

Making the Team

by andlat

Billy has to make it to Pony League tryouts, but after oversleeping and a series of other setbacks, will he make it in time?

The Costume Box

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Chapter 1

Making the Team

"Shit!" Billy sat up with a jolt, staring in disbelief at his clock by his bed. "No! No-no-no-no" was his mantra as he launched out of bed and his pajamas, threw on a t-shirt, grabbed a pair of socks that did not stink too bad, and bolted down the stairs.

"Where are my shoes?" He muttered under his breath, throwing shoes left and right in the closet. Mom might be mad when she saw that, but he would apologize after. Right now, he had to- "What the?" He stared down at his legs in disbelief. No pants, no shorts, just his lucky pair of undies, sharks swimming to and fro across its surface. "Shit!"

He ran back upstairs, hopping his way into a pair of shorts. He had maybe ten minutes to make it to the baseball field for tryouts. Could he make it? He'd have to bike harder than he ever had before. He could do it, right?

"I gotta." He muttered, full of resolve as he nearly tripped and fell down the stairs. He gripped the bannister and launched himself off the third step from the bottom, thumping and clunking his way back to where his shoes were. Or were supposed to be. "What am I-" he groaned as he realized what he would have to do. He shoved his feet into his old sneakers, the ones that lit up with every step. It was a bright, sunny day out so hopefully no one would notice too much. He grimaced all the same. It was not that he had physically outgrown them,

it was just that they were so little kiddy and he was a young man. "Ok." He muttered under his breath, grabbing his glove. He headed out to the garage and that was when he remembered; he forgot to ask Dad to help him fix the flat tire on his bike. He growled in frustration and felt tears well up in his eyes. What was he going to do? Without his bike, his only hope was...

His mind made up, Billy broke out into a mad dash. Maybe if he ran, he still had a chance of making it there only a little late. He knew that Coach Marsh would not like that he was even a minute late, but maybe he could make it up to him? There was only one day of Pony League tryouts and he was not going to miss them!

Someone must have been watching out for him because Billy felt like he made it to the park in record time. All that remained was to get over to the ball fields. He figured if he cut across the playground and then the tee-ball field, he could make it. Easy peasy, he thought, grinning as he saw the clock in the center of the park. He had time!

Billy made it across the playground without much difficulty. Thankfully, little kids instinctively knew to get out of the way of a big kid in a hurry. His luck took a turn however as he reached the baseball fields just as the sprinklers came on. With a yelp, he turned for the infield before he got too wet.

"Whoa! Stop swinging!" A friendly adult voice called. Billy was so focused, he had not even noticed the line of little kids waiting behind a tee. The coach in charge jogged over. Billy

tried to dodge around him, but he slipped and fell onto the sand. "You alright there?" The coach helped him up and dusted him off.

"Uh, yeah, thanks."

"Where are you off to in such a hurry?" Billy touched his lip. He must've bitten it, based on how much it was stinging, but at least it wasn't bleeding.

"Oh, to try out." He nodded in the direction of the Pony League banner, but as luck would have it, the tee-ball team stood between him and the banner. The coach chuckled.

"Tryouts, huh? Well, you made it, champ!" He gave Billy's shoulder a pat and began to subtly, but undeniably guide him over to the waiting line of kindergartners. "What's your name?"

"Uh, Billy."

"Nice to meet you, Billy. My name's Coach John." He smiled at the boy standing by the tee. "Hey, Avery? Do you mind if we let our latecomer Billy have a try? He wants to try out for the team!"

"Huh? Not this team." Billy protested, but Coach John plopped a batting helmet on his head. "Hit a home run and we'll get you your very own Joeys cap!" He squatted down by the tee. "So, what you're gonna do is hit the ball off the tee and then run as fast as you can to that orange rectangle over there, kay?" He pointed to an orange rubber base, maybe half the distance between home and first base. "That's first base.

Then, you'll go to second, then third, and back here to home. Got it?"

"I really need to get over to"

"Keep your head in the game!" Coach John said, patting the top of Billy's batting helmet.

"I'm not supposed to be here." Billy said as loudly as he could, but Coach John handed him the bat.

"Don't be nervous, Billy. Everyone, let's cheer for our teammate. Go, Billy! You can do it!" A chorus of high-pitched voices took up the cheer and an idea sprouted in Billy's mind. It's just on a tee. If I hit it farther than any dumb little kid could, that'll prove I'm not supposed to be here! He shouldered the bat, took his position, raised it up, bounced on the balls of his feet, and swung!

Thunk! The bat hit the tee just below the ball and wobbled as the ball rolled pathetically on the ground.

"It's off the tee! Run, Billy!" A few voices shouted. Billy took off running, adult volunteers at each base directing him to keep going until he finally made it back to home plate where a crowd of five and six year olds waited, cheering for him.

"Nice!" Coach John said, pulling the batting helmet off of Billy's head and replacing it with a light blue baseball cap with one word in red: Joeys. "You're an official Joey now."

