

Ostinato

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Theodore just graduated from a prestigious boarding school specializing in developing those with particular musical talents. He's eager to get out into the world and live life on his own terms, but a night spent at his tech-savy Uncle's house sees his life go down a very different path.

The Costume Box

2024

Chapter 1

Chapter One

Saturday 7th June - 23:35

Theodore pulled into his uncle's driveway, steadily bringing his car to a stop. He peered through the inky blackness towards the palatial front porch beyond, carefully scanning the spotless lattice windows for any sign of life, but there was nothing. It was almost midnight, afterall. Surely everyone would be asleep by now?

Thinking the coast clear, the young man shut off the shuddering engine of his ramshackle red 2005 volvo and stepped out carefully onto the patio. He tiptoed cautiously up to the imposing black front door, sneering at the sight of the tacky lion's head door knocker. The eighteen year old would have rather been anywhere else. Hell, he'd have rather spent the night in the town's dingiest dankest motel than have to endure the awkward breakfast scene surely awaiting him in the morning - but as things stood he had no choice. School was out, and he was skint.

The teen lifted up the edge of the flower pot, feeling blindly around for the spare key he knew his uncle always kept there - or at least he used to. Throughout his whole four years at Holyoke Academy, Theodore hadn't so much as dropped in on his Uncle Rob for tea - let alone allow Mom to rope him in to one of his extravagant holiday get-togethers. Why should he? Whatever she said, it was clear he wasn't

welcome. If Mom wanted him to be part of some big happy ideal family, she shouldn't have sent him packing to boarding school.

Where the hell was the key?

Frustrated, Theodore shifted down onto his knees and started digging around in his pockets for his phone, only to be met with a loud crack as the flower pot teetered over and smashed against the paving stones.

“SHIT!” He exclaimed at the top of his lungs, trying to prop the flower pot back up again - but only succeeding in covering his white school uniform shirt in dirty black soil stains. Suddenly, the porch light flickered on. A moment later, the door swung open, his mother standing over him in her dressing gown with her arms firmly crossed and a disappointed frown fresh on her lips.

“Teddy...” she sighed, looking down in bewilderment at her son. A slender boy, the teen had always come across as a little younger than his true age, but in that moment Theodore's messily swept back sandy brown curls, guilty big blue eyes, and soiled school shirt made the supposedly mature elite music school graduate look more like any other naughty school boy. “What on earth do you think you are doing?” his mother scolded him.

“Don't call me Teddy...” Theodore growled, still floundering around trying to balance the half-broken flower pot. “I was looking for the damn key.”

His mother tutted. “You know how I feel about cursing.” she lectured. “Look at you, you’re filthy!”

“I told you!” Theodore snapped. “I was looking for the key. Doesn’t he keep it in the fucking...” A single glare from his mother made the boy lose his nerve. He started over. “Urgh - I mean, doesn’t he keep it in the flower pot anymore?”

“There’s a smart lock.” Mom explained, indicating a small panel to the side of the door. “It’s fingerprint activated. There’s a camera too.” She allowed herself just the tiniest of smirks as Theodore finally got to his feet, trying to wipe himself down but only spreading the dirt to his gray khakis too. “I’m sure your cousins would be very amused to see the full video of your little flower pot adventure?”

“I’m not in the mood, Mom.” Theodore whined.

“Well I certainly am,” his mother said. “Just where were you?”

“Where was I when?” Theodore said knowing full well what his mother was asking about. His Mother gave an eye roll before setting a withering stare on Theodore.

“The graduation ceremony,” his mother said. “The entire family was there to see you and what? You couldn’t be bothered to show up?”

“Please,” Theodore said with a derisive click of his tongue. “They were there to see Jessica - not me.”

That seemed to be all the defense Theodore felt he needed.

After all, it was the truth. Jessica was Theodore's cousin, they were the same age and had attended Holyoke academy together. Theodore had spent a lifetime of being compared to her and she to him, each of their achievements held up to one another as if it had been some sort of competition. It wasn't like there was any bad blood between the two of them, yet the years of constantly being compared to another hadn't exactly brought them close. Not to mention, as Theodore saw it, she had the edge on him.

“We were there to see both of you,” his mother said, a weary fatigue in her tone. This wasn't the first time this conversation had played out.

“She was the one who sent out the invitation,” Theodore countered.

That had always been Jessica's way. Over his time at the academy, Theodore had taken his studies seriously enough. He had made great strides in his mastery of the violin, his chosen instrument of study, and he had even garnered himself some praise for it by the teaching staff. All in all, Theodore did have a genuine love for it and it was perhaps the only thing that gave him any pleasure at school. It was a welcome reprieve from all of the misery that accompanied it, everything from bullies to Theodore's own seething resentment at having to be there in the first place.

Unlike Jessica who had been eager to invite her own family to recitals, Theodore's own mother had only been to a few. Theodore had been apt to keep them secret from her. She had

only ever showed up on the occasion that Jessica had let slip that they were happening at all. That suited Theodore just fine. His mother had made her choice, and it was clear to Theodore what that choice had been. He knew she didn't care about him - not really. No matter what she said.

She had sent him off to boarding school to get him out of her hair. All so she could focus her attention on her youngest son Charlie, the apparent golden child. The one she really cared about..

“I just don't understand why you are like this,” his mother sighed. “I've only ever wanted to support you, but you won't let me,”

“Save it,” Theodore said, issuing a curt wave of his hand. He didn't want to hear her platitudes, he had heard them enough over the years. His mother looked at him with a pitiful look which made Theodore feel just a tinge of guilt - yet not enough to change his demeanor.

“It's late,” his mother said after a long silence. “Maybe it's best if we all just go to sleep.”

Theodore only nodded. He and his mother both knew that dragging out the conversation any longer would only serve to set them both off into a full blown argument - a mainstay of how all their interactions ended.

Theodore followed his mother into the house. “You're bunking with your brother tonight,”

“Greeceat,” Theodore said, a melodramatic glowerplaying

across his face.

His mother looked like she might launch into yet another airing of grievances, but Theodore didn't allow her the opportunity - kicking off his shoes and retreating up the stairs. He knew the way. Theodore had stayed at Uncle Rob's place enough times as a kid that he'd practically had his own bedroom at the place. At least it had been his own until Charlie came along.

He roughly pushed open the door and flicked on the lamp. Despite the late hour, the argument with his mother had left Theodore in such a state that it didn't even occur to him that his little brother might already be asleep. If he was honest, he did feel a little bad when he saw the yawning ten-year-old's golden mop-head peeking out from beneath his comforter - tired blue eyes identical to his own wincing at the sudden bright light.

"You're back..." Charlie yawned, sitting up fully in his bed. He was wearing a bright green minecraft t-shirt, the rest of his outfit for the day folded up neatly on the dresser beside him. He managed a weak smile. "Where were you?"

"What do you care?" Theodore snapped back, stripping off his khakis and flinging them uncaringly on the ground at the foot of his own bed.

"I dunno...I wanted to see you." Charlie admitted innocently. He gave a few disorientated blinks, peering at the time displayed on his digital clock by the dresser and then back to Theodore. He narrowed his thin blond eyebrows in suspicion.

“Why are you covered in dirt?” he questioned.

“Don’t you know when to shut up?” Theodore growled cruelly. Finished unbuttoning his soiled shirt, he balled it up and threw it directly in Charlie’s face.

“Hey!” Charlie objected in a whine, desperately deflecting the sweaty disgusting garment. He showed a disappointed betrayed pout. “What’s wrong with you?” he demanded.

“Huh?” Theodore responded, a little taken off guard by the seriousness of his little brother’s tone.

“You never come home.” Charlie went on. “And if you do, you’re always angry at me. Or fighting with Mom. Or... throwing a tantrum!” he accused.

“Oh jeez...” Theodore dismissed, rolling his eyes. Now dressed just in his boxers, he sat down on his bed, starting to get under the covers. “Listen. Mom just gets on my nerves sometimes. You’ll understand when you’re more mature.” he told him condescendingly.

“You always say that.” Charlie complained. “But you’re like the least mature person I know! You’re supposed to be my big brother, but you act more like a big baby! I wish...I wish you’d just act your age!”

Theodore snorted in amusement. The kid sounded like a mix between a kindergartener throwing taunts on the playground, and his Mom. “Just shut it, okay? The last thing I need is another lecture.” he complained. And with that, Theodore rolled over, closed his eyes, and instantly fell into a deep

exhausted sleep.

Chapter 2

Chapter Two

Sunday June 8th: 8:00

The sound of a wailing guitar riff playing from the surround sound speakers in the room roused Theodore from his sleep. He moved his hand from under the cover, groping around to find the control panel on the bedside table. He stabbed his finger on the spot of the touchpad, relieved to find that it silenced the alarm. Theodore sat up, still groggy, as he looked at the control panel displaying '0800'. He let out a deep groan

Smart home my ass Theodore thought. He knew full well he certainly hadn't set the alarm to go off, and his suspicions were now resting on his Uncle Rob - who delighted in every opportunity to show off some aspect of his tech innovations. Still, the smart home technologies produced by his Uncle's company had been how the man had accrued his impressive wealth. The house was a veritable fun house of high tech convenience.

Theodore furrowed his brow in thought. He had recognized the song from some lame emo band he had listened to a lot in middle school, and he did have some memory of having chosen that song as his personalized wake up tone, but that had been years ago. Then again, it's not like Theodore had been around much after middle school. Not after what his Mom had done.

He willed himself up out of the bed, still half asleep, picking

up a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie from his suitcase as he pulled them on - barely opening his still heavy eyelids. He trudged his way towards the door, tripping a little as he did. Theodore opened his eyes about halfway to see that he had tripped over a stuffed fox on the ground. He recognized it as something that once belonged to him - that was until it had been handed down to Charlie. Theodore let out a grunt as he kicked it to the side, remembering their conversation from last night. Just who did Charlie think he was going around telling people to act their age when he still slept with stuffed animals?

Walking into the kitchen and taking a seat at the kitchen table across from his mother, Theodore could hear the chattering of his cousins and little brother in the other room. He groaned, his head pounding.

“Good morning sunshine,” mom said in an overly cheery voice, smirking at his still half asleep demeanor. Theodore let out another grunt, still not having opened his eyes fully as he sat with his face in his hands.

“What can I get ya, slugger? Uncle Rob asked, coming up behind Theodore and giving a rather rough slap on the back. Theodore rolled his shoulders a little, none too pleased with his Uncle's jovial nature - especially this early in the morning.

“Coffee,” Theodore croaked, chalking the headache up to his well established caffeine addiction.

“Oh, big man on campus wants some coffee now does he?” Uncle Rob said. Theodore looked up at his Uncle with some

annoyance. “What do you think Mom? Is that okay?”

“He can try it if he wants to.” Mom said with a shrug of her shoulders. Theodore looked over to his Mom with a confused look. Why in the world were they talking like he didn't regularly drink coffee? What's more, why were they acting as if he needed permission to do so?

“I drink coffee every day,” Theodore said

“There is no reason to lie Theo, I already said you could try it,” Mom said, shooting a serious look at her son that almost seemed to suggest she was considering withdrawing her permission.

“Hey!” Theo shouted, offended at the insinuation that he needed her permission for anything - but interrupted as he heard his voice crack up an entire octave. He cringed in embarrassment, yet his Mother and Uncle seemingly gave no notice. Theodore brought his hands up to his throat. He then looked at his hands. They didn't look all that much different, but something did seem subtly off about them - almost as if they were suddenly smaller.

“Something wrong?” Mom asked, noticing the bewildered look of alarm that had come to Theodore's face.

Theodore gave no answer as he got up from the table, walking out into the living room past where his younger cousins were hanging out watching TV alongside Charlie on the couch. Theodore gave them no notice as he walked over to the bathroom door, going to open it but finding that the

handle would not turn. Theodore jostled it in frustration but to no avail.

“You have to use your finger,” Ewan, Theodore's twelve year old cousin said from the couch as he flipped the long half of his half buzzed half long punk rock haircut out of his eyes.

“What?” Theodore said as he continued to jostle the knob. Ewan, ever eager to impress Theodore, got up from the couch and walked over to the door.

“It's the lock, you have to use your finger,” Ewan said, placing his finger onto a pad underneath the lock. A red led light on the pad turned green as Theodore heard a click before Ewan opened the door. “Don't you remember?”

“Yeah sure,” Theodore said as he hurried through the door - despite not having a single memory of such a thing. He vaguely remembered his mom mentioning something about smart locks last night, however he didn't have time to dwell on thoughts of the previous night.

As Theodore got in front of the mirror, he was shocked to see what stared back at him. His curly brown hair was a little longer than it had been - and much more unkempt. The angles of his face had become less defined, leaving him looking more waifish than usual. As strange as it seemed, his entire face gave off the look that he was no more than some kid that had barely started puberty - with the telltale sign of a pimple on his cheek. In fact, that's just what it was. The face staring back at Theodore was not at all unfamiliar to him, he looked just as he had at fourteen.

Theodore stumbled out of the bathroom, not sure where to go before he dashed back up to the room he had stayed in last night. He went over to his suitcase and began to dig through the clothes. They were not that much different than his current wardrobe, except for the few graphic tees denoting designs that would have been appealing to a middle schooler rather than a high school graduate - yet the point still persisted that these were indeed not the clothes Theo had packed yesterday.

He looked down and noticed that the hoodie he had pulled on that morning was also not something he ever remembered owning. Theodore tore it off, chucking it across the room as if it were diseased. Theodore then looked down at his chest. He had never been ripped, but he had at least gained some muscle mass and definition in his chest in his later teenage years. That was now completely gone, replaced by a scrawny frame.

“Looking for something to wear?” Theodore spun around to see his cousin Jessica standing in the doorway. Her long brown hair with the blond highlights had been curled. She was wearing a green sparkly cocktail dress, and she was currently putting some dangly earrings on. She looked like she was headed somewhere fancy.

“Jessica,” Theodore said breathlessly. “Something's wrong.” He held his arms out in a panic. He then noticed his armpits. “Look at this,” he said, showing his armpit that now boasted one or two scraggly hairs - a far cry from the full bush that had been there yesterday.

Jessica smirked a little. "I would have thought that your Mom would have given you the talk already," She walked up and put a hand on Theodore's shoulder. "Your body is going through changes."

"I'm not talking about that," Theodore exclaimed, shaking his head as he scrambled for words to somehow get across his point. "Yesterday we graduated, right?"

"Well I graduated yesterday," Jessica said with a befuddled look on her face. "You're graduating today - or well the ceremony is today."

"We go to the same school," Theodore sputtered out.

"I don't think just being enrolled in the same high school I went to really counts," Jessica said with a laugh. "I mean, as of yesterday I'm no longer a student there - and you haven't even started yet!"

"Buh-" Theodore protested, but couldn't find the words.

" I guess I did make quite the reputation for myself there." Jessica interrupted in a teasing tone. "So try not to mess that up."

With that, Jessica left the room leaving Theodore alone - still unsure of what in the world had even happened.

10:06

Shuffling into the middle school hall, Theo had never felt

more embarrassed. After he'd spent a little too long sorting indecisively through his new wardrobe - finding each individual article not so different from his usual clothes, but of course bearing the immature zippers, tags, or elastic waistbands which marked them out as children's clothes - Mom had made an executive decision, making her own choice of his outfit for the special day. In the end, the boy had found himself in a light blue striped seersucker shirt paired with a set of navy chino shorts. Theo could barely stand to look at his freshly minted definition-less slender legs and awkward knobby knees himself, let alone tolerate parading them around in public, but Mom had decreed that the raggedy pair of jeans he'd located in a ball at the bottom of his suitcase "weren't appropriate" for the occasion - and that was that.

If it was any comfort, none of the other gawking 8th graders milling gormlessly around the space looked any more comfortable. Trussed up in poorly tied ties, plain uninspired summer dresses, and ill fitting creased shirts the crowd of young teens looked as if they would rather be doing literally anything else with their Sunday morning. Theo avoided meeting anyone's gaze, a couple of faint glances of recognition from the other students seeming to confirm that he was, somehow, also a member of the same graduating middle school class.

"And here's our budding violin prodigy." Mrs Somerton smiled. Of course, Mom had made a beeline directly for the music teacher. Theo was a little surprised to find she was still

teaching. He'd thought she must have been a million years old when he graduated the first time around! "Don't you look smart today." she praised, giving him an expectant look.

"Urgh...yeah." Theo grumbled adolescently, if only to break the silence. The boy groaned internally. If Mom planned on showing him off to all his old middle school teachers, the morning would be even longer than he'd anticipated. "Um, I gotta go to the toilet. Be right back." He mumbled, though he had no intention of returning - at least not before the ceremony began. Not waiting for anyone's permission, he quickly detached himself from the family group, diving with relief into the welcome anonymity of the crowd.

Struggling through the mass of bodies, Theo eventually reached a side door, pushing it open just a crack and slinking out into the back hall beyond. He shut it firmly behind him, locking out the hubbub of squawking teenaged tenors and altos. He let out a weary sigh, relieved to finally have a moment to contemplate the utterly insane situation he had found himself in. It seemed he really had gotten younger, and it wasn't just this body that had changed. The entire world seemed convinced he was fourteen again! The boy felt his stomach twist in horrified anticipation, Jessica's words echoing in his head. If he couldn't figure out why, and if he couldn't fix it, it wouldn't be long now until he was checking back into Holyoke for another torturous four year stint.

Theodore's brief reprieve from his new middle school reality would not last long. Two large broad shouldered boys, one with a close ginger buzzcut and the other with a disheveled

mess of disgusting greasy black hair, suddenly burst through the double doors at the end of the corridor - chatting and laughing boisterously with one another. Theo ignored them at first, lost in thought, but it seemed he could not so easily escape the would-be bullies.

“If it isn’t the Teddy Bear!” the ginger boy snorted, grinding to a halt in front of Theo and prodding his meaty forefinger, adorned with a jagged dirt encrusted finger nail, into the smaller boy’s shoulder.

Theo recoiled in surprise and disgust, an automatic sneer coming across his face as he stared up hatefully at the unfamiliar pair of juvenile giants. “What do you want?”

The boys laughed. “Just to play.” the ginger boy continued. “Don’t you wanna play with us Teddy Bear?”

Theodore rolled his eyes dismissively and turned around, intending to disengage himself civilly from the childish confrontation, but before he could even take two steps the greasy haired boy grabbed the tail end of his shirt - yanking him sharply back towards them.

“Aww, is the little Teddy Bear scared?” the ginger boy mocked. “Running back to Mommy already?”

The boy with the greasy hair let out a bizarre deep honking laugh. “Little Teddy Bear’s scared.” he repeated gormlessly.

“Get off me!” Theo insisted, trying in vain to pry the bigger boy’s hand off, but it was no use, the kid holding on tight to his shirt like a hunter clutching a freshly caught bunny rabbit

by its fluffy white tail. “I said get off!”

“Or what?.” The ginger boy dismissed, again prodding his disgusting finger into Theo’s side. “What are you gonna do about it?”

Shout for Help

Throw a Punch

Chapter 3

Chapter Three

It was clear to Theodore that these kids were not going to let him go. There were a lot of people around, however. If he made enough noise that would probably get someone's attention, and send these goons scurrying. Theodore had more than enough experience with people like this to know their confidence came from strength in numbers.

Yet Theodore also didn't want to give them the satisfaction of thinking that he was in any way scared of them, let alone so scared that he needed to call out for help. He was eighteen after all - an adult, if only currently in his mind. Theodore had dealt with plenty of bullies at Holyoke academy. By the time sophomore year had rolled around, he had gotten a little bit of a growth spurt giving him some confidence to not just let his bullies walk over him. He had still gotten pounded more often than not, but not without getting in a few of his own jabs. One could even say he had walked away on top in a couple of fights.

Theodore knew he had more experience in a fight than the two boys before him. If Theodore had been able to deal with the much bigger opponents in high school, then surely these two should be no problem?

"Last chance to leave me alone," Theodore growled, confident in his ability. Both boys laughed.

"Ooooh the teddy- " the ginger boy began to say, before

Theodore wasted no time in rearing back his fist and swinging up hard at his jaw. When it came time to a fight, there was no such thing as good sportsmanship.

Something that Theodore hadn't been expecting however was how light and feeble his strike had felt. He had neither the strength nor the coordination to land a solid strike, the ginger boy pretty much shirking off the hit with no problem as he grabbed Theodore by the collar.

“You're going to regret that,” he said as his nostrils flared. It was the other boy who put his hand on his partner's shoulder, saving Theodore from reprisal.

“Don't go crazy now, we probably shouldn't send him back all beat up,” the greasy boy said.

“I suppose,” the ginger boy said with a thoughtful look. “Wouldn't want mama bear getting involved..” he snickered.

“Let's use that,” the greasy haired boy said, pointing off towards something Theodore couldn't see.

“That's perfect,” the ginger haired boy laughed, before looking back at Theodore. “Little bears are always getting into the garbage.”

The ginger boy began to drag Theodore over to a garbage can. Theodore tried to resist, but the greasy boy had already hoisted up his legs.

“In you go,” the ginger boy said, before they tossed him into the garbage can so that his legs were sticking up in the air -

his body folded over like a chair.

“That’ll teach little teddy bears not to wander too far from mama bear,” the greasy haired boy chuckled.

“Yeah, no telling what kind of mischief they get up to on their own,” the ginger haired boy crowed before both the boys walked off laughing heartily.

Theodore struggled, rocking the trash can back and forth before it finally fell over and he was able to crawl out. Standing up, Theo could feel stickiness all up his arms. He sulked over to the bathroom to try and clean himself up. He had gotten most of the filth off of him before giving himself a check in the mirror. He had managed to clean himself up off enough that he didn't look too disheveled. It was then he noticed the blob of brown paint smeared across the seat of his pants. Theodore grimaced before attacking it the best he could with some paper towels.

Despite his best efforts however, he had done little to make the situation any better. There was now a large noticeable dark stain that not even the navy shade of his shorts could hide. Theodore gave up, walking back into the hallway. He certainly wasn't going back into the ceremony -not like this. Theodore gave a look towards the double doors down the hall that lead outside. He figured he could just go outside and find someplace to hunker down until the ceremony was over. He had skipped his high school graduation after all, why shouldn't he keep up the streak with this one? It's not like he actually wanted to be here in the first place anyways. As he

started to make his way towards the doors, he was stopped by the sudden appearance of his Mother.

“There you are,” she said with a hurried tone. “Hurry up, the ceremony is going to start any minute.”

Theodore felt his voice catch in his throat. His Mother came and grabbed his arm to lead him back to the ceremony.

“I can't,” Theodore yelled as he pulled his arm out of his Mom's hold.

“What are you talking about?” Mom said, giving him a skeptical yet sympathetic look. “There is no reason to be nervous, it's just a little ceremony.” Theodore grimaced, unable to think of a plausible excuse. His decision to act like a big man had gotten him into this situation. He hadn't wanted help, but now it seemed his only choice.

“Because of this,” Theodore said, turning so his Mom could see the back of his shorts.

“Oh Theo what did you do to your shorts?” she said, holding him still at the back of his arms as if he were some little kid trying to run away to hide an accident. She wrinkled her nose. “Is that...?”

“It's paint! I slipped in something,” Theodore whined. “I tried to get it off, but it's stained.”

His Mother released him with a sigh. She told him to stay put and that she would be back. Theodore had no choice but to do as he was told. Minutes later, his Mother returned with some

clothing in her hand. “You'll have to wear this around your waist,” Theodore's mother said, letting the piece of clothing unfurl to reveal a bright red hoodie sweater that was emblazoned with the members of the Paw Patrol on it.

“What is that?” Theodore mewled as his eyes bulged.

“We brought it for Luke in case he got cold,” Mom said. Luke was one of Theodore's cousins and Ewan's younger brother. At five years old the sweater was perfectly appropriate for him, yet it was something a middle schooler like Theodore wouldn't be caught dead in.

“I can't wear that,” Theodore yelled.

“I don't have anything else,” Mom said. “I didn't think at your age I needed to be carrying around an extra pair of pants after all.”

Mom went ahead and tied the sweater around Theodore's waist. It looked incredibly awkward and tight around Theodore's waist, yet it did cover the stain.

“Now hurry up,” Mom said as she ushered Theodore back into the ceremony.

Theodore moved quickly to where the rest of his classmates were seated. His face was beet red, matching the color of the sweater. He sat down quickly, breathing a sigh of relief that no one had seemingly noticed the theme of the thing around his waist. The ceremony seemed to drag on forever. Endless speeches were given. First the principal, then the valedictorian, then as if they needed more, a special speaker

was invited to say some words. Theodore was worried. He couldn't stop thinking about what he was going to do when it came time for them to walk across the stage. He wondered if they even did that. He couldn't exactly remember the particularities of middle school graduation.

The principal then took the mic again. "Now we have a very special treat. Three of our students have been accepted to the Holyoke academy and Mrs. Somerton has put together a small performance to showcase their musical talents. So let's give them a hand as they come up here!"

Theodore felt a lurch in stomach as he watched two other students get up and make their way over to the side of the stage where a piano and some other instruments were set up. He knew he was the third. Theodore got up and quickly made his way over, careful to keep the sweater obscured as he took a seat next to the other two students.

"Theodore," Mrs. Somerton whispered from the piano. "Your violin." she said pointing to the case back near some bleachers. Theodore closed his eyes. Of course nothing could be easy. Theodore stood up walking over to the violin case and turning his back towards the crowd allowing them to get a full view of the smiling character covering his backside. Theodore returned back to his seat with violin in hand.

