonny's care. “I'll come get you for lunch, Lukey loo.” He smiled as Jonny led Luke by the hand back over to the gaggle of kindergarteners. “I'd better get back to my day. Got a math test next period.” He said good-bye to his parents and got a final glimpse of the kindergarteners walking back to class, his once big brother among them. He felt so good, he knew he would ace his test.

*Chapter 9*

## Chapter 9: Jolly Jungle

Liam smiled, feeling a warm glow as he finished what must've been his tenth watch-through of Luke's performance of the Reindeer Pokey from last December. He had zoomed in on Luke just to confirm his suspicions: Luke's blue and white Pull-ups peeked a few times, especially during his most vigorous butt waggles.

Of course, Liam thought, if I wanted to see Lukey loo's Pull-ups... He looked down at Luke, who was sprawled on the floor, playing with Duplo, the LGMs from Toy Story on the butt of his Pull-ups. He sucked on his pacifier even as he noticed Liam watching him.

"Come here, baby." Liam said, holding his arms out. Luke automatically grabbed Teddy before climbing into Liam's lap. Liam chuckled, hugging him close and kissing the top of his head. It was so interesting to him how the Luke in the video seemed so much more mature than Lukey on his lap, despite being a year younger and a few inches shorter. In the year since, Luke had grown enough that his blue and green snowsuit from last year was too small and Liam had had to scramble to find a replacement. Thankfully, one of Luke's friends from kindergarten had had one. It had been cute seeing Johnny bouncing up and down excitedly telling Luke about everything he was doing in first grade as Liam dressed Luke in the snowsuit. Not only was it bright orange and a fairly babyish shade of light blue, the sleeves ended in

mittens so Luke had absolutely no hope of getting out of it without help.

"Lukey's having almost as much fun at Jolly Jungle." Liam said as he zipped the snowsuit up. "Isn't that right?" Luke's meek little nod was almost hidden as Liam pulled the hood over his head. "Good thing you're in Pull-ups." Liam whispered. "You're practically encased in there!"

Jolly Jungle was the preschool and daycare connected to the school. It had actually been the school administrators who decided that Luke would be better off doing a half day at Jolly Jungle than try to navigate the thorny situation of all his kindergarten friends moving up to first grade without him. On paper, it seemed strange, but Liam knew in his heart that it was the perfect solution for a special boy like Luke.

"Do you know what tomorrow is?"

"Friday." Luke replied at once.

"Sing the song!"

"I know my days of the week." Luke said softly enough that he might have been trying to reassure himself before he started the song. "There's Monday and there's Tuesday, there's Wednesday and there's Thursday, there's Friday, Saturday, Sunday, the days of the week."

"But what do we call Friday?" Liam asked, giving Luke a squeeze. "Teddy forgot." Luke looked at Teddy as if he couldn't believe the silly bear forgot again.

“Fun Day.”

“And why do we call it that?”

“Because I don't do any-”

“Any big boy school.” Liam said. Seeing the objection already forming, he gave Luke a hug. “I know you're a big boy, but Jolly Jungle is so much more fun than boring old school, right?” Luke shrugged.

“I mean, at Jolly Jungle, I have to participate. In school, I'm getting graded on me just being there, aren't I?” Luke had been terrified the first week or so of school when he hadn't done his homework. Liam told him it would be fine and sure enough, his teachers didn't seem to expect him to do homework, take tests, or even answer questions. The most important thing he had learned this school year was to trust Liam and everything would work out.

“It's a little more complicated than that, but yes. Close enough.” He smiled and kissed Luke, glad that they had been able to make arrangements that benefited Luke so perfectly.

L \*

The next morning, Liam stood in the bathroom, excited for what the day would bring. He could not get distracted though. He knew it was a little silly to worry about Luke being alone for only a few minutes. It wasn't like he was actually a preschooler! On the other hand, he had become so dependent on Liam that he did worry deep down. He hurried through his morning routine and, as soon as he saw Luke, he knew he had

been right to.