"I don't- I can't be a Joey." Billy said.

"What? Why?"

"Because!" Billy stammered. "My age"

"Well, Joey's have to be at least five. You're five, right?" Billy nodded before really hearing what Coach John had said. "Alright, boys! Billy's an official Joey now. You know what that means!" Billy did not in fact know what that meant, but was about to find out.

He suddenly noticed the entire team charging toward him. Panicked, he began to run away, sneakers lighting up with each hurried step, but there was only so far he could get before they caught up and tackled him.

"Get off!" He yelled as he ended up at the very bottom of a dog pile.

"Welcome to the team!" Coach John said, retrieving Billy's lost hat and dusting it off before putting it back on his head as he was helped up. "Back to batting, boys!"

Billy realized that his chances of trying out were shot, but that did not mean he wanted to stay with the tee-ball team. His every attempt to slip away found him face to face with one of the adults.

"Sorry, slugger. Can't release you without a parent."

"What? But I came here all on my own."

"Yeah, rules sometimes aren't very fun to follow, are they? But it's very important." Billy rolled his eyes. "And baseball has a lot of rules, doesn't it?" Coach John patted his arm. "Come on, how about we get back to it?"

Once everyone had had two at-bats, they moved on to other drills, focused on the very basics of baseball. They ran the bases again and again, each time being told by the adults to ignore the 'big kid bases'.

"We are big kids!"

"I know, Joey." One of the adults said with a tone that made it clear he was used to Joey's outbursts.

"These are special Joey bases." Coach John said. "Everyone, let's meet back at home for Coach Says!" He patted his pockets. "Where are my car keys?"

"Not that home!" The team chorused. Billy rubbed his ears. Some of these little kids seemed to scream everything!

"Oh, that's right. Home plate. Alright, boys. Who's ready to play Coach Says?"

"Me!" Everyone except Billy seemed to yell.

"Let's start with... Coach says, hop on one foot!" The results were chaotic with only a few boys able to stay balanced enough to stay up as they tried to enthusiastically obey. "Ok, ok. Coach says stop." He looked them over. "Few of you weren't doing that." His eyes lingered on Billy. "So remember, when I say coach says, you have to do whatever I say, okay?" He nodded. "Coach says raise your glove into the air!"

The game continued like this with them doing jumping jacks, turning around in a circle, running to second base and back,

things like that. I was supposed to try out for Pony League. This isn't even baseball! Billy thought as they all clucked like chickens.

"Alright, let's see... Coach says five year olds run out to center field!" Billy scoffed and stayed right where he was as most of the team charged out there.

"Go on." The boy standing next to him said. "You're five."

"I am not." Billy replied.

"Well, you gotta be at least five to play tee-ball. It's five and six year olds."

"And we know you're not six."

"Yeah! We're all in the same class and you're not."

"Well, maybe I just-" No, he was not going to try to justify it. "I don't even want to play tee-ball. I was going to try out for" he jumped as one of the six year olds grabbed at him, pinning his arms behind his back.

"I bet the baby's wearing a diaper."

"I think someone got hurt out there." Sure enough, the five year olds were all gathered around a boy who was crying and holding his hand out to Coach John and the other adults. Billy suddenly had a feeling he was in trouble. Wait, this is my chance to sneak away!

"Let me go!" He tried to pull his arms free.

"Nope. Let's see what the baby's got on."

"Jayden, aren't you being a little mean?" Jayden paused and rolled his eyes.

"Fine. Admit you're five."

"I'm not! I'm eleven."

"Yeah, right." The boy who had objected said. "He probably does wear diapers."

"I do not!" He felt his shorts start to come down when a whistle suddenly sounded. Immediately, his arms were free and he quickly pulled his shorts, but he knew Jayden and a few others had definitely seen his shark briefs.

"What is going on here, boys?" Coach John said, jogging over.

"Uh, um"

"Billy said his diaper was wet!" Jayden blurted out.

"What?" Coach John seemed to notice Billy for the first time.

"Billy, what are you doing over here?" They all snorted, their suspicions confirmed. For a second, Billy thought Coach John might pick him up, but he instead grabbed Billy's hand and led him toward center field. "You didn't really wet yourself, did you?"

"No!"

"That's what I figured." Coach John smiled. "Those bigger boys can be bullies. How about you stick with the other five year olds for now?"

"I'm not five!"

"Joey, have you met Billy?"

"Kinda." Billy said. "I like your shoes. What's your favorite color? Is it red like your shirt?"

"I don't really have a favorite color.

"You don't? I like red and blue. I used to like green, but not anymore."

"Ok."

"Alright, my feisty five year old Joeys! Coach says bouncy bounce back to home plate."

"Come on, Billy!" Joey said, grabbing his hand and starting to bounce along. Thankfully, he let go and Billy was able to half-heartedly bounce with everyone else. He did not even care about Pony League tryouts anymore. He just wanted this to end.