He looked out into the crowd, none of the adults seemed to notice anything - yet some of the kids did, and he could see some smirks mixed in with some befuddled looks as to why a person like Theo would have a sweater like that around his

waist. He spotted his own family. Ewan looked like he wanted to laugh, knowing full well where the sweater had originated. As Theodore scanned down he saw Charlie, expecting him to share in Ewan's delight - yet Charlie was smiling as he gave Theodore two big thumbs up. Theodore shook his head a little as he looked at the sheet music in front of him. He didn't recognize the song which meant he was going to have to play it on sight alone.

As the music began, Theo did his best to muddle through it. It was certainly not at the level of the pieces that Theodore had become accustomed to playing, and he was pleased to find that he still possessed the practiced techniques he had spent four long years honing. In the end, he was able to play a halfway decent rendition of the song. If he had been able to run through it once or twice before, he probably could have outplayed the other two kids and Mrs. Sommerton, yet he was just going to have to settle for giving a performance befitting a rookie who had only begun to grapple with the complexities of the instrument in his hand.

Theodore was relieved to be able to sit back down with the rest of the class. There was no use in trying to obscure the garment around his waist everyone had already seen. Yet maybe Theodore was making a bigger deal about it than was really necessary - was it really such a big deal?

“Nice sweater,” a boy behind him whispered. “Which one is your favorite?” The comment set off a chorus of snickers. Theodore closed his eyes as he gritted his teeth. He needed to figure out what was happening to him and find out some way

to reverse it as the looming future of re-living the next four years of high school loomed.

12:30 pm

As soon as Theodore got in the door, he sprinted up the stairs and rushed into the guest bedroom - slamming the door behind him. He quickly unzipped the chino shorts, stripping them off and flinging away the soiled childish garment in disgust. After the incident at the graduation ceremony, Theo had not only had to endure Ewan's teasing enquiries about the exact origin of the stain on his shorts, he'd also had to sit crammed in the back seat of the minivan next to Luke's car seat as the five-year-old talked his ear off about his favorite Paw Patrol episodes. The worst part was that everyone seemed to act as if things were completely normal, the mortifying middle school scene no more out of place to Theodore's family than the boy's sulky mood or his whiny adolescent alto. He couldn't take it any more! He had to find a way to reverse things.

Pacing around the small space, he urgently wracked his brain, trying to think of anything unusual that had happened the day prior. Countless harebrained half-baked ideas came to mind. Could it have been the flower pot? Mom had a hobby for gardening. Perhaps she'd bought Uncle Robb a weird exotic plant, and it had secreted some strange foreign chemical to make him shrink! But that wouldn't explain why everyone was acting so weird. Perhaps it was all some giant elaborate

prank his family were all in on, conceived especially to teach him a lesson after he skipped his original graduation? But no - those matchstick arms, deflated slender shoulders, and gawky oversized features crowding out his fourteen year old face were all too real.

Frustrated, Theodore let out an emotional yell, eyeing up the stuffed fox still lying on the floor from that morning and bringing his leg back to kick it as hard as he could. Still far from at home in his new gangly uncoordinated form, Theodore unintentionally knocked himself off balance, falling back to land his butt painfully on the hardwood floor. Theodore watched from the ground as the stuffed fox careened in a smooth arch towards the open window. To the kid's great surprise however, the toy stopped dead in the air as soon as it reached the frame - falling limply to the floor as if intercepted by some invisible force.

Theodore cocked his head in confusion. He got to his feet, moving curiously over towards the window frame. It certainly didn't look as if anything was there. The boy put a timid hand through the open space, slowly moving it back and forward through the gap, but came across no resistance. He picked up the fox once more, trying to lob it directly through the opening this time, but it simply bounced right back towards him - falling flat on his bed. Finally, the boy tried punching the empty space in the window frame as hard as he could, only to feel his hand stop dead in the middle of open air! It felt as if he had just punched a bag of rice, or perhaps a particularly firm pillow.

Amazed, the boy observed the space more closely. Sure enough, there was just the vaguest distortion of light in the corner of the window frame, shimmering like something out of sci-fi film. It seemed to be some kind of semi-permeable force field employed as a safety device, intended to stop fast moving objects while allowing slow deliberate movement to pass through. Theodore was completely dumb-struck. He knew his uncle's technology was innovative, he wouldn't be nearly so rich if it wasn't, but this was the stuff of miracles!

A worrying thought entered Theodore's mind. Could his Uncle's technology be responsible for his current predicament? If Uncle Rob could make a force field, then who knew the limits of his technological genius? Perhaps he had invented some miracle drug capable of reversing the aging process, and had subliminal messaging machines all around the house making everyone act so weird! But why? Theodore couldn't think of any reason his Uncle Rob would want him to be fourteen again, and he'd been acting weird just like the rest of them! Uncle Rob was a lot of things, but he was certainly no actor. He genuinely thought Theodore had always been this age - just like the rest of them. Whatever it was, Theodore couldn't help but fear the worst. This wasn't magic, it wasn't a dream, and it wasn't a prank. It could well be real bona fide science. And then what hope did he have?

"Theo, honey!" Mom called. Theodore heard the click-clack of her heels making their way up the stairs before she knocked briskly on his door. "What on earth are you doing in there? You're missing your own party!"

“N-not now Mom!” Theo objected, his voice cracking part from plain surprise and part in fear of the conclusion he had just reached.

Mom tutted loudly. “Come on sweetie, everyone’s waiting for you.”

“I’m busy!”

There was a brief silence, Mom seeming to be choosing her own words carefully before she spoke. “Theo, I know you need your privacy...” she began awkwardly.

“Huh?” Theodore responded, baffled by the sudden about-turn in the direction of the conversation.

“...especially now that you’re getting older. But it’s hardly the time and the place.”

The boy’s stomach dropped, the mortifying realization of just what his mother was insinuating instantly making his ears turn a hot humiliated red. “Mom, I wasn’t!” He blurted out his denial at once. He quickly went over to the door, fumbling to open the touch-pad lock as quickly as possible - as if a full and frank disclosure might somehow prove his innocence beyond any reasonable doubt. Unfortunately, when Theodore finally did get the door to swing open, it revealed his skinny pubescent form dressed only in his cutesy seersucker shirt and his oversized boxers.

To her credit, Mom tried to look unphased. “Just put some pants on and come downstairs.” she instructed. “You’re too old to be romping around in your underwear.”

13:54

Theodore sat at the table, picking at the burger in front of him. A banner was strung across the kitchen entrance that read “Congrats Grads” a sign that was meant for both him and Jessica. Some of Jessica's friends had come over to join in the festivities. To Theo's relief it seemed that none of his middle school friends were going to be in attendance. However, he couldn't get over how awkward it was seeing Jessica with her own group. He and Jessica had not shared a social group at the school, yet Theodore still recognized some of them - which made it all the more strange that he was now barely a freshman. Only days prior they had been on equal footing.

Ewan was sitting next to Theodore prattling on about something or another, despite Theo reacting with not so much as a grunt to show that he was listening.

“We could ditch this party and go play right now,” Ewan said, nudging Theo. “C'mon we should, it'll be a lot more fun.”

“Do what now?” Theo asked, finally paying attention to his cousin.

“Pokemon,” Ewan replied. “You brought your game console with you right? Let's go battle already!”

“I don't play that,” Theo muttered, turning his attention back to his burger.

“What are you talking about?” Ewan asked, confused. “You texted me like two nights ago gloating about the new team you just put together.”

“I did?” Theo asked with some surprise. It seemed in this reality he and Ewan were closer than they had ever been. For as long as Theodore had known Ewan, he had always been distant with him. Especially during his high school years on the few occasions he had been forced to spend time with his family and Ewan would follow him around incessantly like a lost puppy trying to impress his older cousin - despite Theodore's best efforts to ignore him.

“Maybe Theo has decided it's time to stop playing kids games,” Jessica chimed in.

“Pokemon is not a kids game, plenty of adults play it too,” Ewan said, resenting his sister's insinuation that he was in any way a little kid.

“Hey Theo, I heard you were enrolling at Holyoke,” one of Jessica's friends asked. “Guess you wanted to follow in your cool big cousin's shoes huh.” she said, playfully shoving Jessica.

“It's not like I want to,” Theo grumbled. “I don't really have a choice.”

“Yeah Jessica is a pretty hard act to follow,” her friend said laughing. Jessica gave her friend a sarcastic look.

“Theo will do great at Holyoke,” Jessica said, sending a confident smile towards Theodore. “Your performance at the

graduation was great. After four years at Holyoke you'll probably be quite the violinist. Who knows, you might even get yourself a scholarship to college out of it."

"Speaking of scholarships, you never told me if you were going to take that full ride you got," Jessica's friend said.

"Oh no I've decided to go to a different school actually. One with a good computer science program." Jessica mentioned which threw Theodore for a loop.

"You mean you're not going to continue with music?" Theodore wondered why in the world she had even attended Holyoke in the first place if she didn't have plans to go pro.

"Piano is fun and all, just not my passion," Jessica said with an airy dismissal. Theodore was taken aback, though if he was being honest he hadn't really given much thought as to what he was going to do after high school either - yet now that didn't seem to matter.

"Jessica is going to follow in her old man's footsteps," Uncle Rob said as he took a seat next to Theodore. "She's already contributed to some product lines at my company. Her work on the force field tech was a big help."

"Force field," Theo said with some surprise. "So that's what that was." Theo muttered, remembering what he had observed back in his room.

"Oh, so you saw it?" Uncle Rob asked with some intrigue, never one to back down from talking about all the zany things his company made. "Still in the experimental phase of course

-but I think when it makes it to market as part of our new and improved child safe house package it's going to make some big waves. It might even become one of our bestsellers.”

Theodore gave no reaction, yet that did not seem to deter his Uncle in the slightest from continuing on with his explanation.

“You see, it will only trigger the child safeguards in rooms where children are detected.” Uncle Rob continued.

“Wait, so the house sees me as a child?” Theodore asked, scrunching up his face.

“Probably not,” Uncle Rob said. “It’s most likely because Charlie is also staying in that room.”

“Hey I'm not a little kid!,” Charlie yelped from further down the table.

“Sure you are,” Ewan snorted. “Little cry baby Charlie who still sleeps with his stuffie,” Ewan then sang out in a mocking tone, flashing a smile at Theodore for approval.

“S-stop it,” Charlie stammered as his face went a little red.

“Ewan shove it - for real,” Jessica chided. “Or do I need to show everyone your stuffed shark, who last time I checked was sitting at the foot of your bed? Mr Nibbles?”

“I don't sleep with him...” Ewan countered, though it was now his turn to turn a little red in the face. “It's just for decoration,” he muttered quickly.

Before anyone could say anything more though, Mom

appeared with a wrapped present in her hand. She placed it on the table in front of Theodore.

“Present time,” Mom sang out. “Now don't worry - this isn't the only thing I got for you. It's just a little something to help my little man who is becoming a big man in front of my eyes,” Mom cooed..

Theodore furrowed his brow as he slipped out of his Mom's embrace. He looked at the square package in front of him wrapped in festive paper. He lazily started to unwrap the paper, finding a metal box that had the name of some fashion brand on the front.

“What is it?” Theo asked.

“Just open up the top,” Mom instructed. Theo opened the top of the metal box and was met with a variety of items. There was a can of body spray and cologne as well as some aftershave. Also included were a razor and a hair brush, as well as some nose and fingernail clippers.

“It's a grooming kit,” Mom said cheerfully, thinking it was a perfectly appropriate gift for her burgeoning teenage son. The subtle implication that it was time for him to start taking some more care of his hygiene wasn't lost on Theo. He stared at the contents of the box apprehensively.

“Well go on, try some of it on - see if you like how it smells.” Mom instructed in an expectant tone.

“She thinks you smell dude.” Ewan laughed.

“I do not smell,” Theodore yelled back.

“Ewan quiet.” Uncle Robb tutted. “No one is saying Theo smells, but he is getting to an age when he has to start taking care of himself a little more. It's a sign of maturity.”

“That's right,” Mom said before she gave a sort of awkward look towards Theo. “Although I will say you do have a little bit of an odor right now dear.” Mom said, placing a hand on Theodore's shoulder. “It must have been from your accident with your pants at school.”

“Theo had an accident in his pants?” Luke, Theodore's five year old cousin interjected, which elicited some chuckles from the table.

“Not that kind of accident dear,” Mom clarified. “He slipped in something, which is why we had to borrow your sweater.”

It had all been a little much for Theodore, as he felt his face start to burn red. She wasn't exactly wrong. He had only just noticed a lingering scent, realizing in this exact moment that it was coming from his shirt. But did she really have to announce it in front of everyone? What's more, it had been her fault anyway! He had planned to take a shower, but she had been the one to hurry him to come down to this stupid party. He didn't need his Mom to tell him how to make himself presentable like some clueless fourteen year old! He had figured all that stuff out just fine without her help the first time around!

Just get out of there

Give her a piece of your mind

Chapter 4

Chapter Four

Theodore got to his feet, making his way to the stairs.

“Theo, where are you going?” Mom called after him, completely oblivious to his feelings.

"I'm going to take a shower!" he yipped, desperate to get out of there. He heard a few titters from the crowd, mixed in with a couple of adoring coos, quickly running up the stairs and into the safety of the bathroom.

The boy soon found that showering in his new form was... interesting to say the least. Looking his pre-freshman frame over in the mirror that morning had been one thing, but this task required getting acquainted with it in a much more intimate way. Cringing at the feeling of his graceless spindly legs only just starting to sprout with thin pale blond hair, narrow shoulders dotted with the occasional angry red acne spot, and the greasy reservoirs of oil stored behind his ears, Theodore washed up as quickly as he could - only remaining under the water long enough to efficiently scrub away his supposed stench from each every odor-oozing adolescent nook and cranny.

He didn't really smell, did he? Theodore's first early adolescent years had indeed been marked by a persistent personal hygiene problem, something his bullies at Holyoke never ceased to torment him with, but he'd long since cured that oversight with a regular program of antiperspirant and a

subtle sophisticated cologne. Mom had tried to soften the blow with the comment about his “accident”, but it was clear that in this new reality he wasn’t quite so diligent - more interested in Pokemon than perfume. The gift was clearly a necessary one.

Finishing up, Theo stepped out of the shower, quickly wrapping himself in a large fluffy white towel. He hurried quickly back to the guest bedroom, locking the door behind him. He sat on the bed for a long time and stared at the force field shimmering in the window, pondering his predicament. His uncle’s tech experiments must have surely been the culprit, but could any technology really have such power? It was as if Theo had found himself in an entirely separate reality - one where he was and always had been exactly four years younger. His body was different, his clothes were different, his relatives even seemed to have an entirely fresh set of memories tailor made for his new humiliatingly diminished status. It was like he’d fallen into a parallel universe!

Lying back on the bed, Theo picked up the fox stuffie, holding it close for comfort. He suddenly felt very vulnerable, as if he might burst into tears at any moment. A niggling part of his brain told him he was being ridiculous, that he was allowing himself to fall susceptible to the cocktail of confusing volatile hormones freshly zipping through his fourteen-year-old system, that he needed to focus on finding a solution! But no. He had good reason to be upset. He had good reason to be devastated! For four years he’d slogged

through that hell hole of a school, knowing that at the end of it he'd be free to cut himself loose and live life on his own terms. Now he was facing another four year sentence. Parole denied.

Slowly drip-drying laid out on the bed like a lifeless corpse receiving mourners at a funeral, Theo listened to the party die down and the front door opening and closing repeatedly as the guests left one by one. Eventually, the boy found the energy to wander once more into the land of the living, finding a fresh pair of red sweatpants and a matching hoodie to pull on over his damp hair. There was no use sulking like a real irrational overwrought fourteen year old. He needed to take action!

If there was one place Theo might find answers, it was his Uncle Rob's computer. If he really was suffering the side effects of some bizarre new tech product - or, even worse, a deliberate plot to rob him of his adulthood - then the kid may yet find an explanation in his Uncle's cache of confusing code and experimental software. If he was really lucky, he might even find a hint of how to reverse things.

Reinvigorated by the possibility, Theo sprinted down the hallway - his bare feet slapping noisily against the wooden floorboards. Hurrying hopefully through the open door however, he was frustrated to see someone already seated at his uncle's vast mahogany desk, Charlie sitting cross legged in the large leather executive office chair. He acknowledged Theo with a brief smile before instantly turning his attention back to the computer, seemingly occupied clicking through

different wallpaper designs in a game of The Sims.

“Are you almost done?” Theo asked impatiently, rolling his eyes at the asinine activity Charlie had chosen to occupy his screen time.

“I only just started!” Charlie objected, not even looking away from the screen. “You can watch me if you want,” he offered nonetheless. “I made a Sim of you already. He’s a teenager.”

“I’ve got something important to do!” Theo snapped. “I don’t have time to play dollhouses.”

“It’s not dollhouses.” Charlie denied, sounding a little offended. “They have jobs and everything. And you can design the whole-”

“I don’t care.” Theo interrupted, walking up and going right ahead trying to wrestle the mouse from Charlie’s grip.

“Let go!” Charlie whined, fighting back with a vengeance. Prior to his regression, it would have been an easy task for Theo to overcome the ten-year-old, but even though there was still a good four years between them Charlie now seemed capable of at least a token resistance. “It’s. My. Turn!” he grunted in frustration, clinging to the mouse like a cat with its prey even as Theo attempted to dethrone him from the coveted computer seat and take it for himself.

“What’s going on here?” Uncle Rob interrupted, suddenly appearing in the door frame. His eyebrows were furrowed in disapproval, far from pleased to find his two nephews wrestling rambunctiously atop his expensive office chair.

“Boys?”

“Theo’s picking on me - even though it’s my turn!” Charlie objected in a whine.

“No I’m not!” Theo defended himself, sounding just as whiny. “He’s hogging the computer!”

Uncle Rob tutted. “Theo, I told Charlie he could play his game on my computer. Did you even ask me?”

Theo’s cheeks went red, realizing how readily he resorted to the kind of whiny entitled moaning not even becoming a kid half his real age. “No...” he admitted. “But can I?” he quickly begged. “I’ve got an um...computer science project.” he came up with quickly. “For this competition.”

“Maybe when Charlie’s done.” Uncle Rob mediated. “Or tomorrow morning.” He pointed out the door, showing Theo an uncharacteristically stern expression. “Why don’t you go play with your cousins? I know Ewan’s been keen to talk to you all day.”

The boy gave an appropriately teenaged sigh. “Fine...” he moaned, stomping out the door.

Theodore walked down the hall towards his own room in an absolutely foul mood, the incident a stark reminder that at this age he was under his Mother and his Uncle’s authority.

“Theo,” the tiny voice of Luke called out as Theodore passed by the younger boy’s open door. The boy sat upon his carpet dressed in a small fireman’s coat and hard hat with a toy

firetruck clasped in his hands. Luke got up eagerly, scurrying up to Theodore standing in the doorway. "Want to play fireman with me?" Luke asked, his eyes growing big and saucer-like in excitement at the prospect of finding a playmate.

"No." Theodore replied curtly, which caused Luke's face to fall a little.

"P-please," Luke whimpered a little as he held the firetruck in his hands out towards Theodore. "I'll even let ya be the driver - since you're older," Luke said, offering up what in his mind had to be the most envious position in his little game.

Theodore was not above feeling just a tinge of empathy for his younger cousin. He even considered humoring the younger boy to pass the time until Charlie finally decided to vacate the computer. But no.

"Sorry buddy, not right now," Theodore said. Whatever small amount of guilt Theodore felt at dashing his little cousin's hopes was not enough to actually sway him into agreeing. Theodore walked off quickly. In his mind he had tried to let his cousin down gently, yet he wasn't going to stick around lest his guilty conscience grow to the point where he would actually give in.

Theodore got back to his room, flopping down onto his bed with his arms and legs splayed out. He felt so helpless at the moment. Here he was, going through the worst thing that has ever happened to him in his life, and the one thing he could do to try and fix it was now out of his grasp. And it was all

Charlie's fault! But what was different about that? It seemed everything bad in Theodore's life was inextricably linked back to Charlie.

“There you are,” Ewan said, interrupting Theodore's private pity party as he stepped into the room, his game console in his hand as he sat on Charlie's bed across from Theodore. “Are you ready to play now or what?”

“Just go away,” Theodore muttered, rolling over to show his back to Ewan.

“What is up with you?” Ewan said. “I overheard my Dad giving you the business. Is that what's bothering you?”

“I don't care about that,” Theodore yelled, sitting up with a scowl. “I need to get on the computer, but Charlie is playing his stupid little game.” Theodore grumbled bitterly, relishing the opportunity to vent about his little brother to the one person who wouldn't turn it around on Theodore and chide him to be nicer to Charlie.

“Oh yeah, he's always playing that game. It's totally for little kids and girls, Jessica plays it with Luke all the time.” Ewan snorted. Theodore decided not to point out that most people would probably view the Sims as far more mature than the Pokemon game currently displayed on the screen of Ewan's own handheld.

“The only fun part of that game is when you trap people with the walls,” Ewan said. “But I mean only for like five minutes,” He added quickly.

“Pffft,” Theodore exhaled as he laid back onto the bed. “He probably has me trapped in some walls right now.” hemused, imagining his tiny virtual avatar's cries of desperation falling upon deaf ears.

“Reminds me of Luke's playpen.” Ewan snickered as he clicked away at the buttons on his own game.

“Luke has a playpen?” Theodore asked, lifting his head in curiosity. Even as young as Luke was compared to the two of them, a playpen seemed infantile even for him.

“Well not really,” Ewan clarified. “It was just some new tech that my Dad was developing for their line of toddler applications. He sometimes makes Luke test them out for him - he calls it a stress test.”

Ewan looked over to the fox stuffie sitting on the bed next to him and picked it up, placing it atop a dresser. “It's like this,” Ewan said, picking up the control tablet for the room from the bedside table, deciding a demonstration was in order. He tapped away on the touchscreen for a moment before looking at Theodore. “Go ahead, try to get it,” Ewan instructed.

Theodore got up and tried to grab the fox from its place, but found his hand was stopped by what felt like the same invisible obstacle he'd felt before. Theodore tried to exert more force, but found the invisible barrier too strong. He pulled back his hand and delivered a swift blow, trying to punch through it. He let out a loud yelp of frustration, feeling strangely jealous at the thought that the toy now belonged to Charlie.

“Try to go slow,” Ewan interrupted. Theodore moved his hand slowly towards the fox and found that he was easily able to bypass the invisible barrier as he grasped the fox. He snuggled it against his chest, his frustration dissipating.

“I can even up the intensity, since it's still in the experimental phase,” Ewan said, plucking the fox out of Theodore's hand and placing it back atop the dresser. Theodore felt a momentary flare of adolescent rage, but suppressed it. “Alright, try again.” Ewan instructed. This time, Theodore found that he had to move his hand at a snail's pace to get the fox.

“It's kind of cool I guess,” Theodore said as he removed his hand, leaving the fox inside of the invisible barrier. “I can see how it would be useful for keeping a little kid contained, or like keeping something out of their reach.”

“That gives me an idea,” Ewan said as a devious look spread across his face.

“I don't really know.” Theodore said once Ewan had explained his plan in full, feeling that it might be a little too mean.

“Oh come on, it's time for little Charlie to grow up a little! I mean, what ten year old still sleeps with a stuffed animal? If anything we'll be helping him.”

“I don't think my Mom or your Dad would see it that way.” Theodore said skeptically.

“It's not like we won't give it back to him. It's just a little prank. You know, for fun,” Ewan compromised.

Shoot down the idea

Agree to the prank

Chapter 5

Chapter Five

“I guess,” Theodore said. As much as he knew this was going to be upsetting to Charlie, he couldn't put aside his own resentment for his little brother. Not to mention, it did sound like a good bit of revenge. Hadn't Charlie done the same thing to him by denying him access to the computer? If anything, maybe it was time Charlie got a taste of his own medicine.

With their plan decided, Ewan shifted focus back to getting Theodore to finally battle him in Pokemon. Theodore was surprised to find his own game console tucked away in his suitcase, and was even more surprised to find upon booting it up that he had his own team of buffed up monsters that would only be possible if the player had put in some serious time in training them up. As the two battled, Theodore felt himself getting into it. For the first time that day he felt like he was actually able to blow off some steam and forget about his problems for a moment.

Charlie entered the room some time later, bringing a pause to Theodore's brief respite.

“You guys battling?” Charlie asked, spying the game console in the two other boy's hands. He went over and sat next to Ewan to peer over at the screen. “Can I watch?”

“No,” Ewan said, pulling the game console away out of the boy's eyesight. “This is just for me and Theo. Besides, I thought you were busy playing on the computer?”

“Oh, Mom said I had to get off. Besides, Uncle Rob had some work he had to get done.” Charlie gave a brief pause before his eyes lit up again. “Oh yeah, I was supposed to tell you that Mom wants everyone down in the living room for a family movie night - but she said we should all get our pajamas on first.” Charlie said as he got up to go towards his suitcase, noticing the fox sitting on the dresser.

Charlie walked over to the fox, giving a suspicious look back towards the other two. It had moved from the spot he had placed it earlier in the day. As he went to grab it, he found his hands blocked. Charlie made a curious face as he went to try again. Theodore observed that the more Charlie tried, the more frantic his attempts became - just as Theodore's had been.

“W-w-whats going on here?” Charlie stammered, still trying to grasp at his coveted companion.