Luke was dressed just as he had left him, just Pull-ups and his snowman sweater, and was playing with toys rather than getting ready to go.

"Lukey." Liam said. Luke yelped and rolled over to face him, guilt written all over his face.

"I... got distracted."

"Pants, mister." Luke shuffled over and dutifully stepped into his pants. "Lukey, we have to focus so we aren't late. I gotta get you to daycare so I can get to school." Luke's nose had wrinkled and Liam knew he had misspoken.

"It's not daycare! It's Jolly Jungle!"

"I know, I'm sorry." Liam said. "You're a big boy."

"I am!"

"Well, right now, big boys need to listen so we can get ready to go." Liam said in that practiced gentle, but deliberate tone. Luke, however, seemed to have woken up on the silly side of the crib because he abruptly went from pouting guiltily to running away with a squealing giggle. "I really don't have time for this." Liam muttered under his breath before giving chase.

In the couple of minutes it took Liam to catch him, Luke managed to get his pants off. Two can play at that game, Liam thought as he picked up first Luke's pants and then Luke himself before heading to the front door.

“Alright, buddy, snowsuit time.” Liam said. Luke giggled, thinking it was yet another silly game as Liam began to dress him in his snowsuit without putting his pants back.

“I need my pants.” He said as Liam threaded his arms through their respective sleeves.

“We'll put them on on the other end.” Liam said. “We really can't be late.”

“But”

“You wanted to be silly.” Liam pushed Luke's pacifier into his stammering lips. “And this is the price you pay.” He could tell from Luke's eyes, the only thing still visible, that this was a grave injustice in his mind. “Don't wanna be late! Santa's watching!” Luke's eyes changed abruptly and he began to bounce on his heels, a sure sign that Luke was ready to go. “Now I'm the one holding us up!” Liam said, slipping the straps of his backpack over his broad shoulders. “Hello, Lukey!” He said in the voice that was universally understood to be Teddy's, the bear's head poking out of Liam's backpack. “Hand.” Luke looked as if he might blast off soon with how much his boots were tapping on the floor. “And away we go!”

Luke knew Santa wasn't real, but he was starting to wonder if he really knew that. Everyone at Jolly Jungle, including the teachers, seemed to believe in Santa. Even Liam seemed entirely convinced that Santa Claus, the man in red himself, was going to be at Jolly Jungle today. Luke pondered this as he waddled along, Liam's grip so strong and constant, Luke could feel it even through the mittens so thick, they made it

impossible for him to unzip his snowsuit. Liam wouldn't ever let Santa think he was naughty, would he?

The rest of the walk to the school and Jolly Jungle right next door was spent going over his misdeeds of the last year. Luke was pretty sure he had been mostly good, probably better than a lot of people. He didn't steal things, he didn't hit. He shared! He hugged! All the same, he could not help but feel as though he might just be considered naughty. He had been playing instead of getting ready just that morning, after all. He whimpered nervously, finding none of his usual comfort in his pacifier.

"Alright, we gotta rush." Liam said, more to himself than to Luke as they reached a crosswalk where the hand was already flashing with a countdown. He scooped Luke up, pressing him against his shoulder as he speedwalked across the intersection.

Luke had only just begun to feel the cold in his snowsuit when they arrived in the warmth of Jolly Jungle. This had been his routine every Friday morning since the start of school all the way back in September, but the chaos of a preschool in the early morning still took him by surprise. He tried to look at everyone and everything around him, so distracted by all the commotion that he forgot he wasn't wearing pants until Liam had unzipped his snowsuit and he stood there in his snowman sweater and Pull-ups.

"I see Lukey's diaper!" Simon said with a giggle as his mom extracted him from his coat.

"It's not a diaper!" Luke whined. Liam hugged him to prevent an escalation.

"Now, Lukey." Liam said, rubbing his back slightly above the papery-plastic of his still exposed Pull-ups. "It is too a diaper and I know you know that."

"But"

"It's okay to wear diapers, isn't it?" Liam said. "I mean, what else would babies like Lukey wear to Jolly Jungle?" Luke nodded, recognizing Liam's logic. "What would baby Lukey wear if it was a big boy school day?"