Almost as soon as they arrived back at home plate, one of the adults brought them all back to the infield, where they gathered around a bucket with balls to practice throwing. This was so much more chaotic than the strictly scheduled Pony League practices that Billy had mentally prepared for!

"We're gonna practice accuracy now." Coach John said, his near-constant grin never fading. "We'll go one at a time. Let's start with Billy." He kneeled down behind Billy and grabbed his arm, not even giving him a chance to show his own ability to throw before guiding him. "Nice and slow, just like this. No, look at the bucket, not me." Thanks to his overbearing

attention, Billy's ball fell short and rolled to the bucket. Jayden snorted and murmured something to his friends, but Coach John only had eyes for Billy. "Good try! You'll get it next time!"

The final drill, if you could even call it that, was a Joey hop around the bases. Noticing a few baseball players coming from Pony League tryouts, Billy hoped they would do it as a group, but Coach John decided they should do it one by one, which meant Billy hopped as best he could while pulling his hat down over his eyes. It was only as he rounded second that he remembered it was baby blue and said Joeys right on it. Well, you're going right in the trash on the way home, he thought.

"It's cool how your shoes light up, Billy the Joey!" Coach John said, holding out his hand for a high five.

"I'm Joey the Joey!" Joey exclaimed, almost colliding with Billy in his exuberance.

"You sure are!" Coach John said with a laugh. "Alright, all my Joeys." The group, including Billy in spite of himself, groaned at the bad Australian accent. "Run out to... right field and then butts on the bleacher!" He watched them take off, chuckling to himself. "No, Avery, that's left field." He called.

Once there was a group of panting kindergarteners and first graders sitting on the bench, Billy wedged in between Joey and a boy in a Spider-Man t-shirt to make sure he was as far from Jayden's group as possible, Coach John surveyed his team.

"Nice work today, everyone. Let's catch our breath and then" He kneeled down. "Hands in the middle." Billy once again had to do it just because everyone else was.

"Go Joeys!" They yelled in unison, throwing their hands up high.

"Nicely done, boys. Back to the bench until you see a parent come." His eyes seemed to linger on Billy. "No one leaves without a parent."

"Then you better expect me to be here for forever." Billy muttered.

"Do you not have a ride?" The boy in the Spider-Man shirt next to him whispered. Billy only grunted, looking away and not noticing how concerned his bench neighbor was. When it was his time to leave, he took action.

"Hey, Soren buddy! Did you have fun?" His mom asked. He nodded.

"Yeah, we ran around a lot! Like a ton!"

"Did you like it more or less than ballet?" Soren thought about it and shrugged.

"Same?" He shrugged again as Mom smiled and laughed.

"Well, ready to-"

"Wait!" Soren pointed right toward Billy, who had started to wonder as the kids dwindled, just how he was going to get home. "Billy doesn't have a ride!" Billy jumped as he heard

his name and saw the finger pointing at him.

"Oh. Is that true, Billy?"

"Yeah, my uh mom said I should walk home. I just live over on Oakhaven, it's not far."

"And not safe." Soren's mom replied. "Come on, we can take you home. Is that okay, John?"

"Uh, sure. I trust you. And you're sure, Billy, your parents aren't just running late?"

"I'm sure. Absolutely positive that they are not going to come pick me up from friggig tee-ball." Once again, the adults' selective hearing only picked up what they wanted.

"Alright, Sara. I guess you've got an extra Joey." He chuckled.

"You can hold my hand!" Soren announced. Billy begrudgingly took it and they began the trek to the minivan.

"Soren, can you get yourself situated while I help your new friend Billy?" As Soren climbed into the car and a waiting booster seat, Billy found himself lifted up and then set in the booster seat's twin. "I'm sure you're a pro at your booster seat, but it seems like these things are all different." Soren's mom said, more to herself than to him as she buckled him in quite securely. "All buckled?" Soren nodded.

"All buckled?" He asked Billy, who nodded back. He had only stopped using a booster seat a year or two ago, but he did not remember it being so restrictive!

"Since we're making an extra stop, do you want to watch Bunnydale?" Soren quickly looked over appraisingly at Billy before shaking his head, turning red.

The drive therefore passed in silence and it was only as they were pulling into the driveway that Billy realized that he was pretty sure he had never told Soren's mom where he lived.

"Here we are. That really wasn't too much of a detour." She looked at Billy through the rearview mirror. "Can you figure out how to undo your seatbelt?"

"Uh, I don't think so." Billy said, concerned.

"Why do they make these things so complicated?" Soren's mom sang under her breath as she unbuckled Billy and, lifting him, set him down on the ground.

"It was very nice to meet you, Billy. Hopefully you can make it to the next Joeys day!"

"Uh" was all Billy said before running inside.

"Did I hear a car?" Dad called from the hall.

"Uh, yeah. Someone offered me a ride."

"How were tryouts?" Dad asked, stepping into view. His eyes flitted up to Billy's head and Billy realized he still had the Joeys hat on. He did his best to hide an amused smile. "Did you make the team?"