“Oh looks like Mr. Fox wants to be left alone,” Ewan said in a mocking tone, getting up from the bed with the control tablet in his hand. “Maybe he thinks you're a little too big for him.”

“You guys did this?” Charlie asked, looking to Ewan and then to Theodore, a betrayed look on his face. “G-give him back,” Charlie whined before turning back to the fox as he began to swipe against the invisible barriers. Tears were now starting to form in Charlie's eyes as he turned back towards Theodore. “Make Ewan give him back please,” Charlie pleaded to Theodore.

On one hand, Theodore could see the prank had run its course, yet seeing Charlie's crumpled little face as tears fell down his cheeks made Theo feel pity for his brother. It was not out of sympathy however, instead being borne out of spite. The only reason Charlie was reacting like this was because, unlike Theodore, he had been babied and coddled by their mother all his life. Ewan had been exactly right. Charlie needed to grow up - and to do that it was time for some tough love.

“Quit being such a baby all the time,” Theodore said gruffly as he rolled his eyes.

“I'm not a baby,” Charlie said, stamping his foot in frustration.

“We'll give him back,” Ewan said. “But only if you prove you still need him.”

“What do you mean?” Charlie asked, his voice quivering.

“Admit you're a little baby who still needs his stuffie,” Ewan said with a satisfied smirk. “Go on and say ‘I'm a widdle baby’ just like that and you can have it.”

“I won't, you can't make me,” Charlie said, the corners of his mouth turning downwards as his chest began to heave up and down.

Ewan merely shrugged, showing that he was not going to budge unless Charlie fulfilled his part of the bargain. Meanwhile, the boy was growing more and more panicked.

“I'm a widdle baby,” Charlie finally whispered. Ewan held his

hand to his ear, leaning a bit forward.

“What was that? Couldn't hear you,” Ewan said with a laugh.

“I'M A WIDDLE BABY,” Charlie blurted out before breaking down into full-on tears. Ewan let out another laugh as Theodore looked on with his arms crossed and a muddled expression on his face. He shook his head a little. Theodore was starting to feel like this wasn't really the prank he had been sold on.

Theodore took a step to go and grab the tablet from Ewan's hand, but was stopped by a knock at the door.

“Charlie honey are you alright in there?” Mom's voice asked from the other side. Yet Charlie gave no response as he kept on crying hysterically. The door opened and Mom walked in, immediately seizing upon the fact that something was very wrong. Charlie ran to his Mom wrapping his arms around her.

“They won't give him back,” Charlie cried out, yet his voice was muffled as he had buried his face into his Mom's body. Before Mom could even begin to question the other two boys, Uncle Rob appeared in the doorway.

“Hey, I just got a distress alert from this room on my computer. Is somebody hurt here?”

“They took my fox,” Charlie weeped. “I can't get him,”

Uncle Rob spied the fox on the dresser and rolled his eyes a little. “What is the matter with you two?” he said, giving Theodore and Ewan a displeased look as he walked over to

the dresser. Uncle Rob made a grab for the fox but found his hand stopped by the invisible barrier. He pulled back his hand a little before looking over at Ewan, who still had the control panel limply grasped in his hand at his side. “Oh, I get it now,” Uncle Rob said, walking over and snatching the tablet out from Ewan's hand. He made a couple of swipes on the tablet before motioning with his head towards Mom, who proceeded to grab the Fox and give it to Charlie. He clutched it close to his chest as he continued to whimper, his crying having subsided.

“Ewan, why do you have administrative permissions attached to your profile?” Uncle Rob asked, looking up from the tablet.

“I uhh well,” Ewan dribbled out, squirming under the furious gaze of his father.

“Is everything okay here?” Jessica asked, poking her head into the room.

“Everything is fine,” Mom said, picking some flannel pants and a white long sleeve undershirt out of Charlie's suitcase before ushering Charlie over to Jessica. “Do you think you could take Charlie and Luke downstairs for me?”

“Sure,” Jessica said, putting an arm around her younger cousin. “C'mon buddy we can get nice and cozy on the couch together.” she said as the two began to walk away.

“Go ahead and start the movie without us,” Mom called out before shutting the door and turning around to face the guilty boys in the room. “I'm hoping to hear a darn good

explanation out of the two of you,” she said, her tone turning dire.

Theodore could only gulp, seeing that his day was only going to get worse.

Mom had been furious. Their weak excuses falling on deaf ears, she'd subjected the pouting pair of bullies to a proper dressing down - making sure they felt suitably ashamed of their infantile behavior before banishing them to their respective rooms for the night. According to Mom, Theodore was lucky he was staying at his uncle's, or else he would have spent the remainder of the night with his nose pressed against the living room corner where everyone could see how bad he'd been. That particular remark had drawn a muted titter from Ewan, but his superior attitude was short lived, Mom informing the pair that neither boy was too old to go across her knee.

Theodore knew that was nonsense, of course. Mom might have been cold, and she might have been crazy, but she would never actually hit him. Still, despite Theodore's adolescent angst, she somehow knew how to elicit a healthy helping of shame in the boy. Excluded from the family movie night and confined to their bedrooms, Theodore now found the tools of his own cruel prank turned against him - the touchpad on the door now steadfastly refusing to recognize his fingerprint, and the forcefield in the window warding against any and all irresponsible escape attempts. Similarly shut out of his

console, Theodore had nothing to do but brood - staring sulkily at the shimmering force field that had earned him this fate.

Somehow, he couldn't help but think about Charlie. The kid had really freaked out, and all over that silly fox plushie. Theo thought back to himself at that age, wondering if he had been quite so emotional - but no. Looking back, Theodore was quite certain he'd only cried once between the ages of eight and eighteen. He had been eleven years old at a violin recital, having just royally screwed up his performance in front of the entire elementary school. He'd hidden in the bathroom for half an hour before he'd managed to get over himself, terrified that some other kids might see him crying, and even more terrified of what his Mom might say.

Theo felt a sickly nauseous stab of jealousy deep in his stomach, scrunching up his fist. He couldn't possibly imagine bawling out big blubbery tears over some stupid toy at Charlie's age. His Mom would have told him to get over it and pull himself together, yet she seemed perfectly happy for Charlie to burst into tears every hour of every day! The kid was so coddled, he'd probably wet his pants if he ever had to deal with anything close to what Theodore was made to put up with. Not that that was ever likely to happen. Mom treated Charlie with the tenderest most juvenile of kid gloves, insulating from even the slightest inconvenience, and the ten year old was quite happy to coast along on the good life! He acted like he was two years old, and everyone else was expected to walk on eggshells - treating him like a pampered

little prince lest he run to Mommy!

As the hours ticked by, Theodore only grew more and more resentful, pacing around his bedroom cell like a tiger prowling up and down his cage. He had once again resorted to staring into nothing sitting at the end of his bed when the door finally opened, Mom leading a yawning Charlie back into the room. The stuffed fox still cuddled affectionately into the crook of his arm, the ten year old wandered sleepily up to his bed, happily accepting a hug from his Mommy before he burrowed under the covers. Theodore watched the adorable scene with a festering resentment, a warning glare from his mother keeping his boiling anger simmering just below the lid.

“Theodore.” she instructed curtly when she was finished, pointing to the door. “A word outside, please.”

“Can’t I just go to sleep?” Theo moaned. “You already chewed me out.”

“Now, Theodore.” Mom instructed. The teenager moaned, getting to his feet and deliberately stomping as noisily as he could as he schlepped his way out into the corridor.

“What?” he moaned, his tone dripping with disrespect.

Mom firmly closed the door, shielding Charlie from earshot. “We need to talk about your behavior today.” she said in a sinister tone. “I don’t know what you thought you were playing at, but-”

“I know, I know!” Theodore interrupted impatiently. “I

already told you it wasn't even my idea!"

"And do you really think that kind of attitude is going to be accepted at Holyoke?" Mom snapped right back. Theo's demeanor shifted at once, the remainder that he would soon be returning to the hated boarding school filling him with dread. "It's a prestigious school, Theodore." Mom continued. "Not every kid gets a chance at that kind of helping hand in life. The last thing you need is to mess it up with some absurd attempt at silly teenage rebellion!"

Theodore was silent and glassy eyed, staring off into space. The reality of his situation loomed a lot more threateningly than any lecture his Mom could give him. He couldn't stop thinking about it. The impatient egomaniacal teachers, the stupid knuckle dragging students three times his size, the loneliness of it all. He'd have to do it again. The whole thing. For four long, long years.

"Do I make myself clear?" Mom demanded, putting a finger under Theo's chin to force him to meet her gaze. "Hmm?"

The boy scrunched up his face in defiance. "No!" he yelled.

"What did you say?" Mom demanded.

"I said no!" he repeated, gathering his courage. "Maybe... maybe I don't even want to go to Holyoke!" he screamed, the words he wished he'd said four years ago tumbling relentlessly off his tongue. "Maybe I don't care about...about music...about any of this stuff!"

"Theodore!" Mom exclaimed in shock. "You don't mean..."

“Well I do!” Theo interrupted, an embarrassing voice break punctuating the exclamation somewhat impeding the dramatic point. To his surprise, he could actually feel a couple of stray tears gathering in the corners of his eyes. He quickly wiped them away, desperate not to show any weakness.

Mom’s hard disciplinarian frown faded away for just a second, a look of deep concern instead passing across her face. “Theodore...” she repeated. “If you’re nervous about the boarding, you know we’ll always be there for you? Me, and your cousins, and your brother Charlie...”

The mention of his brother’s name was like a venomous fang, piercing Theo’s heart and poisoning any honest confession of his feelings that might yet have been recovered from the conversation. “No!” he shouted petulantly, filled with spite. The only thing he cared about now was hurting her as much as he possibly could. “Don’t you get it? It’s you I’m sick of!” he screamed.

He turned his back on her, running through the bedroom door, slamming it behind him again, and diving under his covers. Mom didn’t try to follow.

“Theo?” Charlie’s little voice called out in concern. He felt a small hand prodding at his side, but he only groaned in response, holding his comforter in front of his face like a shield. “Are you okay?”

“Go away...” Theo groaned. He knew he was fully crying now, but he refused to acknowledge that reality, as if keeping

the sheets held stubbornly over his sodden face would make it not so.

“Were you fighting with Mom again?” Charlie asked innocently. “We could talk about it, if you want...”

Theo momentarily removed the covers from his face, scowling in fury at his stupid, condescending, interfering, little brother. “FUCK OFF!” he screamed, and smushed his face into his mattress. He scrunched his eyes closed, willing himself to sleep.

Chapter 6

Chapter Six

Sunday June 8th: 8:06

“Teddy...” Charlie’s gentle voice coaxed, shaking him awake by the shoulders. “Teddy! It’s time to get up!”

Theodore blearily opened his eyes, his little brother’s smiling face slowly coming into focus. He frowned, vaguely remembering the events of the previous night. A wave of regret came over him like a tsunami as he remembered each embarrassing emotional outburst, his contrition only compounded by the genuine brotherly look of adoration on Charlie’s face. It certainly didn’t seem like he was holding a grudge. The bitter hormone-fueled envy that had fuelled Theodore before now seemed entirely alien to the boy, as if all the angst and rancor had been drained out of him overnight. Why had he been so angry? And why had he pulled that awful prank? And why had he said all those terrible things?

He let out a moan, a little surprised by the childish treble tone of his voice. Blinking, he sat up in his bed, looking around in confusion at the guest room. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but something was definitely off. Suddenly struck with a strange unbidden sense of fear, he brought his small spindly arms up around to hug his own chest, surprised to find the fox stuffie nestled snugly in his lap.

“Are you alright?” Charlie asked in concern, going right

ahead and putting a hand up against his forehead as if to check his temperature. “You’re acting kinda weird.”

“I’m not weird...” Theodore objected, cringing again at the sickly sweet syrupy pitch with which he’d spoken. Feeling like he’d got something stuck in his throat, he coughed, holding up a small pudgy hand to his smooth girlish throat. He shifted where he sat, a cacophony of strange sensations overwhelming his senses. Why was Charlie looking at him like that? And what was that strange feeling between his legs? And why was everything so...big?

As he stared towards the large full length mirror on the door, the inescapable conclusion hit him like a freight train. There were his bright watery blue eyes, framed between a round apple red cheeks and a pudgy pug nose - staring gormlessly at his brother. There was his curly mop of hair, now entirely blond, styled adorably into messy caramel tufts. There was his stripey blue and white button-up pajama top, wrinkled and disheveled from his restless tossing and turning throughout the night. There was no denying it. He’d gotten younger again. Much younger - his new body no more than five or six years old.

“You’re not sick are you?” Charlie continued. “Mom’ll be pretty disappointed if we can’t go to the ceremony.”

Theodore was taken aback, the mention of a ceremony throwing him for a loop. “Wh-what day is it?” he squeaked.

“Sunday.” Charlie answered. “But we’ve got to go to your school, remember? For the graduation?”

Graduation? Theodore snapped his head around to look at the alarm clock, the digital display in the corner confirming that it was indeed Sunday the 8th of June - just like it had been yesterday. But surely that was impossible? Then again, he'd thought getting younger was impossible too.

"I have to talk to Mom!" the boy demanded, scrambling out of bed.

He felt a cold air brush against his little legs as he crawled out from under his covers, letting out an embarrassed squeak at the sight of the thick crinkly pair of Goodnites strapped around his waist. Even worse, they seemed to be wet, a vague yellow stain and a slight sag clearly communicating his nocturnal accident to his now big brother. Whatever strange technology was causing Theodore's regressions, it had got the details perfect - right down to the smallest humiliation. Theo really had wet the bed up to the age of seven. Of course, the first time around, he'd gotten over it before his little brother had arrived on the scene. Completely humiliated by the exposure, Theodore froze still under Charlie's gaze, certain he would make fun of him.

"Oh, is that why you were acting so weird?" Charlie commented nonchalantly, nodding at the soiled protection.

"It's not my fault!" Theodore instantly blurted out defensively.

Charlie just shrugged. "I know." he said, seemingly confused why Theo was just standing there staring at him. "What, you need help or something?"

Theodore felt his cheeks burn bright hot chili red, so embarrassed he thought he might pass out. “NO!” he exclaimed, and with that he sprinted from the room, making for the safety of the bathroom.

To say Theodore's morning had been a whirlwind would be the understatement of the century. The most jarring thing this time around had been how all over him his Mother had been. He had only just gotten the sodden Goodnite off before she had burst through the bathroom door with his outfit already in hand.

“How's my big kindergarten graduate,” she cooed, grabbing him and delivering a flurry of kisses to his cheeks.

“Mom stooooop,” Theodore mewled as he peeled himself away from her, flustered and red faced from the sudden onslaught of affection, before remembering he was naked from the waist down! The sudden realization caused him to let out of yip of embarrassment as he covered himself.

“Now let's get you looking all spiffy for your ceremony today,” Mom said, not giving an ounce of thought for Theodore's desire for some modesty.

Thankfully, the first thing she pulled out of the pile of clothes was a pair of underwear, which Theodore snatched up immediately - only realizing they were decorated with cutesy little race cars that had big stupid smiles on their faces upon pulling them up to his waist. Theodore could only shake his

head a little. In the end, he vastly preferred them to nothing - or the crinkly underwear he had woken up in. She then got him dressed in a similar pair of navy blue chinos like he had worn the previous day - despite Theodore's protest that he was capable of dressing himself. He may be a little kid now, but he wasn't so little that he needed her help with such a task.

“Oh I know you're a big boy, but I need to make sure you look absolutely perfect for today,” Mom had said as she threaded his arms through the sleeves of a light blue button up shirt.

Once she had the buttons done up, she turned towards the sink, giving Theodore a moment to breathe. He looked down to see an embroidered Cookie Monster positioned on his right breast waving back at him. Theodore scrunched up his face a little, yet didn't have time to dwell on his positively kiddy attire as his Mom then turned back around with a spray bottle in hand, giving his hair a spritz before attacking it with a brush. Theodore let out little moans and yips every time the brush got caught on a snag.

“Oh I just don't think we are going to be doing anything with those curls of yours,” Mom finally said, before ushering Theodore out of the bathroom.

Down at breakfast, the embarrassment did not let up as Mom had tied a washcloth around Theodore's neck as a makeshift bib. Theodore had protested loudly that he didn't need a bib only to be met with a quick shush from his Mom - explaining that she didn't want him accidentally dribbling any milk onto

his nice shirt.

Ewan had wasted no time in making some snide remarks about it before being shut down by some threats from Jessica. It was apparent to Theodore that his status as Ewan's cool older cousin had been completely flipped now. Ewan's remarks had cut Theodore, leaving him red faced as he hid his face into his arms onto the table.

“Don't listen to him,” Charlie had whispered, patting Theodore on the back. “You're going to be in first grade. Nobody can say you're a baby now.” Theodore however had found little solace in the reassuring words of his former little brother. The indignity of it all was too much to bear, especially coming from Charlie of all people.

Theodore now found himself sat in the auditorium at his old Elementary school, sitting next to the rest of the soon to be kindergarten graduates. All of them were dressed to the nines with mini graduation caps on their heads as parents darted about trying to get the best angle for their photos as the ceremony proceeded. Theodore could see Uncle Rob standing near the back, using his impressive height to record a video capturing every mortifying moment.

“Okay parents,” one of the kindergarten teachers said, taking the microphone. “Now comes the part of the ceremony where our wonderful scholars will get to show off their talents for you. Some of them have formed groups while others will be performing on their own, such as our first performer. Lets all give a big round of applause to Theodore Parks”

Theodore's eyes went wide upon hearing his name as he sat glued to his chair.

“Go on Teddy, it's your turn,” another teacher said, kneeling next to him.

“I don't know what to do,” Theodore whispered in a panic.

“Just do what you've been practicing silly!” the teacher replied before scooting him off the chair. Theodore walked with shaky knees to where the other teacher was standing. He looked out into the expectant crowd, his sides aching with anxiety as he still had no idea of what he was supposed to do.

“Here you go champ,” a man's voice said as Theodore looked to see the face of his old elementary school music teacher, Mr. Kerns holding out a violin towards him. Theodore was shocked at first to see the man looking somewhat older than he remembered - the man's brown bushy beard speckled with bits of gray. Theodore accepted the violin with shaky hands.

“What do I play?” Theodore asked.

“Don't be nervous,” Mr. Kerns said with a chuckle, noting Theodore's shaky demeanor. “Just play Twinkle Twinkle Little Star just like we've been practicing,” Mr. Kerns said, handing Theodore the bow. “You're going to knock em' dead kid.”

Mr. Kerns then moved back, leaving Theodore to face the deafening silence that had settled upon the auditorium. Theodore pursed his lips before bringing the bow to the strings. He felt a wave of confidence hit him as he pulled it

across the strings. The song should be no problem for him. A couple of days ago he had been playing selections that had been worlds away, after all. Theodore however found that, unlike before, the well practiced techniques that he had spent years honing were now a little harder for him to access. The bow felt clumsy in his hands, and his fingers felt awkward on the neck, which all came to a head when he pulled the bow across the strings - letting out a screechy note.

Theodore came to a halt, grimacing before trying to recover as best he could. When the song had thankfully come to an end Theodore stood listening to the crowd applause. He looked out to see Charlie and Luke clapping excitedly letting out a few cheers. Jessica was grinning as she gave him two big thumbs up. He then saw his Mom, who was dabbing some tears out of the corner of her eyes.

Theodore took his seat feeling terrible about his performance. Unlike yesterday, when he was confident that if he had just a little bit of prep time he would have performed flawlessly, today he could muster no excuse. He had performed exactly as one would expect from an unpracticed amateur. He should have been able to play such a song with no issue.

The last four years of his life seemed to evaporate in an instant. All the long rehearsals and time spent endlessly practicing scales and fingering, and for what? Theodore didn't even know why he seemed to care so much. He wasn't even sure if he even liked the violin anymore. Sure, when he had first started he had loved it. His interest had been sparked by seeing a performance on TV right around the time he had

actually been six. Listening to the notes play out in rhythmic succession had stirred something in him. After some begging, his Mom had finally gotten him one and signed him up for lessons and Theodore had taken to it with enthusiasm. Each year he had gotten better all in pursuit of being able to play like that performance he had experienced. Yet upon getting to Holyoke, he found his fondness for the instrument drying up - and suddenly the passion he had so vigorously held became a dying ember. Holyoke had seen to that.

The ceremony eventually came to an end. Theodore was greeted by his family with congratulations all around. His Mom wrapped him up into a big hug with some more kisses to his face. Shortly thereafter, Theodore then found himself standing in front of Mr. Kerns as his Mom held his hand. Theodore was looking at the ground as the adults talked. Some phrases such as “real potential” and “rigorous study” floated through Theodore's ears.

Suddenly Theodore felt an odd sensation. Out of nowhere it seemed a pressure had built up in his bladder. He needed to go to the bathroom, and fast!

“Mom,” Theodore whispered, trying to get her attention, yet she seemed too wrapped up in her conversation to notice. “Moom,” Theodore said this time a little louder - still his Mother seemed too preoccupied. Theodore was starting to worry that he wasn't going to be able to hold it. He took a deep breath. “Mommy” he yelped, his panic seeming to take over as he let out the childish phrase.

“Hmmm.” Mom said looking down at him finally shaken from her conversation. “What is it sweetie?”

“I uh have to go to the bathroom,” Theodore muttered.

“Oh well let me see if Charlie can take you,” she said looking around for her other son. Theodore felt his cheeks flush red at the thought of his little brother having to accompany him to the bathroom.

“I can do it myself,” Theodore huffed, as he broke his mother's hold on his hand turning on his heels towards the bathroom - not taking a second to wait for his Mom's approval.

Theodore slinked out into the hall, his need becoming increasingly dire. He was in such a hurry that he didn't even notice the kid standing near the corner until Theodore had run face first into him. Theodore staggered backwards, rubbing his face a little, before looking up to see two boys standing against the wall. One of them had a rat tail hanging down onto his shoulder while the other boy had a patchy shaved head. Neither one of them could have been older than eight.

“Watch where you're going, dingus.” the rat tailed boy barked.

“S-sorry,” Theodore stammered as he tried to move past the boys. The two boys gave a cold stare to Theodore before the boy with the shaved head smirked.

“Nice shirt,” the boy with the shaved head laughed as he prodded his finger into Theodore's chest.

Theodore looked down, only for the other boy to bring his finger up, flicking Theodore's nose and causing both the boys to laugh.

“St-op it,” Theodore mewled, rubbing his nose a little.

“You're that violin kid ain't ya?” the rat tailed boy asked.

“So what?” Theodore asked, furrowing his brow a little.

“You know you suck at playing,” the boy responded. Theodore shook his head. It's not that he entirely disagreed with the review, yet Theodore was also confident that these two kids wouldn't know a good performance if it smacked them in the side of the face - so what did he care what they thought of him? Theodore went to move past them again, but was stopped by the boy with the shaved head.

“Where you going?” The boy said as he gripped down onto Theodore's shoulder.

“The bathroom,” Theodore grumbled, once more trying to sidestep out of the boys' way.

“Oh really,” the shaved head boy said as she shoved Theo against the wall, trapping him in between two garbage cans. “What, about to pee your pants or something?”

“Betcha he is,” the other boy crowed. “Maybe he'll do it right here.”

Both boys laughed as they began stabbing their fingers into Theodore, chiding him not to have an accident.

Theodore was getting to the point that he might actually wet his pants as he tried to shield himself from the painful pokes of the other boy's fingers. He wanted to fight back, to try to barrel into them with all his strength just so he could run away. But after yesterday Theodore knew that whatever tactic he could come up with was pointless if he didn't actually have the strength to pull it off. Theodore looked around, before spotting Charlie a little farther down the hall. His face was buried in a book and he didn't seem to notice the ruckus happening. Theodore couldn't. There was simply no way he was going to reduce himself to actually having to call out for his little brother to rescue him. But then, Theodore felt a tiny spurt of pee slip out into his underwear.

Cry for help

Make one final escape attempt

Chapter 7

Chapter Seven

He knew he had no choice. Theodore gritted his teeth.

“C-Charlie,” he squeaked out. Charlie looked up for a moment, not realizing what he was seeing, before his eyes went wide. A minute later he was sprinting down the hall.

“Stop that,” Charlie barked. The other boys stopped their assault, turning towards Charlie.

“Or what,” the rat tailed boy chortled. Even though Charlie was a little bigger than them, that didn't seem to deter the small tormentors. They had the numbers.

“Try me,” Charlie growled, delivering a hard shove to the rat tailed boy. The boy with the shaved head shirked back a little upon being met with some resistance. The rat tail boy, to his credit, straightened himself up before telling his co conspirator that this was lame - not able to hide the nervousness in his face replacing the confidence that had been there moments before. Both of the boys sulked off.

“Are you okay?” Charlie asked, kneeling down in front of Theodore with a concerned look on his face.

“Y-yeah,” Theodore said, still a little shaken up

“What are you doing out here anyway?” Charlie asked, cocking his head a little.

“Going to the bathroom,” Theodore mumbled.

“Oh, well c'mon I'll take you.” Charlie said, nodding his head as he outstretched his hand. Theodore wanted nothing more to slap his brother's hand away and tell him to buzz off. Theodore then looked to the side noticing the other two boys were still hovering a little ways off. Theodore knew he had no other options if he wanted to avoid further trouble. He took Charlie's hand as they walked down the hall. Theodore couldn't help but sniffle a little.

“Don't worry, those guys won't bother you anymore.” Charlie said, giving Theodore's hand a little squeeze. “Your big brother will protect you.”