"Undies."

"But even in your undies, what are you?"

"A baby." There was no note of reluctance in Luke's voice. He was matter-of-fact about being a baby, which only made sense since here at Jolly Jungle, just like at home, that was how he would be treated.

"That's right! So, does my baby want to put his pants on?" Luke nodded. "Use your words, Lukey pooky baby boo!"

"Pants, please." Luke said softly, already lifting one of his adorable little feet to step in.

"Please and thank you, please and thank you's what we say, 'swhat we say." Liam said as Luke used his shoulders to steady himself to step in. He smiled as he noticed Luke silently mouthing along with the words. "When we're talking, when we're talking, every day. Every day." Most of the Jolly

Jungle songs were repeated so frequently, you couldn't help but learn them, even if you were only a part time student like Luke. They were catchy and simple, two things that Liam liked for Luke, even if he found himself sometimes humming them in class. Only a few nights ago, Luke had struggled to remember the Reindeer Pokey he had sang just last year, but he never seemed to forget a Jolly Jungle jingle.

"Thank you, big brother." Luke hugged Liam as Liam tucked his snowsuit and boots into the cubby with Luke's name written above it.

"Run off to Circle Time, Lukey."

"Aren't you staying today?"

"That's right, but remember how we talked about it? You need to stick to your usual Fun Day routine even with me here." That wasn't all that they had discussed, but Liam didn't want to make little Lukey late with a lecture. He got to his feet, smiling as Luke ran off and gave Simon a hello hug, the earlier diaper comment apparently forgotten.

Luke tried to focus on the morning's Circle Time activities, but he kept looking over at Liam. He seemed to constantly have one or two of Luke's new classmates in his lap. Luke wondered why he wasn't allowed to climb into Liam's lap, but remembered that he was supposed to pay attention to Miss Katie, who was leading them through the colors of the rainbow.

"Red! Apples are red. Firetrucks are red!" Liam watched

Luke, marveling at how much he seemed to belong as he dutifully recited with the rest of the preschoolers. It was almost as cute as the way he kept acting like he didn't want to run over and climb into Liam's lap. The little boy who loved nothing more than snuggles was acting like he was too big for it. It was cute, especially since it was all thanks to Liam's persistence that little Lukey was so clingy.

"Very cute." Liam murmured, his lap suddenly abandoned as Circle Time transitioned into wiggling out your sillies. He watched Luke bounce and giggle and squirm with everyone else, pausing only for a moment as one of the adults pulled out the back of his pants in what must've been one of the most blatant diaper checks. Luke wasn't the only one who got checked, but Liam noticed Simon didn't get one. That made sense with how loudly he had pointed out Luke's Pull-ups.

"We're gathering all the bigs in the storage room." One of the teachers said, touching his arm. "To help prepare for the special surprise." Liam smiled, feeling especially grown up that he was a part of making the day extra special for Lukey and the other little ones.

He emerged from the storage room just in time to see Luke being led by the hand to another room. It wasn't naptime yet, so where was he going? Luke looked over his shoulder at Liam and he immediately knew. Well, that was one of the perks of Jolly Jungle. Sure enough, Luke came back out a moment later, his cheeks a little red as he rejoined the group he had been playing with.

“Alright, everyone.” Miss Katie said, clapping her hands. “Let's all gather back over at the circle rug because we have a special visitor.”

“Who is it?”

“I think I heard sleigh bells!” The teacher who had directed Liam to the storage room said playfully. The room buzzed with excitement and Liam chuckled as he saw Luke starting to get caught up in it.

“Everyone sit down in the circle and we'll sing to bring you-know-who!”

“What should we sing?”

It took a few minutes to calm the room full of preschoolers down, but they were soon sitting in a rough circle, sing-shouting Rudolph, followed by Jingle Bells.

“I think Santa's almost here!” Miss Katie said, almost immediately droned out by soprano shouts of ‘Santa!’.

“Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus!” The teachers began with the kids joining in, though one or two only shouted Santa's name rather than sing along. Liam heard the door open and smiled as a familiar man in red and white entered, any semblance of orderly singing forgotten as the room practically exploded in excited squeals. Liam looked away from Santa and found Luke bouncing up and down just as eagerly as any of the other little kids. He fits right in, Liam thought fondly.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” Santa boomed. “Are there some good boys and girls here?” He laughed as the kids’ bouncing only sped up. “Well, let’s get started then!”

“They’re never going to get them to sit still for the Santa story.” One of the other ‘bigs’ remarked to Liam. He chuckled, but watched with admiration as the teachers managed to wrangle the kids back to the circle time rug.

“When Santa says your name, you’ll go sit on his lap. Parents, that’s your time to shine, so have those phones ready! Santa’s a busy guy this time of year, so we don’t want to wait for you to get your phone out.”

Luke stared up at Santa, amazed that it really was him! The Santa at the mall had been wearing a fake beard, but this Santa? This was the real Santa, he knew it. Maybe that was why everyone said Santa wasn’t real. The actual Santa couldn’t be everywhere, so it was rare to see him. But here he was, at Jolly Jungle.

“Luke, you’re up.” Miss Katie said. Luke gasped and hurried to his bare feet, running over to Santa.

“Hi, Santa!”

“Hi, Luke!” Santa replied, pulling him into his lap. “Have you been a good boy?” Luke nodded.

“Yes, Santa.”

“That’s wonderful!” Santa said. “Oh, let’s go ahead and smile. Looks like your big brother Liam is going to take a photo.”

Luke gasped and looked up at Santa adoringly. Miss Katie had told Santa his name, but how had he known Liam's? This was definitely the real Santa. "Look at Liam, Luke." Santa coaxed.

"No, that's fine, Santa. I got the perfect photo of a starstruck little Lukey." Liam pocketed his phone, wondering if it was too late to make that the family Christmas card as he picked Luke up.

"You got to meet Santa!" He said, checking Luke's Pull-ups as he carried him a short distance away from the group, the next kid already making her way up to Santa.

"Uh-huh." Luke said. The excitement of the moment had passed and he had returned back to earth with a horrible realization: he had lied to Santa!

"What's wrong, Lukey?"

"I... I" he began to sniffle.

"Uh-oh. Lukey." Liam slipped into the nap room, where cribs waited for the kids like Lukey who still napped in a crib. "What's wrong?"

"I lied to Santa!" He wailed. "I wasn't good. I'm bad!"

"What?" Liam wasn't sure what he had expected Luke to say, but it wasn't that. "You're definitely not naughty, Luke. I promise."

"But I was playing instead of getting ready this morning. And I hit Johnny a few weeks ago. And... and..." he knew there

were more bad things he had done, but he was feeling too overwhelmed to think of them.

“Oh, Lukey.” Liam hugged him tightly, rubbing his back until all his worries were gone. “You’re a good boy. I should know. You’re my good boy, after all.”

“But”

“But nothing. Santa knows that sometimes, little boys don’t do what they should, but he still loves you.”

“He does?”

“Uh-huh. He let you sit on his lap, didn’t he? He didn’t say ‘I can’t go to Jolly Jungle! That naughty little boy Luke is there!’, did he?”

“No.”

“Exactly.” Liam kissed Luke’s tear-soaked cheek. “Santa knows that you’re trying very hard to be the best little boy you can possibly be. He knows you love me and Mommy and Daddy. You do, don’t you?”

“Yeah!” Luke seemed slightly offended Liam even had to ask.

“See? You’re a good boy.” Liam chuckled. “Just the thought of maybe being naughty made you cry. A total good boy.” Luke giggled. He was a good boy! Of course big brother Liam knew that. “Ready to go back out? You’ve got a whole day of fun and I’ve got to get to school.” Luke nodded, so Liam gave him one last kiss. It was only a few hours, but he was really going to miss his baby boy. Winter break and days

of long snuggles couldn't get here fast enough.