13:15

Theodore was sure that if he was actually six, a trip to Riley's Rocking Grill would have been a real treat. As things stood however, dumped at the kids table with just the slightest humiliating dampness still nagging uncomfortably in his underpants, all the former eighteen year old could focus on was his new impossibly diminished status.

The kids, Theodore now unquestionably included in their ranks, had got a booth to themselves. Unlike yesterday, Ewan seemed perfectly content to befriend Charlie, happily chattering away with him about the Pokemon game he'd played with Theodore the night before. Of course, in this new version of reality, that evening was still a good couple of hours away - and it seemed very unlikely to include the newly minted six-year-old. Far from plotting a prank on the

sensitive ten-year-old, Charlie and Ewan were now the best of friends, and it was instead Theodore who was considered the immature one. Any attempt to join in the ‘big boy’ conversation met with condescending placations from Charlie, and outright hostility from Ewan.

“Can you just stop bothering us?” his new big cousin demanded when he tried to butt in with his own thoughts. “Like, I bet you haven’t even played it.”

“I have too!” Theodore found himself objecting, almost on instinct. He cringed at the sound of his own whiny petulant tone.

“Suuuure.” Ewan mocked, rolling his eyes. He turned to Charlie, as if eager to confirm that his beloved game wasn’t also the pastime of an annoying fussy momma’s boy like Teddy. “He hasn’t, right?”

Charlie gave Theodore a sympathetic look, but ultimately confirmed the truth. “Mom doesn’t really like him to have too much screen time.” he dismissed.

Ewan laughed, reveling in the opportunity to tease the little boy. “I guess it’s all Sesame Street story books for you, huh?”

Theodore scrunched up his little fists, pudgy cheeks going bright red. He showed Ewan a deathly stare, all but ready to jump up and whack him in his stupid smug face, but he didn’t have time to act before the server appeared.

A young man dressed in an absurd red and white pinstripe apron bejeweled with about a dozen buttons and pins

featuring various silly slogans, the server bore a plastic grin and a paper notepad. “Alrighty, gang!” he enthused with an exhausting energy, crouching down at the table so that he was at their level. “Welcome to Riley’s Rocking Grill! My name;s Tyler. How about I start you Rockstars off with a few kids menus?”

Ewan wrinkled his nose in embarrassment. “Err...my Dad said I could order off the proper menu...” he interjected awkwardly.

“Me too!” Charlie mimicked straight away. Theodore cocked his head at the ten-year-old, a little taken off guard. Charlie always ordered off the kids menu.

“Heck yeah!” Tyler enthused, passing over two large menus to Charlie and Ewan while distributing a couple of sheets of paper and accompanying bundles of crayons to Luke and Teddy. “That’s two grown-up menus for the big kids, and two kids menus for the little guys.” he narrated, maintaining the bizarre patronizing energy that reminded Theodore of a particularly annoying history teacher he’d had in middle school. “You boys need a little time, or is there anything I can help you with right away?”

“Apple juice, please!” Luke sang, kicking his legs playfully back and forth under the booth.

“Sure thing, little dude.” Tyler agreed, noting the request down.

“A coke.” Ewan said curtly.

“Me too.” Charlie echoed.

“And me.” Theodore muttered.

Charlie gave him a skeptical glance. “Are you allowed that?” he interrupted.

“Huh?”

“I thought fizzy drinks give you a tummy ache.” He explained, sounding kinda concerned. He dropped his voice into a low confidential whisper, though it was still plenty audible enough for everyone at the table to hear. “Remember what happened at the Zoo that time...?”

A derisive snort from Ewan reawakened the petulant fury bubbling away in Theodore just under the surface. He of course had no idea what Charlie was talking about, but from Ewan’s reaction he knew it must have been something extremely humiliating. Unfortunately, his new little boy brain only seemed to be capable of the most basic of arguments in objection. “But I want it!” he demanded.

Charlie ignored him, turning directly to the waiter. “He’ll just have milk.” he substituted, overruling his fussy little brother.

“Sure thing, dudes.” Tyler agreed straight away, the harsh scratch of his biro crossing out Theodore’s original order making the little boy pout. He soon disappeared again, leaving them alone.

Theo scowled at Charlie. “What did you do that for?” he growled.

“You don’t even like coke.” Charlie informed him. “I was just looking out for you.”

“Yeah.” Ewan interjected. “We wouldn’t want little Teddy having another oopsie in his nice graduation shorts.”

Theodore felt his ears go hot, starting to put together what might have happened at the Zoo. His embarrassment soon turned straight back to anger however. None of this was supposed to have happened! He was supposed to be eighteen!

“Shuddup!” he growled, scrunching up a crayon in his fist and brandishing the point at Ewan like the blade of a knife.

The display only seemed to amuse Ewan even more. “Don’t worry.” he tittered. “When you get home, Mommy can sit you on your training potty, and then you can drink all the soda you like!”

“I don’t have a training potty!” Theodore seethed.

“You don’t?” Ewan kept on mocking cruelly, acting all surprised. “But you’ve got all the other toddler stuff. Your stuffie, your sesame street shirt, your pull-ups. Little Teddy the Toddler.” he teased.

The taunt hit home - Theodore’s natural six-year-old obsession with being a ‘big boy’ combining with his very real adult fears about waking up even younger the next day creating the perfect storm for a proper Kindergarten temper tantrum.

“I’M NOT A FUCKING TODDLER!” He yelled at the top of

his voice, jumping to his feet with his fists at his side.

The smirk on Ewan's face instantly disappeared, replaced with a look of genuine concern as he whirled around his head in search of any lurking adults who might have heard the forbidden word. Luckily however, the restaurant was rather noisy, and the adults were a good few tables away. It seemed he had gotten away with it. Ewan smirked, seeming to regard Theodore with a strange kind of respect.

"Jeez. dude. Calm down." he giggled. "I was only messing with you."

"Where did you even learn that?" Charlie asked in amazement, frowning at his little brother with a mix of disapproval and amazement.

"Teddy said a naughty word!" Luke chimed, otherwise occupied running a blue crayon messily through the maze printed on the back of his menu.

"I'm not a toddler..." Theodore growled, breathing heavily in and out. He was still wearing a furious frown as he glared around at his fellow dining companions.

"Sure, dude." Ewan assured - though he seemed more concerned with preventing the furious little kid from blowing up again than actually apologizing. "You're a big boy or whatever. You're in first grade and everything."

Theodore was hardly placated, but as he continued to take big calming breaths he did find that his anger had dissipated - if only slightly. "...Fine." he conceded, sitting down in his seat

again.

“Hey.” Ewan suddenly suggested, a fresh mischievous grin coming to his lips. “You wanna play a game that like everyone plays at my school?” he asked temptingly.

“What?” Theodore asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Argh...I dunno if we should actually.” Ewan dismissed. “You guys are probably too little. It’s only for like actual big kids. Like in middle school.”

“I wanna play!” Theodore chimed at once. A rational part of him knew that Ewan was manipulating him, but he didn’t care, entirely preoccupied with showing - no, proving - that Ewan was wrong, and that he really was the most mature out of all of them.

“Well, alright.” Ewan agreed. “It’s called truth or dare.” he explained. “Basically, I ask you ‘truth or dare’, and you have to choose if you wanna answer any question I ask you, or if you wanna do whatever dare I come up with.”

Theodore scrunched up his face. He had always thought that ‘truth’ was easier, but how could he hope to answer questions about a new life he didn’t even remember? As the story about the Zoo had demonstrated, there were clearly plenty of embarrassing secrets surrounding his six year old past. If he got caught in a lie, Theo was certain that would only make him appear more babyish.

“Um...dare...” he decided half-heartedly, pouting in nervous anticipation.

“Nice.” Ewan grinned. Clearly, it was what he had been hoping for. He pointed over towards the grown-up table where Mom, Uncle Rob, and Jessica were all sitting together - having just received their drinks. “Your dare is to go over there, and get Jessica to give you her phone.” he said smugly.

Charlie let out a dismissive tut. “That’s dumb.” he said, rolling his eyes. “No way she’s just gonna give him her phone.”

“It’s not that hard. Just say you wanna play a game or whatever.” Ewan defended himself. “Or I guess you could just take it.” he shrugged.

Theo looked nervous, stealing a glance at Jessica. Sure enough, her phone was right there on the table beside her. But was he really going to risk getting in trouble for the sake of some stupid bet? At eighteen it would have been no sweat, and at fourteen, he wouldn’t have thought it was such a big deal – but now he felt almost sick at the thought. He didn’t know why, but some frightened silly six year old part of Theodore seemed to cry out in terror - the idea that getting in trouble was just about the worst thing that could ever conceivably happen to him.

“I dunno if I wanna...” he objected, looking up at Ewan with big needy blue eyes.

His cousin let out a devastating disapproving snort. “Seriously dude?” he demanded. “You’re gonna wuss out?”

“He doesn’t have to do it if he doesn’t want to.” Charlie

defended him half-heartedly.

“Wussing out is like...the most babyish thing you could possibly do.” Ewan lectured. “If you wuss out, you’re basically a baby. You might as well be like...two years old!” He nodded sagely himself, as if he were a respected guru of pre-teen wisdom. “Everyone’s gonna think so. You’d be better off going back to diapers.”

The threat hung heavy in the air as Theodore looked back and forth between Jessica and Ewan. He didn’t know what to do.

Wuss out

Go through with the dare

Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

“Fine,” Theo huffed, sliding out of his seat under the table before crawling out.

“Good luck,” Ewan said, giving Theo a thumbs up - which gave the boy a jolt of determination to go through with it, feeling for the moment that Ewan, his big cousin, was actually counting on him for something.

Theo made his way over to the table where Jessica was. He could see her phone sitting on the table right in the open. He thought for a moment on Ewan's suggestion of just taking the phone, but for some reason it caused Theo to only think of the trouble he would be in if he were caught. He didn't know why, but for some reason the idea of getting in trouble was playing on his mind - giving way to a certain level of fear at the prospect. Stupid as he knew it was, the thought of his Mom or any of the other adults chastising him only made Theo more uneasy.

He had never been one to back down from a fight with his Mom, and at times had welcomed the opportunity - if only to make her feel just a bit of the anger he held for her. So why now did that seem like such a harrowing idea to him? Theo pushed the thoughts aside, deciding it was best to avoid such things for the moment. Besides, he didn't need to put himself in such a situation. He was six years old now, so all he had to do was turn on some of that little kid charm he now possessed

and Jessica probably wouldn't be able to say no to any request from him – it surely worked for Luke most of the time.

Theo sidled up to the table where Jessica was seated. None of the adults seemed to notice he was there. Mom and Jessica were leaned in close together as they both peered at Mom's phone looking at photos from the graduation, deciding which one's were worthy of being printed out to be kept as adorable reminders of the day's events. Uncle Rob was also concentrating on his phone, tapping away furiously, no doubt answering a deluge of work emails that had piled up in his inbox. Theo took a moment to steel himself for what he was about to do, before reaching out a little hand to tug on Jessica's shirt sleeve.

“Oh Teddy, do you need something?” Jessica asked, turning around to see her adorable little cousin vying for her attention.

“Can I borrow your phone for a bit?” Theo asked, making his little voice as syrupy sweet as he could.

“What would you need that for?” Jessica asked, a smirk appearing on her lips, amused by the request of the little boy in front of her.

“I umm... I'm really bored and wanted to play a game and well uh Ewan told me you had really cool ones,” Theo said, trying to come up with something convincing enough to tell her that made his request seem realistic.

“Oh he did, did he?” Jessica said, shooting a glance towards her brother.

“I’ll be really careful with it, I promise,” Theo said, morphing his face up into the most hopeful sort of pleading he could, even sticking his lower lip out a bit.

“I think Ewan was telling you a big fat story,” Jessica said, not able to hold out a little laugh at seeing Theo's expression. “I don't actually have a single game on my phone. But if you're bored, I think there are plenty of games on the kids menu you can do. I bet Luke would be more than happy to play some tic-tac-toe with you .”

“That's a great suggestion,” Mom said, jumping into the conversation. “Besides Teddy you know the rules about playing games on the phone. Thirty minutes a day after dinner - and that's only if you eat all your food.”

Theo felt his shoulders slouch at the childish restriction on his screen time. He guessed he should have expected a rule like that after hearing what Charlie had said earlier, but in the moment it felt completely controlling - in a way that made Theo's eighteen year old self bristle.

“Although I suppose it is a special day,” Mom said, seeing Theodore's dejected look. “If you go back to the table and behave like a good boy, afterwards when we get back to the house I'll let you play that cute little train game you seem to like so much on my phone for a whole hour.” Mom said before she and Jessica went back to looking over photos, clearly thinking that Theo would be placated enough by the offer to send him scuttling back to his table immediately.

Theo balked for a moment realizing what the game his Mom

was referring to was. It had been a game that Charlie had been obsessed with when he had been around Theodore's current age. You could put together long chains of trains, provided the player answered a few simple math problems, and then you would drive them around tracks to different stations where the player would then be met with simple words to spell out. It was a game certainly meant for the littlest of little kids.

Theo could only scowl at the insinuation that he could be convinced to do anything with the promise of being able to play such a childish game. He looked at Jessica's phone still sitting on the table unguarded. The occupants at the table, having gone back to their own activities, made it so that Theo could easily just take the phone with little notice. Theo gave one last look back at his own table, each of the boys watching him. Ewan motioning with his head goaded Theo on, while Charlie sat with a sort of nervous look on his face.

Theo turned back around. It was now or never. His hand shot out, grabbing onto the phone and pulling back quickly - however, in his haste, his hand knocked into the glass of water sitting near Jessica, sending it toppling over and splashing its contents all over the table. Jessica gasped as Mom and Uncle Rob wasted no time in throwing down napkins to contain the mess with the reflexes befitting two parents who were no strangers to sudden spills. Jessica sat wiping some water off of her legs and dress, yet she wasn't too wet. Theo looked down to see that most of the water had splashed heavily onto him, his shorts bearing the brunt of the

damage as he now stood phone in his hand - looking as if he had peed his pants.

“Theodore Parks, what on earth do you think you are doing?” Mom said, causing Theo to see her marching over to him with an angered expression on her face. “You were told no, and then you just tried to take it! And look, now you've caused a spill.” Mom said as she snatched the phone out of his hand giving it back to Jessica. Theodore could say nothing as the overwhelming fear of seeing his Mom upset with him gripped him into silence. “Look at your pants,” Mom then exclaimed before grabbing him by the wrist and dragging him off towards the bathroom.

“Just what on earth were you thinking?” Mom asked again as she yanked down the wet shorts from Theo as they stood in the bathroom. She then spotted the wet spot on the front of Theodore's underwear and gave another sigh, though thankfully for Theodore she took it for a wet spot caused by the spill rather than the embarrassing truth.

“Mommy...noooo...” Theodore protested, completely humiliated, but he was powerless to stop his mother as she removed his underwear and ran both items of clothing under a hand dryer. Theo could only shiver from the coldness - another woman walked into the restroom giving a little smile as she walked past the little boy covering himself with his hands. Theo felt as if he might actually pass out from embarrassment, his little boy brain and his adult mind so overwhelmed by the situation that they seemed to shut down like a crashing computer.

Luckily, the woman was swift to leave - but it seemed to take ages before Mom finally turned around and re-dressed the lower half of the boy.

“Anything you have to say for yourself?” Mom finally asked, her anger having subsided, yet the sternness in her voice remained.

“I’m sorry,” Theo could only mutter, still feeling too anxious and scared to say much more.

“Well I’m not the one you should be apologizing to.” Mom said before leading him out of the bathroom and back over to Jessica to make him apologize properly before bringing him back to the table where his cousin’s and brother sat.

“Don’t think that just because you said sorry that means you aren’t still in trouble. When we get back to the house you are going on a time out young man, and if I get any more problems you can expect to be sitting there for the rest of the afternoon.” Theodore looked up at his Mom with a saddened look as he continued to shiver, knowing that punishment was still imminent. “Are you cold?” Mom asked with a sigh, noticing the shaking.

Theo just nodded his head.

“I’m cold too,” Luke whined a little. Mom told the boys to wait a moment as she walked off before returning a couple seconds later with two red hoodies in her hands.

“Charlie, help out Luke,” Mom said, tossing one of the sweaters across to Charlie.

“Okay,” Charlie said before turning to Luke. “Arm's up Lukey.”

Mom then proceeded to pull the sweater over Theo, not even giving him the option to attempt to put it on himself.

“We match,” Luke said as Theodore turned around to see Luke was wearing the same hoodie that yesterday Theodore had worn around his waist at the middle school graduation. Theo then looked down at his own sweater to confirm that he was indeed matching with Luke, the sweater from yesterday having duplicated.

“It's a good thing thing we found them on sale yesterday when we went shopping,” Mom said smiling at Luke for a moment before turning her attention back on Theodore.”Get back in that booth,” Mom ordered, which caused Theodore to whimper a little as he crawled over Luke and Charlie to take his seat. “Now I don't want you out of that seat for the rest of the time we are here,” Mom said with a wagging finger. “Remember - you are on thin ice with me young man.”

Theo plopped his chin onto his hands a sulky pout on his face, completely humiliated at the dressing down he had received - both figuratively and literally.

“Charlie, watch him,” Mom said, issuing a serious order to her older, more responsible son.

“I will,” Charlie said, placing a hand on Theodore's back. Satisfied, Mom walked away. An awkward silence descended upon the table. Theodore felt like he was at the bottom of a

deep dark well - having thoroughly been put in his place confirming his new status as nothing more than a six year old little boy. The feeling of Charlie's hand slightly rubbing his back gave him a little comfort as he felt like he was about to cry.

“Sorry about that Ted,” Ewan finally spoke up, giving Theodore a good natured smack on the back. “Guess that was a little too much to ask of you. It's a shame though, I really needed that phone.”

“Why would you need Jessica's phone?” Charlie asked.

“She has administrative permissions on her phone,” Ewan said. “If I had gotten it, I could have put them on my profile too. Then I could have taken off all the stupid restrictions my Dad has on me. It's really annoying when my game console switches off every night at ten on its own.”

Theodore could only look at Ewan with a scowl. Theodore couldn't believe how stupid he had been. How could he have let himself be talked into such a dumb stunt - and for what? So Ewan could play video games later into the night? Theodore could only shake his head. He should have known that Ewan had ulterior motives. Yet something he had said piqued Theodore's interest. He still wasn't sure what had caused him to get younger, but right now his only lead was something to do with the house. If he was going to have any way of figuring out whether or not it was true, he was no doubt going to need those administrative permissions as well. Yet even if he did have them it wasn't like he was really

going to be able to make heads or tails of the inner workings of the complicated technology powering the house - but there was a person who just might.

Theodore looked over at Jessica, seeing her chatting away with her Dad. Jessica had enough knowledge that she just might be able to figure out what was happening and be able to fix it. Most importantly though, unlike Uncle Rob, Theodore might just be able to convince her that he was indeed the same age as her. Sure, they may not have been close but they had gone to school at the same place for four years. Theodore knew things about the inner workings of Holyoke and he also had knowledge befitting a high school student - and that could be enough to convince her. Theodore knew that he had to switch up his game plan. He couldn't do this alone. He needed help and there was only one person that he could turn to.

16:05

By the time they had eaten, paid the check, and driven all the way home, Mom seemed to have all but forgotten Theodore's uncharacteristic bout of kleptomania. Indeed, it was likely the boy would have escaped any further penalty at all if he hadn't looked so glum. For some reason, the incident continued to eat away inside Teddy - his pudgy tummy all twisted up and his precious Kindergarten features puckered into a permanent pout at the thought of his naughtiness.

He didn't know why he felt so guilty - he had barely caused

any harm after all. If anything he should have been angry! Mom had completely humiliated him in the bathroom, and he'd been too frightened to utter a word of protest. He tried to summon some righteous indignation, but for some reason those angsty adolescent feelings were entirely out of reach for the six year old, instead obscured by an overwhelming desperate desire to please his Mommy.

“Alright, grumpy-guts.” Mom tutted, taking a purposeful hold of his little hand and leading him into the living room. “We’ll just do 30 minutes in time out and then you can go play, alright?”

Mom’s attitude was a far cry from the searing scolding he’d received in the restaurant. Her sulky little son seemed to have learned his lesson after all, and she was now more concerned with comforting the shell-shocked tot - while still holding firm on the punishment she’d dolled out earlier, of course.

“I’m sorry Mommy...” Theodore mumbled again, really meaning it this time. He felt like he was about to burst into tears, completely overwhelmed with a bizarre cocktail of unfamiliar needy emotions. He felt so small and vulnerable, as if he might shrivel up and die like an unwatered plant if his Mommy didn’t hug him right this second.

To his surprise, she did hug him - pulling him into a warm comforting cuddle. Theodore didn’t know how to react, a warm fuzzy feeling spreading all through him like a sip from a warm spicy bowl of soup. He nuzzled his head up to her chest, looking up at her with confused watery big blue eyes

as she continued to hold him in the warm hug.

“Why did you hug me?” he asked flatly, rather baffled.

“Didn’t you want a hug?” Mom asked, just as confused.

“Um...yeah.” Theodore admitted. “But I was naughty...” he added.

“Sweetie, you still deserve a hug when you're sad - even if you were naughty..” His Mom told him. “I love you no matter what. But you have to learn not to take other people’s things, okay?” She lectured.

“Err...okay.” Theodore agreed. A jittery excitable energy ran up his spine, all those lingering bad feelings he harbored against his mother seeming to dissipate - if only for a moment.

“Let’s do time out on Mommy’s lap.” Mom decreed, not even asking before she heaved him up onto her knee as she sat down in an armchair - putting both hands over his tummy like the safety bar on a rollercoaster ride. “How’s that?”

Theodore blushed, feeling a strange mix of lovey-dovey affection and abject humiliation at finding himself perched on his mother’s knee like a comically overgrown toddler. Mom seemed to take his lack of response as acquiescence - if she even required his consent at all - ignoring his fidget and wriggles and firmly keeping him rooted in place as she absentmindedly switched on the radio.

A 30 minute time-out may have sounded easy enough, but to

Theodore's six-year-old mind the circumstances he had found himself in were pure torture. Not only was he unfathomably bored, the droning talk radio Mom seemed so invested in prickling at his ears like nails on a chalkboard, the boy was completely mortified. When Ewan wandered past at around the 20 minute mark clutching his games console, Theodore thought his cheeks were burning so hot they'd leave a permanent sunburn. The conniving preteen only smirked at the site of Theodore however, not daring to make any snide remark lest he be subject to the same puerile punishment.

"Alright sweetie, that's time." Mom eventually relented, moving her hands away to let him hop down. Theodore did just that, wincing as he rubbed the numb spot on his bottom. "What did you learn?" Mom interrogated.

"Not to take things that aren't mine." Theodore droned obediently.

"Good boy." Mom praised. "Alright, go play. Mommy loves you."

Theodore scampered off as fast as he could. As humiliating as the punishment had been, it was blessedly short-lived - not taking up nearly as much time as the equivalent he'd suffered the day before. He made a beeline straight for Jessica's room, dead set on putting his latest plan into action.

As he approached the slightly ajar door however, the boy realized he didn't have even the semblance of a plan. What was he going to do? Just rock right up and tell her he was eighteen? She'd laugh him out of the room! He suddenly felt

very timid, fidgeting awkwardly from foot to foot as he racked his brains for the best possible approach. Try as he might, however, he just couldn't concentrate. He felt like he'd just drunk ten cups of black coffee, his mind buzzing every which way - but never on the problem at hand. He didn't understand why he felt so jittery. He felt like he was overflowing with nervous energy - just like a real six year old. Maybe he needed some time to gather his thoughts, first? Or maybe it wouldn't hurt to get one more calming hug from Mommy? He felt a familiar ache in his bladder, his legs wobbling involuntary in an impromptu potty dance. Maybe he just needed to go pee?

"Teddy?" Jessica called from behind the door. "Is that you?" Still overcome with unexplainable nerves, Theodore bit the bullet and peeked shyly around the door. Jessica was sitting at her desk in front of her laptop, a complex-looking dense paragraph of code open on her screen. She smiled, rolling her eyes at the boy's bashfulness. "I thought so. What are you doing lurking out there?"

Theodore padded into the room proper, still with no clue how he might possibly go about explaining his bizarre situation. He decided he could maybe work up to it. "Um...nothing." he answered, sounding very guilty indeed. He pointed at her computer screen. "What are you doing?"

"Just working on something for my Dad." Jessica explained, going on to think out loud. "I'm trying to figure out when all these new systems got installed. If it wasn't me and it wasn't Dad...well, I don't know. But they can't have just appeared

out of nowhere!”

“Can I see?” Theodore butted in at once, feeling a jolt of excitable energy. Could these ‘new systems’ have something to do with his regression? He got up on his tippy toes, extending a possessive grabby hand towards the keyboard - only for Jessica to slap it away.

“Teddy - no.” The boy’s cousin scolded him firmly. “What did your Mommy tell you about touching things which aren’t yours?”

Theodore felt a pang of shame, but still mixed in with a whiny desperate sense of entitlement. “But I wanna see!” he complained. He found himself tugging at Jessica’s sleeve, desperately trying to capture her attention. “Can’t I see? It’s important!”

“No, Teddy!” Jessica repeated. “This isn’t a toy. It’s not for little boys.”

The firm rebuke elicited a strange sense of panic in Theodore. He needed to see that computer right now! If he couldn’t fix things now, who knew how little he would be by tomorrow?

“But...but...” he stammered, feeling himself getting emotional. He took a deep breath, trying to find the words to explain himself – but all he was capable of was a panicked disjointed scramble of whiny begging. “But I gotta see because...because if I don’t then I won’t ever be big again, and I was big just like you - I was eighteen - but then I woke up and, and-”

Jessica wasn't listening, getting up from her desk and effortlessly picking him up under the armpits to deposit him outside her door. "Sorry, Teddy," she told him, not unkindly. "But I really need to work this out tonight. If you wanna play pretend, why don't you ask Luke?"

She didn't give him a chance to reply before she closed the door, the sound of a bolt locking confirming his failure. It was all Theodore could do not to burst into tears. He'd been so certain Jessica was the solution, but now the hope he'd felt at the restaurant had turned to bitter disappointment.

The boy didn't have long to wallow in his sorrows however, another tingle in his six-year-old bladder reminding him of a more pressing concern. He groaned, scampering down the hall towards the toilet. Why had the urge come on so quickly again? Was his reduced anatomy really so incapable in the potty department? The last thing he needed on top of everything else was to soak his pants.

He came to the door, only to find it firmly shut - the fingerprint touch pad looming high above. Theodore got up on his tippy toes, trying to reach it, but it was a good three inches out of reach. He let out a groan of frustration. This wasn't fair! He crossed his legs, squeezing on his bladder. As humiliating as it was to admit, it was clear he needed some grown-up help. He needed to find his Mommy. But as desperate as he was, did he even have time for that?

"You have to say the password." a high-pitched voice squeaked. Theodore whirled around, seeing Luke watching

him from his own bedroom door across the hall.

“Huh?”

“You gotta say the password!” Luke repeated, pointing at the closed bathroom door. “If you can’t reach the lock.”

“Then tell me what it is!” Theodore demanded, pressing down as hard as a vice grip on his bladder.

Luke bit his lip, as if considering. “Will you play with me?”

“What?”

“If I tell you the password, will you play Teddy Bear picnic with me?”

Theodore groaned. “Can’t you play on your own?”

“Nuh-uh.” Luke shook his head. “You can’t have a picnic on your own. Plus, you’re Teddy, so you gotta be the teddy bear!”

The boy bristled, reminded of the taunt the middle school bullies had kept repeating the day before. He thought of the elementary school bullies from that morning, too, and how he’d barely escaped drenching his pants. If he didn’t get through the door in the next five seconds, he knew he wouldn’t be so lucky this time.

“Please, Luke. Can you just tell me the password!” he begged.

“Promise you’ll play!” Luke demanded. It was obvious there was no escaping his ultimatum.

Promise to play

Run to find Mommy

Chapter 9

Chapter Nine

“Fine I promise to play,” Theodore huffed. He figured he could just blow Luke off after the fact - kids lied all the time, right?”

“Okay the password is...” Luke said, leaning in to whisper it into Theodore's ear before pulling back.

Theodore felt his stomach twist up for a moment as he gave Luke a side eye glance. “You can't be serious?” Theodore asked, as Luke just nodded his head - not really grasping what the big deal was. Theodore was skeptical that the password was something so stupid and he was beginning to think that Luke was messing with him. Then again, Theodore didn't really know Luke well enough to even be able to tell if he was the type to pull tricks like that.

Theodore let out one last sigh. The pressure was becoming unbearable and he really had no choice.

“I need the potty please,” Theodore mumbled, only to see nothing happen. He gave a scandalized look at Luke who seemed to not find anything amiss.

“You gotta say it loud or else the door won't open.” Luke tittered. Theo gritted his teeth. It was either this, or having an accident - which was seconds away from becoming a reality. He repeated the password again, this time in a much louder voice, taking a look around afterwards just to make sure no

one had noticed.

Miraculously, the red led light turned green as the whirring of the lock could be heard and the door opened a little - allowing Theodore to push it open with some urgency as he raced over to the toilet to relieve himself.

“I’ll be back,” Luke said before rushing off. It was at that moment that Theodore realized he had not shut the door. Yet he was currently trapped in front of the toilet and it seemed it was not going to be a quick stop. Every agonizing second passed as Theodore prayed no one would walk past. He then heard some footsteps before a moment later Uncle Rob walked past. His Uncle only chuckled and reminded him to close the door.

“We got ladies in the house, Teddy,” Uncle Rob said before shutting the door.

Theodore finished before washing his hands and walking out of the bathroom. He didn’t see Luke anywhere and decided now was the time to slip away unnoticed, however his plan was short lived as Luke appeared running into the hall with something bundled up in his arms.

“Here’s the costume,” Luke said, shoving the brown fluffy clothing into Theo’s arms. “Although you might want to take off your clothes first - it gets kinda hot.”

Theodore let the fabric unfurl to see Luke had given him a brown one piece onesie. “Um... yeah you know Luke I don’t think I really want to play anymore,” Theo said, holding the

suit back towards Luke.

“B-but you promised,” Luke said with a betrayed look coming to his face. “You lied?”

“I guess I did,” Theo said, pursing his lips a little. He did feel a tiny bit guilty seeing his little cousin start to tear up.

“You promised! If you don't play I'm gonna tell!” Luke threatened. Theodore suddenly felt his stomach twist up. A sudden fear took hold again at the thought that he was going to be tattled on. What would his Mom say if Luke told her that he had lied to him? She would surely get mad at him again - she would somehow find a way to turn it around on him as she always did.

“Wait, look I'll do it,” Theo said as he began to unbutton his shirt. Luke's mood seemed to do an instant 180. Theodore got his shorts off before stepping into the costume. He was having a little difficulty as he found that his hands were now trapped in some paws attached to the costume.

“What are you guys doing?” the voice of Charlie asked from behind. Theodore spun around to see his brother standing in the hallway.

“We're playing teddy bear picnic,” Luke enthused. “And Teddy is going to be the teddy bear!”

“Oh I see,” Charlie chuckled a little before leaning down to face-level with Theodore. “Let me help you.” Charlie began to help Theodore get the rest of the costume on and then turned him around and zipped him up in the back. “There you

go,” Charlie said, adjusting the little bow tie around Theodore's neck. “Although it still needs something. Luke - you still got that face paint kit?”

“Yes,” Luke gasped before running off back to his room.

“What's the matter with you?” Charlie asked Theodore, noticing his less than pleased expression.

“This is stupid,” Theodore grumbled. He felt completely foolish now that he was trapped within the fuzzy prison.

“Ahh don't say that,” Charlie said. “I think it's really nice of you to play with Luke like this. I don't think Ewan or Jessica do stuff like this with him. Plus it's nice to play with someone your own age every once in a while.”

“I wasn't this age yesterday.” Theodore said, venting his own frustration more so than trying to convince Charlie of anything. He already knew that was a dead end. Yet as Theo looked up at Charlie he was surprised to see his brother's brow furrowed a little. As if what Theo had just said stirred something in him.

“Yesterday,” Charlie said softly with a far off look on his face. It was almost as if Charlie had some notion that what Theodore had just said was true. Theo wanted to question him further, but Luke returned and Charlie's face shirked off whatever strange notion he had just taken in - returning back to a smile as he took the face paint container from Luke. Charlie then proceeded to paint Theo's nose black and added three black dots on each cheek for good measure. “There now

you look like a proper teddy bear.” Charlie said with a laugh.

“Lets gooo,” Luke exclaimed, dragging Theodore off to his room. Coming in, Theodore could see Charlie had a blanket spread out on the ground with some cups and plates. “Okay, so since you’re my teddy bear you have to do what I say.”

“Luke, how is that gonna be fun for me?” Theodore whined a little, imagining Luke getting all bossy with him.

“Just sit down,” Luke said, not paying Theodore's protest any mind. Theodore grumbled sitting on the blanket bracing himself for the long night ahead of him. Luke took a seat across from him.

“Now we can have our picnic,” Luke smiled, picking up a cup. Just then however, Mom opened the door to the room and announced it was dinnertime. “Awww we were just going to start our picnic!” Luke whined, a little downtrodden that their game was being called off just as it had started.

“I see that.” Mom said, smiling at Theodore all dressed up. “Tell you what, you boys can just have your picnic at dinner.” Mom suggested. Luke let out a cheer, while Theodore only groaned. Luke gathered up the blanket before tearing out of the room, leaving Mom and Theodore alone. “What's got my little Teddy bear all grumpy hmmm?” Mom asked, plucking Theodore off the ground into her arms.

“I don't wanna play.” Theodore mumbled. It was bad enough he had to wear this stupid costume - it was going to be even worse now that everyone would see him in it!

“Oh come now, Luke seems really happy - and you two always have a lot of fun playing together.” Mom said as she carried him out of the room downstairs to the kitchen. Theo wanted to protest, but being in his Mom's arms as she cuddled him seemed to make him feel a bit better about the whole thing. It was a fleeting feeling however that disappeared just as soon as they entered the kitchen together to a chorus of coos and some laughter from Ewan. Luke had already set out a blanket on the ground next to the kitchen table and was sitting eagerly, awaiting his teddy bear.

“We're having fish sticks tonight, which I hear bears love.” Mom said.

“I can't eat like this!” Theodore mewled, holding up his paws.

“Oh I suppose you're right.” Mom said with a frown. Theodore smirked, happy to have found the loophole that would spare him the indignity of having to eat in the costume.

“He's my bear so I hafta take care of him,” Luke interrupted, a proud look on his face. “I'll help him eat.”

“That sounds great Luke,” Mom said, setting Theodore down on the blanket in between Luke's legs. Before Theo could even think to protest Luke had already wrapped his arms around Theo's tummy and held him close.

Mom then set a plate of fish sticks down in front of the boys. Luke grabbed one and held it up to Theodore's mouth. Theo hesitated a moment looking up to his Mom, yet she only

nodded with a smile on her face. Theodore let out one final sigh before chomping onto the fish stick, pulling it out of Luke's hand. The rest of dinner proceeded on in much the same manner. Theodore could only stew in silent discontent, and he couldn't ignore the sounds of shutters emanating from his Mom's and Uncle Rob's phones as they seemed to be sneakily taking picture after picture.

Luke was not letting up either, as he seemed to be at the ready with another fish stick just as Theo finished swallowing the previous one. Theodore was actually beginning to feel rather sick with the rapid pace at which he was downing fish sticks. Thankfully, Uncle Rob gave a reminder to Luke that he couldn't just feed his teddy bear and he needed to eat as well. Theodore took the opportunity to crawl away from Luke, grasping the juice box that had been set on the blanket for him, and guzzled down the contents within.

Dinner came to an end as Mom and Uncle Rob began to clean up. Luke was dragging Theo off before they were stopped by Mom.

“I have a favor to ask of you boys - seeing as we have Teddy here looking the part. Do you think you could sing that adorable little song for me?” Mom asked putting her hands together as if she were pleading.

“What song?” Theodore asked with some suspicion.

“You know.” Mom said with a matter of fact tone. “Teddy Bear Picnic.”

“Moom no,” Theodore whined a little.

“Oh please,” Mom said, begging a little more. “If you do it, I’ll let you boys watch a movie and I’ll even make up some popcorn for you.”

“We’ll do it,” Luke exclaimed, not even waiting a moment for Theodore to agree.

Mom was overjoyed to hear the news and Uncle Rob chuckled a little as he had the tablet in his hand. With some swipes Theodore could hear some music start to play out over the integrated speakers of the house as the rest of the family gathered to watch the performance. Theo knew the song well. His Mom had asked him to perform it on more than one occasion when he had been younger, especially in front of company. Theo had been all the more happy to comply back then. It had always been met with adoring praise and his Mom had always been happy when he would do it. As he looked at her now with her phone out, he couldn’t help but feel those same feelings of wanting to do a good job for her.

Luke was already into the performance, singing out the lyrics to the familiar tune with a loud enthusiastic voice – which was about as generous as one could say about the quality of his performance. Luke then fell silent as he looked over expectantly at Theo for the biggest part - the lyrics that they all wanted him to say. Theodore didn’t want to do it, but thinking on the promise of watching a movie was too good to pass up - if only to contain Luke from making him do more stuff.

Theodore took a big breath and then sang “Because today’s the day the teddy bears have their pihhc-nic!”

The family clapped as the song came to an end - that was all except Ewan, who looked on with a smug look of disapproval. The whole display was a little too cutesy for the burgeoning teenager, who was much more concerned with appearing more mature than he was.

True to her word, Mom had Luke and Theodore set up in the living room - delivering both of them a bowl of popcorn as she started a movie for them. Luke went to try and feed Theodore again.

“I can do it myself,” Theodore said before grabbing the bowl in-between his paws and eating the popcorn like he was some sort of animal, which elicited some laughter from Luke. After the boys had eaten their popcorn, Luke had glommed onto Theodore, cuddling him as if he really were a stuffed animal.

At one point, Theo looked at Luke who had a dreamy smile on his face as he watched the movie. Theodore then felt the night hadn't been all that bad. He remembered the day before when he had blown Luke off, and the small amount of guilt that he had in doing so.. He remembered Charlie's earlier comment about how Jessica and Ewan never played with Luke like this. Theodore could certainly never imagine Ewan doing anything like this with Luke. It must be hard for an affectionate kid like Luke to have an older brother like Ewan.

As the thought crossed Theodore's mind, he started to feel a guilt ridden knot form in his stomach. Maybe Ewan wasn't

the world's greatest big brother, but what kind of big brother had Theodore been to Charlie? He had been magnitudes worse. Adding salt to the wound was how nice Charlie had been to him when their roles had reversed. Why hadn't Charlie resented him the same way Theodore resented him? Surely in this reality, Theodore had been the usurper. The one who had come along and taken away their mother's attention. Just what was going on? Yesterday Charlie had been driven to near hysterics when Theodore and Ewan had taken away the fox stuffie, yet that morning Theodore had woken up with it in his arms - and Charlie didn't seem to care.

Eventually, Theodore had drifted off to a warm fuzzy sleep, only being awoken by his Mom standing over the two boys who had fallen asleep cuddled up with one another.

“Alright you sleepy boys, it's time to get you in a proper bed for the night,” Mom said.

“Can me and Teddy sleep together tonight?” Luke asked, letting out a big yawn.

“Oh, does someone need their teddy bear?” Mom cooed as she gave Luke a poke to his tummy. “I think that's a fine idea. Teddy, you can even keep that costume on - it looks very cozy.”

Theodore grimaced a little, but at this point he couldn't muster any energy to protest as he was feeling very tired. Mom led the boys upstairs before leaving Luke to get ready in his own room as she took Theodore to the bathroom. She helped him out of the costume before hoisting him up onto

the counter so she could wipe the paint off his face. When she was done, she let him down so he could use the toilet as she left the room.

She returned with a pull-up in her hand. Theodore had completely forgotten about his “protection”, but upon being reminded he felt another wave of embarrassment hit him. Theodore quickly put it on, not wanting to drag out the process any longer than he had to. Mom then got the costume back on him, before leading him to Luke's room, setting him in the bed where he would be sleeping that night.

Looking around the room that suited the taste of a five year old didn't help Theodore's mood one bit. The fact that he was also wearing a crinkly pair of pull-ups underneath a cuddly bear costume just made him feel all the more babyish. Mom then told Luke to go and use the potty before bedtime, which the boy did without question - leaving Theodore and his Mom alone.

“Teddy, I'm really proud of you.” Mom said. “Luke really looks up to you - so going along and playing like this with him is a really big deal for him.” Mom then sat on the bed pulling Theodore onto her lap as she cuddled him, pulling down the hood so she could stroke his hair.

“Moom stop,” Theodore whined a little, not wanting anymore coddling.

“Oh hush,” Mom said with a chuckle, “You're growing up so fast that pretty soon you won't let me do this anymore.”

Theodore didn't resist as he nuzzled into her a little. Her affection effectively squashed whatever sort of resistance he had.

“Speaking of which, I kinda wanted to talk with you about this whole growing up business,” she then said.

Theodore gulped a little. This was not a good sign. He had been given more than one of these types of talks in the past. It usually revolved around him having to give up something or take on some new responsibility all in the name of making way for Charlie – all so he could have everything nice and easy. Heck, that had been the whole reason his Mom had shipped him off to Holyoke in the first place. Just so she could put all her attention on meeting Charlie's every need and whim. Some of that resentment began to well up within Theodore.

What was she possibly going to say? He could almost imagine her saying something about how he needed to grow up so Charlie didn't need to watch after him so much, and how taxing it must be on him to pay so much attention to Theo.

“You know I love my favorite cuddly lovey baby boy*.*” she praised mawkishly, her tone so absurdly saccharine and over the top that it was almost nausea inducing. She was certainly being silly (as was only appropriate for the coddled freshly minted baby of her family) - but strangely enough however, as far as he could tell, she was entirely genuine. Theodore looked up at her with baffled blue eyes, completely taken off

guard by the unexpected tone. “But you were a bit of a mischievous little monkey today, weren’t you?” she continued.

Theodore felt his cheeks go hot and his tummy go all fluttery, once more filled with the confusing horrible sense of guilt he’d felt after the incident at the restaurant. He was in trouble again - and he knew it. How could he be so silly? No way it was going to be that easy! Had he really thought that all she’d do was yell a little, sit him on her lap for half an hour, pat him on the head, and he’d be off scott free? Of course not! This was Mom they were talking about! His panicky skittish six-year-old mind began to race with all the terrifying ways he might be punished. Would she ground him? Spank him? Send him off to some sterile sanitary-smelling institution again? He heard an involuntary squeak emanate unbidden from his lips, realizing he was actually shaking in fear.

“I’m sorry Mommy!” he found himself crying, twisting around to show her his big blue begging eyes and clinging on as tight as he could to her arm for dear life. “Please don’t send me away!”

Mom looked completely baffled, but soon began to comfortingly rub his back - trying to soothe the shuddering six year old. “Don’t be silly.” she cooed. “Why would I ever send you away?”

Theodore blushed, suddenly seeming to realize how irrational he had been. Was there even such a thing as a boarding school for first graders? He gulped, still feeling strangely

guilty. “Because I was naughty...” he squeaked.

“You are too cute. But I think you’ve been watching too many cartoons. I’m not sending you to military school..” Mom showed him an adoring smirk, before adopting a more serious tone. “Teddy, I would never give up on you. You’re my baby.” she told him. Theodore felt his heart go all fluttery for a moment, but tried to disguise his relief and elation, maintaining a worried pouty frown. “I know you’ve got lots of energy, but I just need you to try and listen a little better to your brother and I - especially now you're such a big boy.” she explained calmly. “Do you think you can be a big boy and listen?”

Theo blinked a few times, barely even processing the rest of what his Mom was saying. He felt so confused. Mom had sounded so genuine and caring, so certain she would never give up on him. To the six year old Theo, it was like a million warm cuddles all at once. But somehow it was still tainted, her comforting words censored and blotted out by the undeniable truth the eighteen-year-old Theo still knew. She would give up on him. She would send me away. One day. She’d already done it once.

“Earth to Teddy!” Mom teased, prodding his tummy. “Are you listening, baby bear?”

“Yes, mommy...” Teddy finally replied, though his tone was full of melancholy. He began to wriggle uncomfortably in her lap, just wanting to be by himself. “Can you put me down now?” he whined.

“Of course, sweetie. You’re growing up so fast!” Mom conceded, laying him down gently on Luke’s bed. He could hear the boy himself giggling further down the hall, apparently engaged in some kind of silly pre-bed time ritual with his own Dad. “Have sweet dreams.” Mom told him. “I’m sure you’ll be an even bigger boy in the morning.”

Theodore mumbled his assent, turning his head away and nuzzling into the pillow as he felt his eyelids growing heavy. He wasn’t so sure of that himself.

Chapter Ten

Sunday June 8th: 7:04

“Teddy...” a high pitched voice nagged. “Teddy!” Theodore awoke with a disgruntled grumble, a series of unhappy animalistic snorts accompanying his return to consciousness. Luke’s dorky five-year-old features loomed inches from his face, his little cousin stood practically on top of him at the side of the bed. “WAKE UP!” he exclaimed with an over-energetic shout, practically vibrating with energy.

Upon glimpsing the number displayed on a paw-patrol themed alarm clock on the bedside table, the boy’s first instinct was to ignore the annoying preschool graduate and turn around - endeavoring to go right back to sleep. But as Theodore was forced to process the juvenile room around him, and felt an uncomfortable dampness beneath the Sesame Street sheets, and slowly began to recall the events of the last night, and the day before that, and the day before that, his sleepy pre-adolescent grumpiness dissipated completely - giving way to jittery anxious anticipation.

He sat up as rigid as a board in bed, springing up like a jack-in-the-box. Practically shoving Luke aside, he reached for the alarm clock - reading the day of the week displayed in the top right hand corner. His heart fell a little. It was Sunday. Again.

As he studied the dark glass display however, his hope once again piqued at the shrouded barely visible shimmers of his

own reflection. His eyes darted around the room, eventually locating the full length mirror directed towards him propped up in the corner. It showed himself, wide eyed and bed-haired, sitting straight up in bed. He let out an involuntary yip. He'd got bigger again!

Theodore continued to stare, his smile only growing bigger and dopier. He was still a kid, that was for sure, not a whisper of the subtle hints of his impending adolescence that he'd possessed at fourteen yet present on his smooth girlish neck and wonderstruck round face. But there was definitely progress - there was no denying that.

His nose, though smattered with just the right amount of adorable freckles, was no longer a cute babyish button - seeming to have found some semblance of grown-up grade-school definition; his hair was no longer a uniform blonde, his wavy curls now arranged in a unkempt thicket of butterscotch atop his head; his cheeks, though still plenty rosy, no longer possessed that pinchable plumpness of a kid only just making his way out of toddlerhood - now more suitable for a boy well on his way with his ABCs. He recognized himself as about ten or eleven, accounting for the late-blooming in his preteen years which left him looking just a tad bit younger by common reckoning.

The boy's mind, free from the kindergarten fog and already starting to whirl into factory production of boundless curiosity, at once began to speculate. Before, it had been a straight spiral - a definite downward trend. He'd started off eighteen, then endured fourteen, and then six. He'd half been

expecting to wake up in a crib. Instead he'd gained five years, earning a reprieve from full-time diapers - for now.

“Um...I think you weed on my bed.” Luke interrupted with a giggle, loosely shaking Theodore to stir him from his daydream and pointing down to a very conspicuous dark spot visible just over Theodore's crotch - blotting out a cheery picture of Elmo.

“Huh?” Theodore exclaimed, turning to stare in horror at what he'd done. The cold dampness between his legs confirmed the truth. But how was that even possible? He'd been well past wetting the bed at this age! At least the first time.

He didn't dedicate any more time to useless navel-gazing, however. He jumped up from beneath his covers, discovering an equally humiliating yellowy damp stain displayed prominently on the shorts of his white and red Pokemon pajama set. Acting as if Luke wasn't even there, he found himself whipping around and starting to strip the bed, as if acting on autopilot. He tried not to panic, but with every passing second he only grew more and more jittery. The mystery of his repeated regressions - not to mention the endlessly repeating Sunday - faded far into the distance in terms of Theo's priorities, the boy instead finding himself catastrophizing over every possible humiliating possibility that might stem from the babyish bedwetting incident. He needed to fix this! If Mom found out - or worse, Charlie or Ewan - his life would be over!

Moments later he was skittering down the stairs in his soggy pajamas, a big bundle of all his soiled sheets in his arms. No sooner had he opened the door to the laundry room, however, than he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Teddy?” his Mom’s voice inquired. The boy nearly jumped out of his skin. He didn’t even pause to consider the name she had used. Ever since he was ten it had always been Theodore, after all - Theo at the very least.

“I gotta use the washer!” Theo blurted out, finding his voice at least had not changed very much. It still sat firmly in the treble register that had so sweetly sang “Teddy Bear Picnic” the night before.

Mom, of course, saw through him at once. She turned him around, getting a good view of the mess on his pajama shorts. “Oh, Teddy.” she sighed, her voice heavy with disappointment. “And in Luke’s bed too?” she questioned.

“It’s not my fault!” Teddy whined defensively, letting Mom take the ruined sheets from his arms.

“Of course it isn't sweetie.” Mom said matter of factly, her tone not particularly comforting. “That brother of yours.” she tutted. “If he’s going to insist on having a sleepover with Ewan, they could have at least included you.” she continued, loading the sheets into the washer. She turned back, offering Theodore a sympathetic smile. “Go and wash up.” she instructed. “I’ll take care of this.”

Theodore sat in the middle row of the car. Jessica was next to him and Luke was in his car seat on the other side. Ewan and Charlie were in the back seat, and Theodore couldn't help but become irritated by every little noise they made. If anything he should be over the moon, what with waking up older that morning, yet so far his day had been nothing to celebrate - and most of it had to do with the two boys in the back seat.

Theodore had thought he could keep his little accident under wraps. He knew his Mom had a habit of saying embarrassing things about him sometimes, but he could trust her enough to remain discreet about this – what he had forgotten about was Luke. Theodore had come down to the kitchen for breakfast after getting changed, which had taken a while as he found that his suitcase had again contained nothing but a plethora of humiliating age appropriate clothing he was loath to choose from . He had managed to settle on a pair of tan cargo shorts and a shirt with some dirt bikers on it. It wasn't a mature outfit, but it was better than what he had been wearing the day before - and it was nice for once to be able to wear something more casual.

Unlike the previous days, there was no graduation ceremony to rush off to. The ceremony had been held a week ago when the elementary school had let out - a thought that wasn't particularly comforting.

Theodore took a seat at the table. His mind had been racing with all sorts of plans of how he could get more information about what was going on. Now that he was eleven, he certainly would be more capable than he had been at six. Yet

all his thoughts had evaporated as he looked up at Ewan smirking at him from across the table.

“Enjoy your sleepover with Luke?” Ewan asked, his voice dripping with annoying smugness.

“I was just being nice,” Theo countered, making up a semi-plausible explanation off the top of his head.

“I guess,” Ewan shrugged before Theo saw Ewan's eyes focus back on him with laser precision, about to strike a decisive blow. “Though it wasn't very nice to piss in Luke's bed, you know. Guess you really do belong in the little kids room.”

Theodore's face immediately turned three different shades of red in quick succession.

“How did you-” Theodore squawked, as his tongue tied itself up in his mouth.

“Luke told everyone all about it,” Ewan laughed, slapping the table.

“Why would you tell people that?” Theo seethed at Luke, who was smiling just like his big brother.

“Because it's funny!,” Luke replied in a sing-song voice.

“No it's not,” Theodore shouted. Luke's smile disappeared, replaced with a worried expression. Clearly his malice didn't run quite so deep as Ewan's..

“Theo is right Luke,” Ewan tutted. “It's not funny...it's super funny!”

“Would you just shut up!” Theodore growled, his embarrassment turning to outright fury.

“How can I?” Ewan crowed back, Theodore's attempt at intimidation not having any effect on him. “I know you act like a little kid sometimes, but even for you this is too much. I mean just think about how perfect it all was. You in your little pokemon pajamas cuddled up under Luke's sesame street blankets—“

“You like pokemon too!” Theo interjected weakly.

“Sure I do,” Ewan had agreed. “But I don't go around wearing it on my clothes. That's little kid stuff.”

“They're an old pair,” Theodore countered.

“No they're not,” Charlie piped up. “You got them last month.”

Theodore whirled around to glare at Charlie, who just stared back with a clueless look on his face. Theodore pursed his lips a little - that couldn't be right. He remembered himself enough at eleven that he knew he would have definitely been too embarrassed to pick out clothes with cartoon characters on them.

“This is messed up...” Theodore mumbled to himself.

“You know what I think is messed up, you and Charlie.” Ewan butted in again, smirking at the ten-year-old. “I mean, you act more mature than little Teddy here. Are you sure you're not actually the older brother?”

“He is a year older than me.” Charlie shrugged.

“Hmmm,” Ewan said, rubbing his chin a little. “ Maybe technically, but I think you might be a little taller.”

Theodore glared jealousy at Charlie for a moment. That couldn't be true. Sure, Theodore hadn't really hit a big growth spurt until later in life, but he was definitely similar in size to Charlie - if not a bit bigger, however slight it was. Yet even knowing that Ewan was just teasing, the comment hit Theodore hard, not in the least part owing to the fact that yesterday Charlie had actually been his much older brother. Theo felt some fury bubble up within him. He couldn't just let the comment slide; he had to assert himself!

“I'm big enough to beat you!,” Theodore growled as he grabbed Ewan by the collar. Ewan gave an amused smirk.

“I would love to see you try, but don't go crying to mommy when you lose.” Ewan had retorted, his voice filled with a confident bravado.

“Is something going on here?” Uncle Rob had interrupted, walking into the kitchen.

Theo unclasped his hands from Ewan's collar, quickly taking a seat. Uncle Rob came over to the table, taking a sip of his coffee as he surveyed the boys who all looked a little guilty. “Hurry and finish up, we got places to be.”

Another chorus of laughter from the backseat caused Theodore to come back to the present moment. He rolled his eyes. Just what were Ewan and Charlie being so chummy

for? Judging from the conversation that morning, it seemed like in Ewan's eyes Charlie was more mature than Theodore. But that shouldn't be. Charlie was now his younger brother again, so shouldn't things have reverted back? Shouldn't Charlie have gone back to being his coddled spoiled little brother? Theo could only conclude that somehow that dynamic had changed now that they were so close in age.

Yet that explanation didn't seem to sit right with Theo either. He had always held that even when he had been Charlie's age, he had always acted far more mature - and he was certainly more mature at eleven than Charlie was at ten! The only possible explanation now was that perhaps Theo's estimation between Charlie and himself had somehow been incorrect. Maybe Charlie hadn't been all that immature in the first place, and it had only seemed that way to the eighteen year old Theodore?

Theodore shook his head. That just couldn't be true. Even when Charlie had been older, their mother had still treated him much differently than she had treated Theodore. It didn't seem to matter who the older child was. Charlie was always her golden child in any scenario. When he was younger she coddled and babied him, and when he was older she held him up as a shining example of responsibility who could do absolutely no wrong!

The car pulled into a parking lot as everyone got out and began to head towards the line of storefronts. Theodore still wasn't sure what they were even doing here, not that he really cared. What did it matter? If things carried on as they had,

everything would be reset again and he didn't know where he would find himself. He felt completely powerless, and with the way the morning had been going he had all but given up. Whatever strange force was causing all this, Theo was resigned to let it do whatever it wanted to him.

As Theo plodded along, kicking a small pebble along the ground, he felt a hand go across his shoulders. He looked up to see his Mom.

“Theo, you need to get those storm clouds out from around your head.” she instructed sternly, yet not without some sympathy..

Theo let his head hang back down. His Mom had certainly shown him some affection yesterday, but he guessed that things were back to normal between the two of them now that he was the older brother. As the older kid, she expected him to not let things bother him. To not make problems for her. He knew he should try to look on the bright side. He had woken up that morning older; it was a cause for celebration - especially since he had fully expected to wake up younger than ever. It didn't seem to matter though. Nothing could ever go his way – he had been thoroughly humiliated.

“What's the point?” Theo grumbled, pushing his shoulders up to remove his Mom's arm. “Everything is terrible!” He complained, his preteen penchant for dramatics on full display. Mom merely chuckled a little.

“That's not true,” she said, using her finger to lift his chin up to look at her. “I know this morning wasn't a great start to the

day. I guess I should have seen it coming. You did drink a lot of soda last night. I apologize for not reminding you.”

Theo pursed his lips a little. His Mom's comment had brought up some memories that he didn't like to think about. This hadn't been the first time he had wet the bed as an older child. Truthfully he had stopped wetting the bed altogether at seven, but his bladder had still been a little overactive and there had been one or two isolated incidents when he had drunk too much before going to sleep.

As supportive and understanding as his Mom was being, it didn't exactly feel very comforting to have his Mom insinuate that he was still at an age where he needed reminders from her about such things. In fact, this whole thing was a little unfair. Theodore hadn't made a choice to drink soda after all. If anything, he had gone to sleep taking every precaution necessary to avoid an accident. It seemed to him that whatever was doing this to him also liked to make sure that he was as humiliated as possible - and there was nothing he could do but take it on the chin.

“Now Theo, stiffen that upper lip young man!” his Mom said, putting her hands on his shoulders. “I don't want to see you acting like a mopey little boy all day. You're much too old for that.”

Theo furrowed his brow a little. His Mom was never very good with the pep talks, often leaving him feeling like his problems were because of his own choices rather than helping him feel better. He looked past her to see Ewan and

Charlie hanging out near a storefront. They were running at one of the stone columns, jumping into it before kicking off it with a foot in some sort of competition to see who could get higher. Mom followed Theo's gaze. "And don't you pay any mind to that cousin of yours, I'll certainly be having a talk with him about teasing."

"Mom no!" Theo yipped. He didn't know why, but hearing his Mom's plans filled him with a weird sense of shame. If anything, he should delight in the idea of Ewan being told off by his Mom - she was certainly good at that. Yet Theo felt like it would only make him look all the more immature in Ewan's eyes, that he needed his Mommy to fight his battles for him. For some reason, Theo felt compelled to try and get Ewan to like him. "He's not bothering me really..." Theodore quickly added. His Mom stared at him for a moment, before smiling.

"Okay, I get it." she said, patting him on the shoulder. "Now hurry up, we've got a big surprise for you."

Theodore saw they had come to a music store. The sound of electric guitars wailing through amps reverberated around as Theo wondered at all the shiny instruments hung on the walls. His Mom took him by the arm, dragging him further into the store. They went past the drum room with the sound of smashing cymbals ringing out, and they went past another section that was filled with stage equipment and turntables, before finally coming to a quiet room near the back. Theodore's Mom sat him on a chair and told him to wait. Theodore looked around, seeing they were in a room that had

all sorts of orchestra instruments. He saw some cellos set against the wall, as well as some glimmering trumpets set up on a table.

“No peeking!” he heard Jessica say behind him as she covered his eyes with her hands.

“Jessica stop...,” Theodore complained, trying to wiggle free

“Oh hush Theo, we're just having fun.” she chuckled. Theodore heard some shuffling in front of him, before Jessica removed her hands to reveal his Mom standing in front of him with a violin in her hands. Theo looked on, a little confused.

“Surprise!” Mom exclaimed as she handed over the instrument.

“This is for me?” Theo asked.

“Of course,” Mom smiled. “You've stuck with it all this time, and you've proven how committed you are - so think of this as your elementary school graduation gift. Go on, give it a try!”

Theo put the violin onto his shoulder and pulled the bow across the strings, letting out a delicate note. He began to play bits and pieces of some favorite songs. The instrument felt immaculate in his hands. He was starting to feel that same spark that had been lost to him for so long – he was reminded of what had made him fall in love with the violin in the first place. It was the feeling he got when he found himself lost in the music, playing for no one but himself. He paused as he

brought the violin in front of himself to admire it. He had never owned a violin as nice as this before. In the past he had always played on cheap rentals, since it was all his Mom had said she was able to afford. Theodore became a little suspicious. In the past he had always felt his Mom had been lying to him. She had just never wanted to spend the money on him. Surely it was to save money so she could continue to shower Charlie with whatever he wanted?

“You're sure you can afford this?” Theodore asked as his eyes narrowed.

“It's a big expense,” his Mom said. “You need to thank your Uncle Rob too. He chipped in for it as well.”

“Your Mom was pretty convincing. She said it was an investment in the future.,” Uncle Rob said.

“My future...” Theodore echoed back. The word filled him with some uneasiness.

“That's right.” his Mom said. “Me and your Uncle had a very long talk about that. You keep up with practice and he said he would look into sending you to Holyoke in three years, just like Jessica.”

“Think you can follow in my footsteps?” Jessica chuckled as she gave Theo a nudge.

“Theo, I want you to think of this gift as a promise between us.” His Mom said. “If we give you this, that means you are promising to keep up the hard work - and then we'll get you into Holyoke to follow your passion.” she looked at him with

an expectant smile, fully confident that what she was saying was sure to elicit a cheerful reaction.

Theo felt a knot well up in his throat. Of course there were strings attached. She would never have given him such a nice gift out of the goodness of her heart, or just because she knew he would like it. What's more, by accepting the gift, he was in some way accepting a future at Holyoke. Who did his Mom think she was talking about passion, while in the same breath committing to send him to the very place that had destroyed it in him?

Theo gripped the neck of the violin. His temper was beginning to rise. Things hadn't changed at all. She was still going to send him away - there seemed to never be a scenario in the world where that wasn't the outcome. He wanted to smash the violin right then and there. It seemed to him a symbol of all the anger and resentment of the last four years in his hands. Still he hesitated. It was a nice violin, and it would certainly cause a scene. Maybe he should just act grateful to avoid any trouble.

A troubling thought then crossed Theo's mind. Something strange was going on here, and he couldn't help but feel like this moment - here and now - meant something about what his future was going to look like. What if by accepting the violin he was committing himself to this future? Is that what this strange mystery was all about? If he accepted the gift, would he wake up in the Holyoke dorm room as a freshman, forced to endure the last four miserable years of his life all over again? He had to avoid such an outcome at any cost.

Just say thank you

Tell Mom how he really feels

Chapter Eleven

Theo gripped the violin stem tight in his fist, anger and fear bubbling around in his stomach producing a horrible concoction of anxiety and angst. He glared up at his mother, her warm enthusiastic smile only infuriating him further. Perhaps she had been the one who had done this to him? It would be just like her, after all! Concocting some crazy scheme with Uncle Rob, and Jessica, and the tech in the house to teach him a lesson. To try and teach him gratitude for sending him away. To humiliate him, and shame him, and rub his nose in his own mess like a potty training puppy all to try and convince him that she'd been right all along! That he was better off growing up into the perfect performer obediently scratching out tunes on stage so she could brag to her friends!

Well he wasn't going to fall for it! There was no way he was going back to Holyoke. He didn't care what the consequences were. He'd rather pee the bed; he'd rather go back to being six again; he'd rather that he never grew up at all! He jumped to his feet, trying to hold back the tears threatening to torrent forth from the corners of his eyes. He thrust the violin hatefully towards her.

"I don't want it." he growled, barely able to bring himself to look her in the eyes.

His mother's face fell at once. "What?" she said. "What on

earth do you-”

“I SAID I DON’T WANT IT!” Theodore screamed, now brandishing the violin like a cave man’s club.

Mom adopted a stern expression. “Theodoore.” she scolded. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I don’t want to play violin, and I don’t want to go to Holyoke, and I don’t want to do ANYTHING just because you say I have to!” Theodore continued, the words flowing off his tongue unbidden like water breaking through an old dilapidated dam.

He didn’t have time to register his mom’s reaction, starting to feel the first tears starting to stream down his cheek. Where had that come from? He hadn’t felt even close to tears a second ago. He turned away in shame, hiding his face and uncaringly shoving the violin towards his mother, unleashing his grip. There was a discordant thwunk as the instrument clattered to the ground, one of the string twinging loose.

“Theodore!” his mother exclaimed in horror. “Look what you’ve done!”

“No!” Theo whined, although he was immediately overcome with guilt. It had sounded like Mom really had spent quite a lot of money on the thing. Why had he been so reckless? He began to feel the same terrible dread of getting into trouble he had felt at six, his unregulated preteen poutiness only adding to his emotional turmoil. He started to hyperventilate, completely overwhelmed by the whole situation.

Mom grabbed him by the shoulder, prying his hands away from his eyes and forcing him to look down through blurry tear stained eyes at the damage he'd done. Although not completely destroyed, the instrument would certainly require some repairs. "What on earth has come over you?" Mom demanded. "You're acting like a spoiled toddler!"

Theo kept on sniffing, hiccupping, and hurriedly breathing in and out - barely able to string a sentence together. "J-just punish me!" he wailed. "I don't care. I just don't w-wanna go to Holyoke!"

Mom looked completely baffled, seemingly taken totally off guard by her older (yet certainly more sensitive) boy's unexplained bout of uncontrollable tears. Theo was half expecting her to take him across her knee and give him a spanking right there in the store, but no such fury was forthcoming - Mom's disapproving stern glare softening to a mere bemused frown.

Meanwhile, Uncle Rob had gently retrieved the violin from the floor, inspecting the damage. "It's alright." he commented in an unbothered tone, clearly trying to calm the tense situation "Certainly not beyond repair."

"That's not the point." Mom argued, putting a firm hand on the boy's shoulder and looking him in the eyes. "Theodore, this is going to be very expensive! You're not a little boy anymore. You can't throw tantrums every time you get a little upset."

Theo blinked back some of his tears, slowly managing to get

his breath back. "I'm s-sorry! But I don't wanna go to-" He stopped, his emotions overwhelming him again at the thought of actually going back there. He hid his face behind his hands.

To his great surprise, Mom pulled him into a hug. "It's okay, sweetie." she said comfortingly into his ear. "It's okay. We don't have to make any decision about that for another three years." she reassured him.

"Oh...oh-kay..." Theodore answered in a quivering voice. "I just don't w-wanna h-have to go away." he continued to gush, feeling as small and vulnerable as a tiny baby bird.

Jessica let out a barely audible coo of adoration, clearly concluding that the sudden temper tantrum was brought on by nothing more than childish anxiety at moving away from Mommy. Extremely embarrassed, Theodore pulled away from his mother's embrace, wiping his eyes.

"I'm sorry..." he repeated, looking away.

"It's alright." Mom said. "I understand. You've always been a worrier." She showed him a stern finger. "But don't think you're not in trouble."

"Yeah..." Theodore squeaked.

"Tell you what." Uncle Rob interjected. "Maybe Teddy can come around and help me out in the computer lab the next couple of weekends. Pay off the repairs in no time."

Mom gave him a skeptical glance. "You really don't have to-"

"It's alright. I want to." Uncle Rob interrupted, packing the

damaged violin away in its case. “How does that sound, buddy?”

“Fine...” Theodore said dejectedly, letting out a petulant preteen sigh. It was only a moment later that he fully processed what Uncle Rob was saying. If he could get a peak in his lab, maybe he could finally get a lead on what was making him change! He perked up, offering a hopeful grin. “Can I look in the lab when we get home?” he asked.

“Teddy - this is meant to be a punishment.” Mom interjected. “Don’t think you’ll just be spinning around in office chairs and playing mad scientist.”

Uncle Rob chuckled. “Don’t worry.” he said, putting a beefy hand on top of Theodore’s mop of silky curls. “There’s plenty of dusting to do.” He offered a big smile. “Shall we get going?” he proposed. “We are meant to be celebrating, after all.”

Mom sighed. “Well, I suppose there’s no use ruining the whole day.” she agreed. “Teddy - hold my hand.” she demanded. “I don’t want you wandering off and breaking anything else.”

Theo gumbled, but complied. “Can’t we just go home?” he asked, now dead set on getting into Uncle Rob’s computer lab.

“Don’t you remember?” Uncle Rob reminded him. “We’ve got tickets for the fun fair.”

Theodore bit his lip anxiously, acutely aware of the hours of the day slowly draining away. “Oh...” he said as they turned

the corner to find Ewan, Charlie and Luke all messing around near the electric guitar display. His now older cousin smirked at the sight of him clutching his mother's hand like an obedient little kid, his cheeks red and stained with tears. Theodore just hoped he could get through the experience without yet another humiliation.

The air was filled with the sounds of excited shouts mixed in with blaring music being played out of speakers. Each played their own tune that melded into one sonic sludge with the undercurrent of the sounds of machinery whirring – the fair was in full effect.

As Theodore walked around with the rest of his family however, his mind was a thousand miles away. He was recalling the incident at the music store. He felt so foolish at how he had acted. His Mom's words about acting like a spoiled toddler hit him too hard – especially since he might actually end up as a toddler if he couldn't fix this. Then again, he felt there had been some sort of breakthrough between him and his Mother. Strange enough as the situation was, he had once again made known his wish to not go to Holyoke, and it seemed like his Mom had actually heard him. If only he had been able to do that in his real life, then perhaps things would have been different.

The adults decided the first order of business would be to get some food, much to the complaining of the kids, Theodore not included, who were far more preoccupied with wanting to

get on the rides. Having come to the collection of food stalls, Theodore was surprised when his Mom turned to him - giving him some money to go and choose whatever he wanted.

“You can handle getting your own food, right?” Mom asked.

“Of course.” Theodore said eagerly, taking the money before starting to rush off.

“Hang on,” his Mom said, grabbing him by the arm. “Get yourself some actual food and not just candy.” she reminded him.

“I got it,” Theo said as he bounded into the fray of waiting patrons.

He looked around, trying to decide what he was hungry for. He was filled with a sense of excitement at having a bit of independence - something that had been severely lacking in his life over the past two days. He looked over and saw his Mom and Charlie at the front of another food stand. She was ordering something while Charlie stood a little behind her with a pout on his face. Theodore felt a small feeling of superiority. Maybe things were more normal than he had anticipated? Charlie, now back to being the younger of the two of them, was once again thought of as the more immature and less responsible kid, their Mom not trusting him far enough to get his own food - not like she trusted Theo.

Theo ordered himself a burger and some fries along with an extra large soda. He then went ahead and ordered a large bucket of popcorn with the rest of the money his Mom had

given him. He sat down at the picnic table that everyone else was already at. He looked across to see Charlie staring glumly at the food in front of him - a hot dog and a small drink.

“You got a big one...” Charlie mewled, seeing the large soda Theo had gotten in its oversized plastic commemorative cup dwarfing Charlie's own small paper cup “And popcorn...”

Theo smirked. He was pleased to see Charlie so jealous, especially recalling how the kid had overridden his drink order at the restaurant the previous day. Still, Theo did feel a little pity.

“You can have some.” Theo said, pushing the bucket of popcorn towards his brother.

Theodore could at least give Charlie that - he supposed he did owe him for getting him out of trouble with the bullies the previous day, after all. Charlie's face lit up as he dug into the popcorn, but was instantly stopped by Mom.

“Charlie no popcorn until after you eat that hotdog.” Mom reprimanded. Charlie groaned, letting the handful of popcorn fall from his hand, but Mom soon turned her attention on Theo.

“Theo, an extra large soda?” she said with a raised eyebrow. “You know how I feel about all that sugar and caffeine.”

“I'm celebrating.” Theo shrugged with mock innocence.

“I suppose...” she said with a roll of her eyes, walking off to

the far end of the table without another word.

Ewan sat next to Theo, a map of the fairgrounds spread out before him. He was using a pen to circle spots on it.

“What are you doing?” Theo asked.

“Picking out the best rides.” Ewan said as he circled another spot. “I was thinking we start with the bumper cars, then we can hit up the roller coaster, and then we definitely have to check out The Twister. Then I guess we can finish up in the midway.”

Theo didn't respond. He was a little skeptical that Ewan was actually going to be able to get to all of the rides he'd listed. The strangest thing of all though was it sounded like Ewan expected Theo to go with him. He had thought that Ewan and Charlie would stick together and exclude him, as it had seemed they had done all day.

“You're not like scared of the rides, are you?” Ewan asked, clearly ready to pounce on Theo if he showed any form of fear.

“No, of course not,” Theo countered assertively. Ewan nodded, satisfied, before he started to dig in to the nachos he had gotten for himself.

“I want to ride the roller coaster!” Luke piped up. Ewan just wrinkled his nose at him.

“You're not coming with us.” He sneered.

“But I wanna go too!” Luke said with a pout.

“You're too little for these rides.” Ewan shot back. “They wouldn't let you on.”

Luke looked completely crestfallen at the news that he wouldn't be able to go along with his big brother. His bottom lip stuck out, quivering a little.

“Don't worry Lukey.” Jessica said, cuddling her little brother as she shot a dirty look at Ewan. “I'm sure we can find plenty of fun things for you to do.”

“Can we ride the merry go round?” Luke asked. Jessica agreed at once, which seemed to satisfy Luke enough to stop his pouting. Theo ate his food and downed the entire soda in quick succession, eager to join with Ewan as quickly as possible. As soon as everyone had eaten their food, Ewan, Theo, and Charlie were up and raring to go.

Uncle Rob and Mom distributed wristband passes to the kids, before Uncle Rob gave Ewan some cash for games and more food if the boys wanted it - with a strict edict to his son that he was to distribute it evenly among the three of them. Meanwhile, Mom was wiping a little ketchup stain from Charlie's face, the younger boy squirming in embarrassment

“Now, you two remember that Ewan is in charge, and you are to stick together.” Mom instructed. “And Ewan, I expect you to be responsible and keep yourselves out of trouble.”

“Oh don't worry Aunt Deborah,” Ewan said as he put an arm around both Theo and Charlie's necks, pulling them so close to himself that the tops of their heads were touching. “I'll

make sure these two rascals stay safe.” Mom smirked as Theo and Charlie both pulled out of their cousins grasp.

Theo felt a little angry to find himself under the authority of his cousin. They were only a year apart currently, not to mention that Theodore knew he was the more responsible and mature of the two - since he still had the brain of an eighteen year old. Yet he wasn't about to throw a fit about it. It was leaps and bounds better than yesterday, when Charlie had been in charge of him at the restaurant. It was a step in the right direction at least.

The boys then raced off towards their first destination at the bumper cars. Theo was surprised with himself that he was going along with all this. The idea of just going around and riding the attractions was filling him with excitement. He decided not to dwell on it all that much. The past few days had been a whirlwind of stress and anxiety - he owed it to himself to try and have some fun. Besides, carnival rides weren't only for kids. Adults rode them too, so what was the big deal?

Theo had a blast on the bumper cars, crashing into the other drivers at full speed. At one moment, Theo and Charlie had even teamed up and sandwiched Ewan - giggling mischievously at the bigger boy's frustrated whining as he tried to maneuver himself free.

As they were standing in line for the roller-coaster, Theo found himself joining in on Charlie and Ewan's conversation about Pokemon and video-games and youtubers they liked

with enthusiasm, completely forgetting his real age. It actually surprised Theo just how well he was able to keep up. Sure, he wasn't exactly current with all the stuff that Charlie and Ewan were, but that didn't deter Theo in the slightest. It all just felt so natural. Theo was genuinely having a good time. He was learning the truth behind the phrase 'you don't know what you got till it's gone', the small shred of independence feeling larger and more pronounced than it actually was. Getting to go around the fair with his little brother and cousin without parental supervision was invigorating, making yesterday feel like just a bad dream.

At one point, Ewan told the boys a dirty joke he had heard from some older kid at school. At eighteen, Theo would have found the joke kind of immature and also wildly inaccurate in its set up. Yet at eleven it seemed thrilling to hear and uproariously funny. Charlie, on the other hand, had a muddled expression on his face.

"I don't get it." he said, looking from Theo to Ewan in confusion- hoping one of them would explain it to him.

"You'll understand when you're older," Ewan said, patting Charlie on the head condescendingly.

"I'll explain it to you later." Theo promised, feeling a smug sense of self satisfaction that he and Ewan were old enough to have access to some trove of knowledge that Charlie had not yet attained.

After the roller coaster, the boys made their way to the Twister. After getting through the queue, the boys took

their seats. There were three seats to each car. In the middle was a wheel on a pedestal, which could be spun to make the car spin faster.

“Lets see how fast we can get this thing going,” Ewan said as the arms of the ride raised their car into the air. Theo and Charlie smiled as they all gripped onto the wheel, more than happy to go along with Ewan's plan. As the ride started to go around, the boys spun the wheel as fast as they could. The surroundings turned into a blur around them. They were all laughing maniacally as they picked up speed. About a minute into the ride, Theo started to feel himself getting a little nauseous - the feast he had just treated himself to about thirty minutes ago not sitting so well in his stomach. He didn't want to say anything though. The last thing he wanted was Ewan thinking he was in any way uncool. Thankfully, the ride was coming to an end, the spinning of the car starting to slow and the arms lowering them to the ground.

As the ride came to a stop, Theo noticed Charlie's arms were hanging loosely at his sides and he was slumped back into his seat. His head was slowly rocking from side to side, and his face looked pale.

“Charlie, you alright?” Theo asked, looking nervously at his little brother. Charlie made no response, only gazing up at the other two boys with a dazed look.

“Uh oh.” Ewan said, clenching his teeth in a wary look. The boys got out of the car as it came to a complete stop. Theo had a hand on Charlie's back, the boy stumbling a little as

they walked away.

“Charlie, you need to sit down?” Theodore asked. He took on a more caring demeanor, his boyish enthusiasm melting away .

“I’m gonna- ” Charlie began to say, before his hand shot up to cover his mouth. Theodore’s eyes widened. He looked around and saw a metal barrel that was being used as a trash can. He hurriedly led Charlie over to it, having him put his head over it – and not a moment too soon. Charlie let out a pained retch. Theodore rubbed his back as he looked away with wince. After another couple of seconds, Charlie lifted his head up with a moan. Theodore patted him on the back, thankful that at least the color had returned to his brother’s face.

“Eughh, he actually barfed,” Ewan snickered, his nose wrinkled in disgust. w

“What are we going to do?” Theo asked, panicking a little. Charlie was in bad shape and Theo was feeling just a little overwhelmed by it all. He didn’t have the faintest idea of what they could do to make him feel better.

“Relax.” Ewan said, rolling his eyes as if Theo was making a big deal out of nothing. He made a couple of swipes to the watch on his wrist, before Theo could hear the voice of their Uncle coming out of it.

Theo didn’t hear the rest of the conversation, reserving all of his attention for Charlie - who was staring off into space with a woozy look. Ewan came back over, motioning for them to

follow. They walked over to another area where vendors were set up. Nearby one of the tents, they were met by Uncle Rob and Mom. Theo felt some anxiety as his Mom marched up to them. He braced himself for the incoming lecture. Surely his Mom would blame him for the incident? However, Mom did no such thing. Instead, she just gathered Charlie up to her side and began to stroke his hair.

“Had a little too much fun hmm?” she chuckled. Charlie groaned as he let his head slump against her side. “Rob, can you go buy a bottle of water?” she asked. Uncle Rob gave her a thumbs up before walking off. “C'mon let's go sit,” Mom said as she led Charlie over to a bench. Theo followed like a lost little puppy, still convinced that he was in some sort of trouble. Mom didn't say anything as she continued to stroke Charlie's head as he rested against her with his eyes closed.

“I'm sorry!” Theo yelped out suddenly, not being able to take the waiting anymore. Mom looked at him with a confused look.

“Sorry for what?” Mom asked, cocking her head to the side.

“For getting Charlie sick,” Theo said, figuring she wanted him to say it himself - just to hammer home the point that he'd been in the wrong. That would be just like her, after all.

But Mom simply chuckled. “Charlie isn't sick dear, he will be perfectly fine in a minute or two,” She said with a reassuring smile.

“You mean you're not mad?” Theo asked. Surely she had to

be pulling his leg? This seemed just like the kind of thing she would blame him for! Theo had let her precious little baby get so sick he had puked!

“Not at all.” Mom said. “These things happen. In fact, I’m very proud of you. “You did a good job of taking care of him, and getting him back to us,” Mom went on. “That’s exactly what I would expect of you as his older brother. It was very responsible.”

Theo did a double take. He felt a little shimmer of pride at being called ‘responsible’. In fact, as far as Theo could remember, it was the first time she had ever praised him like that. Theo paused. That couldn’t be right, could it? Theo and Charlie had never been close, but surely this wasn’t the first time he had ever shown the kid some care and kindness?

Uncle Rob returned with a bottle of water. Charlie took a couple of small sips. Mom then had him lean forward as she poured some water over his head - just to help him cool down a little.

“We were going to do the haunted house next.” Ewan said, sounding rather frustrated. “You should be able to handle that, right Charlie? I mean there’s no spinning or anything.”

Charlie looked up nervously. Theo knew that Charlie didn’t do well with stuff like that. He remembered one of the rare times Theo had been home, and had decided to watch a movie with Charlie. He’d put on a horror movie he had been eager to see. Charlie hadn’t wanted to, but Theo had pretty much ignored his protest. They hadn’t made it far into the

movie. The first jump scare had sent the kid screaming out of the room, and earned Theo an earful from Mom about what were appropriate movies to watch with his little brother.

Just as Theo had predicted, Charlie tensed up at Ewan's proposition, but he didn't say no. Theo figured he didn't want to admit to Ewan he was scared.

“Why don't you guys go on ahead?” Mom said with a smile, sensing Charlie's apprehension. “Charlie will meet up with you when he's feeling better.”

“Works for me,” Ewan said with a shrug as he started to walk off. Theo caught up with Ewan and they got into line for the haunted house attraction. “Are you scared?” Ewan asked, noticing the worried look on Theo's face.

“Huh?” Theo asked, a little flummoxed. “No, I was just worried about Charlie is all.”

“He sure got sick,” Ewan remarked. “Guess I should have known delicate little Charlie's tummy couldn't handle a little spinning.”

“It's not his fault,” Theo said, frowning his brow. He was surprised to hear Ewan talk about Charlie like this. Theo had been sure that Ewan had favored him in this reality. “We were going really fast, it could have happened to anyone.” Theo said defensively. Ewan just frowned, looking vaguely disappointed that Theo hadn't joined in on the teasing. The boys fell silent as they waited in the line.

After a while they were nearing the front - but another

problem arose for Theo as he was finding himself increasingly needing to go to the bathroom. He cursed himself for getting the biggest soda he could, and doubly cursed himself for drinking the whole thing in such a short span of time.

“What's with you?” Ewan asked, noticing Theo's jittery fidgeting on the spot.

“I have to go to the bathroom.” Theo said with some urgency. Ewan looked around, rolling his eyes.

“We're at the front of the line already! Can't you hold it?” Theo straightened himself up a little, Ewan's comment making him somewhat self-conscious of how he was behaving. Of course he could hold it. He wasn't some snott nosed little kid! But then again, he had wet the bed that morning...

Play it safe. The haunted house can wait.

Try and hold it

Chapter Twelve

“Fine,” Theo said. He was confident. It's not like he was on the verge of pissing his pants. He was eleven years old! Not some snot-nosed toddler. They would be through the ride in a short time, and then he would be able to get to the bathroom.

Easy as pie, Theo thought as they walked into the haunted house.

Theo went through quickly. The house itself really wasn't all that impressive. The monster's themselves looked old and crusty. Theo could only surmise this thing had been standing for years on end without any updates. Ewan, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying it a whole lot more. Theo did smirk a little when they walked past one corridor which set off some bright flashing lights - Ewan leapt into the air completely startled! Clearly a little embarrassed, the twelve-year-old shouted some expletives back at the demonic doctor mannequin that stood with a buzz saw in his hand as a show of bravado.

Meanwhile, Theo's need for the bathroom got more and more dire. Although they were going at a good pace, it had gotten to the point where he had to use some effort to stop himself from bursting. Finally, Theo could see the exit ahead in the murky darkness. With great relief, he marched over to it. Just as he was about to turn the final corner however, he was hit by a blast of compressed air as a large bat swooped down

accompanied by a loud screeching wail and flashing lights. Theo was so taken off guard that he let out a startled yip.

That's when he felt it. The warmth spread across his crotch. Theo froze, realizing what had just happened. Ewan came up behind him - still laughing at his reaction to the bat. Theo spurred into action. He couldn't let Ewan see what had just happened! He dashed out into the outside air, looking around frazzled. He really had no idea what to do. He felt like all the eyes in the world were on him. With no other options, he scurried off towards a wall - standing with his front towards it to hide his shame. He looked down to see the dark spot spreading on the front of his pants. It was obvious what he'd done.

"Are you okay," Ewan said, coming up behind him.

"Leave me alone!" Theo shouted back, his voice quivering.

"Oh come on - it wasn't that scary!" Ewan laughed as he grabbed Theo by the shoulder, spinning him around. Theo yelped, feeling completely exposed.. He watched as Ewan looked down at his pants. His jaw dropped as his eyes met Theo's. "You...oh my god!" Ewan exclaimed, as he started to laugh.

"It's not what you think!" Theo whined, his face turning the color of a sun kissed tomato.

Ewan however made no response, only continuing to laugh. He grabbed Theo's arm, beginning to pull him along like an uncooperative toddler - cackling the whole time.

They finally got back to the bench where the parents were. Charlie, having bounced back, was on his feet in front of Mom - animatedly talking at her as she listened on with an amused expression on her face. Ewan all but thrust Theo in between them, reveling in his little cousin's humiliation.

"Theo had another accident!" Ewan sang excitedly, putting extra emphasis on the word "another."

Mom looked shocked at first, before she let out a sigh and frowned a little - yet not without a hint of pity.

"I-I don't know what happened!" Theo stammered, his humiliation all encompassing.

"It must have been all that soda," Mom stated disapprovingly, taking Theo by the hand. s. "You know you have an overactive bladder."

Mom led Theo to a grotty bathroom stall behind the food stands . She told him to take off his pants and underwear and get cleaned up, and that she would be back. Theo was left alone in a stall. He did as he was told and waited. He found himself almost wishing he was still six - at least then this wouldn't be quite so humiliating. What kind of eleven year old still pissed his pants? His Mom returned twenty minutes later as she knocked on the stall door.

"I finally found something out there for you to wear." she said, sounding kind of pleased with herself. "Hand me the stuff you ruined."

Theo cracked open the stall door and made the hand-off.

Shutting the door quickly, Theo looked at what he had been handed. It was a pair of red and white striped overalls. They were completely garish - but he knew he had no other options. He quickly put them on.

“What are these?” Theo asked as he stepped out of the stall.

“They were selling them at some booth.” .

“They look like their for little kids...” Theo grumbled.

“They had adult sizes too.” Mom countered. Theo tried to convince himself that he didn't look ridiculous, a notion that was dashed away just as soon as he found himself in front of Ewan and Charlie once again. Ewan let out a laugh as soon as he saw Theo, and even Charlie couldn't help but smile .

“Don't you look festive.” Ewan said, trying to quell his laughter after getting a stern look from Mom. Theo pursed his lips a little. He agreed with Ewan. Theo looked like a clown sans the makeup.

“You boys were headed to the midway, correct?” Mom asked, shoos the boys off in an attempt to re-direct attention away from Theo's new wardrobe. She stopped Charlie a moment later, giving him some extra cash for games and making a point to say that it was for both of the brothers. Theo couldn't help but feel a little sidelined. Why was she giving it to Charlie? Didn't she view Theo as the more responsible brother? Or were her words earlier just lip service?

As the boys walked along the midway, Ewan started up again now that they were out from under Mom's supervision.

“You look great, by the way,” he teased. “You could run off and join the circus in those.”

“Shuddup...” Theo muttered. He felt completely dejected. Ewan now thought he was total dweeb! He was even more distressed by the fact that he seemed to care a great deal of what Ewan thought of him. He kept trying to tell himself that it didn't matter. He was eighteen, and Ewan was just his dumb little cousin. Yet even telling himself this didn't seem to suppress the unquenchable pre-teen thirst to be cool - to have Ewan think of him as an equal.

“It's okay,” Charlie said quietly as he walked alongside Theo a little further back from Ewan. “I like the overalls. They're... fun.” Charlie said, patting Theo on the back. Theo knew Charlie was just trying to be supportive, yet his words and actions only served to remind Theo of how Charlie had treated him yesterday -a reminder that only made Theo feel all the more uncomfortable.

“Just leave me alone,” Theo growled, shirking off Charlie's hand.

“You don't have to be grumpy,” Charlie said, looking a little put off by his brother's demeanor. “You're supposed to be the more mature one, you know.”

Theodore spun around to Charlie with a furious look upon his face. All of the stress, frustration, and resentment that had plagued Theo's life even long before his sudden roller-coaster ride into regression suddenly bubbled up- filling every fiber of his being. It wasn't rational, but Theo was suddenly

convinced that somehow all of this was Charlie's fault.

Theodore's entire world had been upended by Charlie's birth. Suddenly, his Mom had shifted her focus over to the new baby - which left little for Theo. Not to mention everything Theo had to give up. Charlie was the whole reason his Mom had shipped him off to Holyoke. The worst thing of all was when Charlie was born... Theo stopped himself, not even wanting to manifest the last thought.

"I'm plenty mature, I'm older than you and Ewan!" Theo spat. "Everything is messed up, and maybe if everyone just left me alone for five fucking minutes and stopped dunking on me every chance they got I could fix this!"

Charlie narrowed his eyes. A hint of recognition seemed to spread across his face, before a moment later it disappeared. "What are you talking about?" He asked "Ewan is a year older than you..."

Theo growled. He took a step towards Charlie, fully ready to grab him and throw him to the ground. This was all his fault!. He stopped as Ewan got between the two of them however, pushing them apart with his arms.

"Now now boys, let's not be fighting." He lectured in a cloying tone. "Or I'll most likely get blamed." Ewan said as he shifted into a more serious tone.

"I just said I like the overalls!" Charlie protested gruffly. He crossed his arms, not in any way able to comprehend why that had seemed to set Theo off.

“Shut up!” Theo spat back in response.

“Relax, Teddy.” Ewan said, before looking at him with a devilish smirk. “Your overalls are fine. They’re plenty roomy for your diaper!”

“Shut. up.” Theo hissed, but Ewan wouldn’t let it go.

“That’s why you were gone so long, right?” he pursued. “Your Mommy was putting you in a diaper.”

“What?...I mean...No! I mean...I’m not a baby!” Theo whined, completely scandalized by the implication. “You know I’m getting real sick of your crap.”

Ewan raised an eyebrow as he puffed out his chest a little. “You’ve been acting like one all day.” He remarked smugly. “If you don’t want people to think you’re a baby, then just grow up a little.” He turned his back and began walking off, confident that he had reasserted himself as the de facto alpha among the boys.

“I don’t need to grow up,” Theo shouted after him. He roared as he launched himself forward, tackling Ewan to the ground from behind. Despite Ewan being a full year older, Theo was still able to hold his own as the boys rolled around on the ground in a scuffle. Charlie looked on, completely shocked, before he started pleading with the two of them to stop - noticing that people were starting to stare.

Theo had managed to pin Ewan onto the ground, sitting on top of him. He raised his fist, fully ready to punch Ewan in his face to pay him back for the barrage of insults and teasing

that he'd had to endure because of him. Just then, Theo felt a hand grab him at the back strap of his overalls, hoisting him up into the air and back on to his feet. It was Uncle Rob, who now had both him and Ewan in either hand, held apart from one another.

“What do you think you two are doing?” he barked. Both boys froze in fright.. It was Ewan who spoke first.

“Theo started it, I was just defending myself!” He insisted with a scowl. Theo's eyes widened, completely flabbergasted by the outright lie. Ewan had started the whole thing calling him a baby!

“If you could learn to keep your big mouth shut, then I wouldn't have to shut it for you!” Theo yelled back.

“I didn't say anything, idiot.” Ewan protested.

“Yes you did!” Theo shouted back. Both boys tried to lunge at each other again, but both were stopped as Uncle Rob, still holding onto them, yanked them apart once again.

“Stop it,” Uncle Rob ordered forcefully.. “We are in public,” he growled. Both boys immediately felt the tension drain out of their bodies in submission.. “Now, if you guys think you can be bigger men than we can let this pass,” Uncle Rob said, letting go of the two. “However if you would rather carry on like squabbling toddlers, then I'm sure we can settle things more thoroughly back at the house. That is if you boys think it's necessary to completely ruin everybody else's day?”

“No sir...” Ewan squawked obediently, a hint of shame in

his voice.

“Whatever,” Theo mumbled.

“Theodore,” Uncle Rob said in a stern tone.

“I-I mean no sir,” Theo squeaked.

“Good,” Uncle Rob said, straightening up a little. “Now, I saw a shooting gallery down there. What do you guys say to watching me set the high score?”

“Yeah right!” Ewan giggled, instantly in a good mood again. “I’m way better than you old man.”

“I’ll beat both of you!” Charlie cheered.

“All right, looks like we got a contest,” Uncle Rob laughed. “Theo, you coming?”

Theo nodded as he followed along, although he didn't participate in any more of the amusements for the rest of the day - acutely aware of how much of a kid he had been acting since coming to the fair. The sooner they got back to the house the better. Maybe he could finally try and get some answers.

The whole way home, Theo was sure the other boys were talking about him. He sat in the middle row with Jessica and Luke again, the sound of their hushed whispers and giggles pricking at his ears like tiny needles. He shot them a few aggrieved pouty scowls from between the gaps in the seats,

but that only seemed to amuse his fellow preteens more, inevitably prompting Ewan to mumble yet another secret in joke into Charlie's ear from behind a confidential hand and eliciting another cascade of cacophonous cloying laughter from the boy. Theo clenched his fists in frustration, feeling another pang of anger. What were they saying about him?

Back home, the two of them made straight for Ewan's bedroom, brushing past Theodore as if he wasn't even there. That only made him even angrier. Just a few hours ago, he'd been entirely enmeshed into their preadolescent clique, happily chatting away about video games and roller coaster rides. Now, it seemed he'd once again been deemed an outcast, serving only as the butt of their jokes. Theo was still furious about what had happened at the amusement park, but more than anything else he felt an unquenchable sense of seething envy; a horrible suspicion that Charlie had been deemed cool and mature enough to hang out with their almost-adolescent big cousin while he was still languishing in lame boring babyhood.

"Where are you going?" He whined at Charlie as the younger boy stomped up the stairs, narrowing his pale blond-brown eyebrows into a pleading puppy dog expression.

Charlie looked a little embarrassed, sympathetic even, but a telling glance from Ewan was all it took for him to grow sterile and standoffish again. "To play Pokemon." he dismissed.

"Aren't you gonna ask if I wanna play?" Theo asked. It

wasn't like he actually wanted to play Pokemon with the two of them, but the fact that no such invitation had been extended rubbed him the wrong way. Charlie bit his lip awkwardly, clearly unsure what to say.

Ewan snorted. "No." he said bluntly, cutting the younger boy off. The corners of his lips grew into a cruel smirk as he flicked the supporting strap of Theo's striped overalls, pretending to wrinkle up his nose in disgust. "Urgh, do you smell that Charlie?" he announced in an over-dramatic, disingenuous voice.

"What?" Theo demanded.

"I think Teddy pooped his diaper." Ewan cackled. It was about the most immature insult imaginable, but it elicited another excruciating round of giggles from Charlie all the same - his snickers like nails on a chalkboard. "No wonder he's cranky."

Theo would have tackled Ewan to the ground again right there and then, but before he got the chance he darted away up the stairs behind Charlie - leaving Theo seething speechless in the hall landing.

"I don't...I DO NOT WEAR-!" He stammered and shouted after them as they escaped, completely at a loss for words - but they were already gone.

Completely overcome with emotion again, Theodore instead stomped up the stairs himself, marching to his own temporary bedroom and stripping off the ridiculous overalls. Flinging

them aside with all the force he could muster, he dug out some plain gray sweatpants from his suitcase, quickly pulling them up to his waist. He took a few deep breaths, trying to calm down. He knew he was being ridiculous. They were what? Twelve and ten? He was eighteen! Why was he letting their stupid jibes get to him? He had much bigger things to be worrying about.

Theo was just managing to calm down, his cheeks only a little red still, when he heard a rapping on the door.

“Come in.” he said, cringing at the sound of his high-pitched morose little voice.

Uncle Robb opened the door, showing the boy a wide enthusiastic smile. “Hey, buddy.” he encouraged. He cocked his head as he got a look at the expression on the boy’s face, a little concerned. “You alright?”

“I’m fine.” Theodore insisted, though he knew he didn’t sound fine. He managed a smile all the same, remembering what his uncle had proposed in the music shop. “Did you need urgh...help in the computer lab?” he asked, trying to sound less excited by the prospect than he actually was.

“Sure do.” Uncle Rob confirmed. “Come on.” Theodore jumped to his feet, following his uncle out of the bedroom. They went down the stairs, through a locked door beside the laundry room, and down yet another set of stairs towards the basement. “It’ll just have to be for a little while tonight.” Uncle Rob explained as they walked “I’ve got tons of work to do.”

“I could help!” Theodore piped up at once. If there was going to be an answer to his predicament, the boy was reasonably certain that it would be found in the computer lab. He needed to negotiate as much time as possible.

Uncle Rob smirked at his enthusiasm. “It’s okay,” he told him. “I don’t want to take up too much of your time. I’m sure you’d much rather be playing with your cousins.”

“I guess...but I don’t mind.” Theodore said weakly, remembering that this was technically supposed to be a punishment. As Uncle Rob flicked on the lights however, Theodore was struggling to see how any eleven year old could possibly think of it as such. The computer lab looked straight out of Iron Man! Decked out with sheet glass whiteboards, pristine white floors, and dominated by a gargantuan silver clad computer which took up an entire wall whirring away noisily at the back, the place was a dorky kids’ paradise.

“Wow...” Theodore exclaimed, wandering towards the nearest monitor like a moth drawn to light. Uncle Rob put a calming hand on his chest, stopping him in his tracks.

“Pretty neat, huh?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.” Theodore nodded. He was jittering all over, feeling like a little kid hopped up on 10 cups of coffee. This place was so high tech! If it wasn’t the direct cause, surely he could make some progress towards solving his predicament here. All he needed to do was get a look at the monitor, and he’d be well on his way to getting back to normal.

“I know it’s exciting but don’t touch anything without asking, okay?” Uncle Rob insisted. “This stuff is valuable. I don’t let just anyone wander around in here.”

Theodore’s curiosity was piqued. “What about Ewan?” he asked.

Uncle Rob laughed heartily. “Are you kidding?” He pointed at the huge silver clad unit humming noisily at the back of the room. “That is one of the world’s premier technological servers. If I gave Ewan free run of this place, within three days it would be going to waste hosting the world’s premier minecraft sever.”

Theodore tittered and puffed with pride, feeling an odd sense of superiority. “You can trust me.” he reassured.

“Sure, buddy.” Uncle Rob agreed. “But do as I say, okay?” He went over to the monitor, starting to boot up some program. The computer began to hum even more intensely. “You’ve got Jessica’s talent for music. I guess it only makes sense you’d have a knack for computers too. And if you don’t wanna go to Holyoak, well...” he trailed off, his gaze falling intensely on whatever program he was running. He typed a few hesitant figures into the keyboard, before pointing over towards a large empty space in the opposite corner behind a glass screen. “Go stand in the center of the grid, bud.” he instructed, not taking his eyes off the screen.

Theodore did as he was told. “Here?” he asked.

“That’s right.” Uncle Rob confirmed, though he still hadn’t

taken his eyes off the screen. He typed in a few more rapid sentences before he finally turned around, showing an excited grin. “Now this is really something special,” he began. “You know Jessica and I were working on our new child safety package?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.” Theodore nodded, starting to feel a little anxious.

“Well, just between you and me, we stumbled on somewhat of a game changer.”

“What is it?”

Without any further ceremony, Uncle Rob pressed down a key on his computer keyboard. The hum of the computer rose to an almighty crescendo, almost seeming to make the whole house shake for a moment, before Theo saw it. If he hadn’t already experienced much much more momentous changes over the last three nights, he wouldn’t have believed his eyes. It was like magic! He watched in wonder as the threads of his sweatpants seemed to expand, the waistband extending upwards and upwards and the color of the drab gray material subtly brightening bit by bit. In a matter of seconds, Theodore found himself wearing the exact same pair of red and white striped overalls he’d shucked off mere minutes earlier, his sweatpants having dissolved into thin air.

Theo locked gazes with his uncle, eyes as wide as two surprised saucers. “How?”

“Nanobots.” Uncle Rob explained with a smirk. “Think of them like teeny tiny super intelligent workers. They’re smart

enough to take all the individual fibers that made up your sweatpants and rearrange them into something new. Like those overalls.”

“That’s...amazing.” Theodore exhaled, looking completely starstruck. Beneath the surface, his mind was racing however. Surely this was the technology that had transformed him, rearranging his own body in the exact same way! Of course, Theodore knew a body was much more complex than a pair of sweatpants, but the analogy was too close to be a coincidence. He had to get on that computer - tonight.

“It’s pretty limited right now. But the use cases are endless.” Uncle Rob continued to speculate. “Just the simpler functions could disrupt entire industries. And of course, the simpler the change the less energy it takes.” He pressed a few more buttons on his keyboard, almost instantaneously switching out the color of the stripes on Theodore’s overalls - first to blue, then to green, and finally to yellow. “Talk about fast fashion, huh?” he quipped.

Theodore stepped out from behind the glass screen, bounding up excitedly towards the monitor. “Can I try?” he asked, bouncing up and down like a hyperactive puppy.

Uncle Rob stepped aside, letting Theo see a surprisingly polished user interface. In one corner, Theo could see his own face, various categories of statistics about himself listed taking up the rest of the screen. “Feel free to explore.” Rob allowed permissively. “It’s pretty amazing. Just don’t change anything, okay?”

“I won’t...” Theo promised.

“Great.” Uncle Rob nodded. “I’m just gonna run upstairs and get a spare cable. Be right back.”

“Mmm-hmmm...” Theo hummed, already pre-occupied clicking through his profile.

The very first thing he clicked on was the ‘Age’ subheading. Instead of a number however, the only thing that was displayed were the letters ‘N/A’ written in bright red font. Beside it were three dots, which Theodore clicked to expand - a dialogue box popping up in response:

“Diagnostics request pending, user Charlie Parks...calculating.”

Theo was curious. What did Charlie have to do with anything? Narrowing his eyebrows in suspicion, Theo clicked out of his own profile and went to Charlie’s. Unlike him however, nothing seemed to be amiss - Charlie’s age of 10 duly noted in his profile. He clicked back to his own profile, hesitantly clicking on the age entry. There was a space he could click to edit the entry. He hovered his mouse hesitantly over the space. Surely it wasn’t that easy, was it? It might be his only chance. But there was still so much he didn’t know. If something went wrong, he might put himself in an even worse position.

Do as Uncle Rob says

Change the age entry

Chapter Thirteen

It was now or never. Hearing some footsteps coming down the basement steps, Theodore hurriedly pressed the edit button - entering the figure '18'. He once again heard the computer hum to life and his body tingle all over as the nanobots got to work. He closed his eyes, bracing himself for the inevitable return to normal. Surely it was over! Surely he had finally escaped the horrible humiliating nightmare!

As he opened his eyes however, glancing down at the familiar white pressed Holyoke uniform shirt complete with school crest and gray khakis still stained with dirt from the flower pot he'd broken, he realized something was off. The spindly arms sprouting out of his short sleeve shirt; the angelic face staring back at him from his reflection in the nearby glass white board; the whining moan rumbling unbidden from his pouting lips - all of these remained not those of a confident young man striding into an adulthood, but of an excluded, unpopular, immature eleven year old boy. Theodore groaned in frustration. What had gone wrong? Why wasn't he older?

"What are you wearing?" A voice sneered from the stairs. Theo spun around, seeing Ewan and Charlie having just come through the door. "Is that...a Holyoak uniform?" Ewan demanded.

"Urgh..." Theodore stuttered wordlessly, much too

emotionally whiplashed to provide any sort of explanation to his bizarre predicament.

Ewan marched confidently forward, brushing the boy aside to take a look at the computer interface. “Oh my God!” he exclaimed, hardly able to contain his amusement as he let out a series of loud mocking snickers. “Did you change your age on here?” he demanded. Charlie scurried up beside him, also taking a look at the monitor. Theodore didn’t answer, just looking at the older boy dumbstruck. “What, did you think you’d actually get older or something?” Ewan went on mocking, as if it were the most ridiculous sentiment in the world.

Charlie smirked, clearly very amused by the situation as well. “All it can do is change your clothes.” he explained. “Didn’t you know that?”

“O-obviously!” Theodore exclaimed defensively, though he didn’t sound very convincing. “I was just messing around with it.” He tried to backtrack.

“Suuuure.” Ewan rolled his eyes. “So then I guess you won’t mind if I mess around with a few other settings, then?” he declared, taking hold of the mouse and keyboard.

“No!” Theodore exclaimed, trying to wrestle back control. He pushed Ewan aside with all his might, trying to pull him away from the precious monitor. This was too important! He couldn’t run the risk of Ewan messing things up! The two boys tumbled to the ground in a scuffle, but not before Ewan managed to press two keys - the back space, and enter.

The computer hummed to life for a third time, the nanobots once again rushing into action to dress Theodore in attire appropriate to his listed age. Unfortunately however, that figure was no longer eleven, nor eighteen - but just one. Preoccupied with keeping Ewan pinned to the ground, Theodore didn't notice the changes at first. He was oblivious as his school uniform shirt and khakis merged into a single set of adorable bright yellow shortalls featuring the smiling sweet face of Winnie the Pooh; as his undershirt unfurled into a stripey soft t-shirt adorned with buzzing bees; as a matching yellow bucket hat materialized on his head, crowning his messy coronet of honey brown curls. In fact, the first notice Theodore had at all was the strange bulk he suddenly felt manifest around his waist - his boxer briefs retreating up his legs and then thickening four-fold into a crinkly, poofy, perfect oversized replica of a toddler's pair of Huggies.

This last humiliating change was also the detail Ewan chose to draw attention to, almost breathless with laughter as he kicked his way free from the grip of the eleven-year-old in toddler's clothing. "I can't believe it!" he exclaimed in delight, expertly twisting Theodore around and pushing him down prone on the floor to put his obviously padded rear on full display. "You're actually wearing a diaper!"

Theodore was completely mortified. Hot all over, he felt like his cheeks were on fire. "CHANGE IT BACK!" He screamed, flopping around under Ewan's grip like a suffocating fish.

"Naw." Ewan shrugged. "I think you're cuter this way." He

turned to Charlie, showing him a mischievous smirk as he continued to hold Theo down. “Hey, click through to the outfit selection mode and get rid of his overalls, would you? I wanna see if it’s like an actual baby diaper. You know, with cartoons on it and stuff.”

Charlie looked vaguely disconcerted, taking a step back. “I dunno. This seems kinda mean...” he said.

Ewan rolled his eyes, seemingly preparing to jump up and do it himself, but before he could act Uncle Rob appeared in the doorway.

“What on earth is going on in here?” he demanded, narrowing his eyes in suspicion as his gaze fell on Theodore. “What is he...?”

“It’s his favorite outfit.” Ewan snickered, jumping up to let the boy loose. Theodore sat up on his padded bottom, completely exhausted and humiliated. He covered his eyes in shame.

“Ewan!” Uncle Rob scolded. “I thought I told you not to come in here without permission.”

“But the door was unlocked.” Ewan countered.

“That doesn’t mean...” Uncle Rob trailed off, extremely frustrated. He marched over, quickly taking back command of the computer. “Theodore...you said you wouldn’t change anything!” he tutted, sounding extremely disappointed.

“I’m sorry...” Theodore whined, his voice barely a whisper.

He was completely dejected. Not only had his plan failed, he was now sitting there in the lab on full display to everyone dressed exactly like a one-year-old infant.

“Go and stand in the testing area.”

Theo didn't need to be told twice. He got up as quickly as he could, cringing at the papery feeling of the diaper rustling around his legs with every step. He finally waddled up to the designated spot behind the glass. Uncle Rob took a few agonizing moments to correct all unauthorized changes the boys had made before he was able to get things back to running how they should. He pressed the enter key, restoring Theodore to his dirt biker shirt and plain sweat pants. The eleven year old breathed a sigh of relief, relaxing at once, though he was still tremendously embarrassed.

“There. Now go to your rooms.” Uncle Rob demanded.
“You're all in very big trouble.”

Theo stood in between Charlie and Ewan in a line up in the brother's room as Mom and Uncle Rob stood across from them. The silence was thick, as if the tension had caused the air itself to become viscous. Theo glanced up to see the tight faces of the two adults opposite the boys. He quickly looked back down, fearing even looking at them would break them out of whatever was holding back the rage that Theo could feel emanating from them. Theo began to fear what was going to happen to him. Would he be grounded? Would Mom take away his video games and computer privileges? What if

she actually made good on that threat to take him across her knee?

Theo at once shook his head. What the hell was he thinking? The fear that had just run through him felt overwhelming, but Theo was eighteen! He shouldn't actually be scared of crap like that. Besides, how was he even in trouble? He hadn't even done anything! Sure he had changed two little numbers on the computer, but how could they even be mad at him after what Charlie and Ewan had pulled?

"I just don't even know where to begin," Mom said, finally breaking the silence and throwing her arms up.

"Let's start at the end and then work our way up." Uncle Rob suggested. Both adults then turned their eyes onto Charlie, who squirmed a little under their gaze. "Well young man, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"I'm really sorry!" Charlie said, his voice sounding so incredibly pitiful at the moment - almost as if he was on the verge of tears. "I was just mad at Theo for yelling at me at the fair, and Ewan was mad at him for fighting with him, and then I said we should play a prank on him..."

Theo's eyes widened a little. He couldn't believe that Charlie was actually admitting that he was the mastermind behind all of this.

"But if I had known that was what Ewan was going to do, I wouldn't have gone along with it." Charlie said. He turned to Theo. "I'm so, so, so, so, sorry,"

Theo turned his head away, waiting with anticipation for Mom to lay into Charlie. Maybe that little kid act had worked in the past when the boys had squabbled, but now with only a year separating them there was no way Mom could ignore Charlie's behavior!

“Well, we can hear how sorry you are.” Uncle Rob began. “And I think we can hardly punish you just for suggesting a prank.” Theo's head turned slowly in shock upon realizing where this was going as he listened to his Uncle continue. “The next time you are upset with someone, please just talk it out with them. Now why don't you skedaddle.”

Charlie went to leave before Mom stopped him. She told him to apologize to Uncle Rob for going into his lab without permission as well, which Charlie did, before scurrying out of the room - no doubt relieved to escape the oppressive atmosphere. Theo was aghast at how manipulative Charlie was. He had certainly put on a good show, and both the adults had lapped it up.

“Now on to you two,” Uncle Rob said, putting his attention on the boys.

“Theo started it! He was messing with the computer, I was just trying to fix it,” Ewan said.

“Don't even try it,” Uncle Rob said with a stern tone. “You are already in deep trouble, lying is only going to make it worse.”

“Theo.” Mom began. “You were already on punishment. Your

Uncle gave you one rule, and you couldn't help yourself for even a minute.” she said. “What could have possessed you to try and change your age in the computer?”

“I had too, it was my only chance!” Theo yelled. Both of the adults looked at each other with befuddled looks. “I h-had too,” Theo said, convinced this was the only chance he had to make his case. There was no telling what age he’d be the next day, after all. “I’m not eleven or six, or fourteen. I’m eighteen! But this house changed me...I don’t know why but...” Mom put up her hand to interrupt him, shaking her head.

“That’s your story?” she said. Uncle Rob couldn’t help but chuckle a little.

“We already know what you were trying to do. We know you were trying to get around some of the restrictions, weren’t you?” Uncle Rob accused.

“So what website were you trying to get on?” Mom asked. “Maybe a movie you’re not supposed to watch?”

“Or play video games late into the night?” Uncle Rob added.

“I’m not lying!” Theo yelled. “I’m not a kid, I’m eighteen!”

“Theo, your story is impossible.” Uncle Rob said. “Just because you change your age on your profile, that doesn’t mean it will change your biological age. That kind of technology is at least a hundred years off. You’re talking science fiction.”

“Yeah, too bad for you,” Ewan smirked. “It would be great if

you could just grow up with the click of a button.” He bit his lip mischievously. “Or maybe we’d all be better off if you grew down.”

“Ewan, you have no right to be talking that way after what you did.” Uncle Rob said.

“It was just a prank!” Ewan insisted defensively. “It’s not like he doesn’t need diapers anyway.” Ewan teased, causing Theo’s face to flush red. “I just didn’t want him leaving puddles all over the house again.”

“Enough.” Uncle Rob barked. “Ewan, you are going to your room for the rest of the night and the door is being locked.”

“What!” Ewan shouted, looking genuinely outraged.

“You heard me, you’re on lockdown tonight and you’re grounded for the rest of the month.” Uncle Rob said, placing his hand on the back of Ewan’s neck as he led him out. “Let’s go, we’ll finish this up in your room.”

Theo and his Mom were left alone. Theo went to say something, but his Mom just shook her head.

“You’re grounded for the rest of the night as well.” she said. “I suggest you use this time to figure out how you’re going to pay back your uncle for that violin - since you can’t be trusted in his lab.”

“I’m not lying! Why can’t you just listen to me for once!” Theo said, seeing his plans slipping from his fingers. She had to listen, she had to believe him!

“I’m listening just fine.” Mom said. “Honestly Theo you are too old to be doing this. Your Uncle was very gracious in giving you an opportunity to make things right.”

Theo felt his temper flare up. Why did he ever think she would believe him? She always thought she knew what was best for him, and nothing he could say to her would change that. Theo's anger was seething as his mind raced. The only thing he could think of now was to hurt her as much as she had hurt him all through his life.

“When we get back home tomorrow, I’ll be taking your electronics as well - until you can show me some maturity.” Mom said. Theo gritted his teeth.

“I’m not going back home.” Theo said. “I don’t ever want to see you again as long as I live! I hate you!” Theo yelled, letting his anger burst with the reckless fury of a preteen. His Mom blinked, a little taken aback by what he had said. But to Theo it wasn't enough - he wasn't going to hold back any longer. “I wish Dad had taken me with him!”

Theo regretted the words just as soon as he had said them. He saw his Mom take in a sharp breath as her face fell. She didn't look angry or even sad, she looked shattered.

Theo had not been serious about his statement. Despite his misgivings and resentment towards his Mom, there was only one person in the world he truly hated - and that was his Dad, who had walked out on the family shortly after Charlie had been born. They hadn't heard a word from him since.

Mom tried to say something in response, but Theo wouldn't hear it. He turned around and crawled under the covers of his bed. There was silence before he heard his Mom leave the room. He could almost swear that she was sniffing a little as she left. He heard the door close and the lock engage with a definite click.

Several hours later, he heard the door open as his Mom and Charlie came in. He heard her say goodnight to Charlie as she tucked him in. He then felt her come and sit on the edge of his bed.

“Theo, are you awake?” she said as she placed a hand softly on top of the lump under the covers. Theo was in no mood to even attempt to reconcile with her however, as he scrunched up tighter underneath the covers. “You can hate me all you want,” Mom whispered. “But I will always love you, no matter what.”

Part of Theo wanted to throw off the blankets and bury his face into her chest. He wanted to feel that comforting embrace, tell her how sorry he was, how he didn't mean any of the terrible things he had said. But he couldn't. He listened as she got up and walked out the room.

Theo lay in the bed for some time, staring up at the ceiling. He wondered what would happen tomorrow. How old would he be? Older, back to fourteen? Or would he get younger again? He knew that just hoping to wake up eighteen again wouldn't make it happen. He sat up. He couldn't allow himself to be given over to the winds of chance. He had to do

something. He got out of the bed, quietly looking over to see that Charlie was completely asleep, and then went to the door -turning the handle and finding it unlocked.

The boy crept out into the hallway. He couldn't hear a single sound. It seemed everyone was asleep. He snuck down the hallway, feeling like a robber in someone else's house. As he went past Ewan's room, he could see the red LED light on the door handle that signaled that his cousin had truly been sequestered into his room for the night. Theo made his way back down to the entrance of his Uncle's lab. He knew this was his only chance at setting things right.

Luckily Theo found the door unlocked. He moved stealthily into the lab area, coming back to the computer. He found it on a screen displaying the profile pictures of all the inhabitants of the house. He looked at his own to see a picture of his eleven year old self smiling, his name next to it along with his age set to eleven - thanks to Uncle Rob. Theo clicked onto the profile. He moved the cursor back over to the box with his age.

He changed it back to eighteen, yet this time nothing seemed to happen. He guessed it was because the clothing program wasn't running. Hopefully changing the setting now would set him back to normal in the morning. He let out a breath of relief, now seeing his profile with his true age next to it. He got up and crept back up to his room, crawling back into bed.

Even if Uncle Rob had told him that it wasn't possible, Theo couldn't buy that. Obviously something was going on that

even his Uncle didn't understand. Theo waited a bit just to see if he could feel something. After a while, he felt his eyelids start to droop. He let his eyes close. He was confident that this would work; it probably just took some time was all. Theo let himself fall asleep, knowing that tomorrow he would be back to normal. Once he was eighteen again they would have to believe him - of that he was sure.

Down in the lab, some life came to the screen on the computer.

Diagnostics report compiling

User input detected...data not complete...continue diagnostics.

Chapter Fourteen

Sunday June 8th: 6:34

When Theodore woke up, he knew he'd had a nightmare - though he couldn't quite remember what it was about. Still, he felt afraid. He let out a tiny kitten-like moan of distress, keeping his eyelids firmly shut as if doing so might keep any imaginary monsters far at bay. He wriggled uncomfortably under his blankets, reaching for his stuffie and pulling it close under his chin. The feeling of the fox's soft fur against his face gave him comfort at once, immediately calming his breathing and filling him up to the brim with a cozy peaceful warmth.

He recalled the events of the previous day in a muddled hodge podge of heightened emotions. He remembered his mother's hug at the music store, and his fury at the fair; his amazement at Uncle Rob's nanobot tech, and the humiliating prank Ewan had pulled on him. The feeling of his stuffie in his arms seemed to wash all of those feelings away like a sandcastle under the rising tide however. None of that mattered anymore. He'd changed the computer system. Everything was going to be okay.

Feeling brave enough, Theodore finally opened his eyes. He was cocooned in a nest of colorful blankets, curled up in a ball atop a soft springy mattress. The boy purred in satisfaction, delighting in the warm feeling rising from the tip

of his toes, up between his thighs, around his tummy, and up to the hair on the top of his head. Twisting around with a lazy yawn, he stretched out to his full length. He heard a gentle rustle as he moved, his waking bliss disturbed by the feeling of a strange papery material tickling against his tummy and the underside of his toes curling around smooth polished wooden rails.

That's when he saw it. Surrounding Theodore on every side, tall wooden bars loomed above him like the narrow trunks of pale oppressive trees. Worse, between his own pink plump legs, the disposable bulk of a sagging saturated diaper was nestled - the playful illustrations of Tigger and Pooh and the humiliating Huggies branding stained a tell-tale muted yellow.

Theo's euphoria evaporated, replaced with panic, disgust, and fear. Throwing aside the crib blankets, he saw he was wearing nothing else but a blue and white striped button up pajama top, stained with spaghetti sauce and riding up over his itty-bitty toddler's paunch. The little boy got clumsily to his feet, resting his arms on the top of the bars for support as he gazed out across towards the mirror - assessing the damage.

Any hint of preteen-hood having been completely erased, the boy's adorable apple red cheeks, little pug nose, and cascading tufts of silky caramel hair had returned with a vengeance. Unlike at six however, he was now firmly in the realm of toddlerhood - no more than three years old. The only comfort Theo could take was that he hadn't tumbled down to complete infancy. Despite the soiled diaper he sported sagging between his legs, he could still stand; and despite the

comforting fox toy still cuddled snugly under his arm, his mind hadn't yet descended completely into hopeless babbling baby nonsense. What on earth had happened? He had changed the figure on the computer to eighteen hadn't he? So why wasn't he big! Had he used the wrong program?

Seeing that Charlie was still sleeping peacefully on the ordinary bed on the other side of the room, Theodore turned on the digital alarm clock on the bedside table beside him. He tried to focus his eyes, but for some reason he couldn't make heads or tails of the numbers displayed. Still, the dim morning light seeping through the windows assured him that it must still have been quite early. He needed to get back to the computer lap before anyone else woke up! Perhaps he still had time?

Steeling his little features into a harsh purposeful frown, Teddy lifted up his pudgy leg over the top of the crib bars and clumsily wriggled over the top like a tyke-sized commando. He landed with a bump on his padded bottom, both the pain and the cold saturated material squelching against his skin making him cringe. Still, he resisted the urge to burst into bawling age-appropriate tears, instead forcing himself to his feet and retrieving his fox from in between the bars. Clutching it against his chest, he darted out into the hall.

Theo's stuffie kept him calm as he tottered speedily along the hallway. He ignored the disgusting feeling between his legs, running at full pelt towards the staircase. When he reached the top of the landing however, his fear spiked to a new paralyzing height. Looking down the steep tall stairs, Theo's

comparatively miniscule stature made him feel as if he were teetering at the top of a mountain side. Gurning in determination however, he spurred himself to press on. He plopped down on his diapered bottom again, taking each step by humiliating step as he propelled himself bump by bump to the ground floor.

Finally having reached safety, Theo jumped to his feet again. He could see the door to the basement just a few short steps away! As he reached for the latch however, getting up on his tippy toes and straining his arm with all his might, it soon became apparent that he was simply too short. He let out a loud moan of disrepair, trying to jump for it, but only succeeding in losing his balance and falling down on his bottom again.

“There’s my little teddy bear.” Mom’s voice cooed. Suddenly, Teddy found himself propelled up into the air, suddenly sitting on her hip as if he weighed no more than a ragdoll. “What are you doing running around the house?” she asked playfully, tickling a single finger against his sensitive belly button.

“I need t-to...” Theodore tried to explain, before instantly breaking into an uncontrollable hysterical fit of high-pitched toddler giggles. Strangely enough, all of his panic and embarrassment seemed to fade into the background for a moment, replaced with simple ecstatic joy and affection for his Mommy. Eventually, he just about managed to pull himself together, pointing needily at the latch on the door. “I need to go to the ‘puter lab Mommy!” he heard his sickly

sweet little boy's voice ask. He cringed. Why had he said 'Mommy'?

"Oh, well that's not for little boys." Mom dismissed, summarily carrying him away from the door and into the living room.

His last hope seeming to diminish, Theodore felt another wave of uncontrollable emotions. "Noooo..." he whined, squirming and fidgeting and wriggling - doing all he could to escape his Mom's grip and get back to the basement door.

She was having none of it, however. "Someone's fussy, huh?" she dismissed, laying him down on the couch and pushing his chest down flat. Mom wasn't particularly strong, but the maneuver seemed to dispel any and all wiggly resistance Theodore could muster - instead leaving him breathless and immobile like a kitten held by the nape. "Let's get that yucky-yucky diaper off, huh?" Mom continued to commentate, going right ahead and ripping off the tapes holding it in place.

Theo felt like he was frozen immobile by a spell as Mom continued on efficiently in her well-practiced diaper change procedure. He could do nothing but mumble and whine as the sodden material was pulled away, his legs were cantilevered into the air, and the most private parts of him from his crotch to his bare bottom were wiped squeaky clean with wads of freezing cold wet wipes.

It was only when she reached for another diaper, taking a break from wiping him down to struggle with the plasticky package of a fresh pack of Huggies, that he managed to find

his voice.

“No, Mommy!” he asserted definitely, shaking his head.

“Hmm?” Mom asked, looking a little surprised. “What’s wrong, sweetie?”

“No diapers.” Theo insisted, pointing hatefully at the babyish package. “I don’t need ‘em.” he grumbled, poutily crossing his arms across his chest.

Mom looked a little skeptical. “Are you sure, Teddy sweetie?” she asked. “It’s going to be a long day today, and we’re going to the park. There might not be a potty nearby all the time...” she reasoned.

“No!” Theodore insisted, digging in his heels like a typical stubborn toddler.

“Come on, sweetie.” Mom tried to coax. She finally got the package open, picking out one of the diapers and making sure to show him the Winnie the Pooh characters printed on the front. “Look, they’ve got Tigger and Pooh. Just like the outfit Mommy picked out for you.”

Mom put down the diaper, reaching for a nearby basket of fresh laundry she had been folding that morning to produce the exact same outfit Theodore had been in the night before - except in miniature. Every humiliating detail was present, from the ridiculous hat, to the cutesy t-shirt, to the all too revealing shortalls.

Theo’s eyes bulged in horror. “I don’t wanna...” he mumbled.

He was utterly mortified.

“Come on, Teddy bear.” Mom coaxed gently. “You’d look so cute. It would make Mommy very happy.”

Do as Mom says

Refuse to wear the outfit.

Chapter Fifteen

It was just too much for Theodore. After everything Mom had done, after all the trouble she'd given him, all the responsibility she'd laid at his feet - now she wanted him back in diapers? The rational explanation didn't cross Theo's mind for a moment. It didn't matter to him that Mom thought he was three; it didn't matter that he'd woken up in a completely soaked-through diaper; it didn't matter that he probably did need diapers in this strange messed up universe that the computer, or nanobots, or some crazy magic had created. All he knew was that he was furious with his Mom, and he was going to let her know about it.

“NO!” Teddy shouted at the top of his lungs. “I won't, I won't, I won't I WONT!” he ranted. He managed to wriggle free from under his Mom's grip, standing up on the couch with his fists scrunched up furiously at his side. “I'M NOT A BABY!” he yelled directly into his mom's face.

The boy braced himself for the scolding of a lifetime. As soon as he finished yelling, he was certain his Mom would drag him across his knee and spank his bare bottom until it was bright red. Instead however, she barely blinked. In fact, she actually smiled! She put a finger to her lips, simply gently gesturing for him to keep his voice down.

“Shhhh...” she cooed. “Inside voice, sweetie. It's still very early.”

Theodore blushed, embarrassed. He suddenly felt very guilty, a wave of empathy and affection for his mommy washing aside his prior rage. Why was he acting like such a brat? “I’m sorry...” he mewled. He showed her a sad devastated pout. “But...but I don’t wanna wear a diaper!” He complained.

“That’s okay.” Mom reassured. “You’re a big boy, huh?”

“Yeah...” Theodore nodded.

“Well then you can wear your big boy undies.” Mom confirmed. “You just need to promise to tell Mommy or another grown-up if you have to go, okay?”

“Okay.” Theodore nodded eagerly.

“Alright.” Mom said, reaching back down towards the laundry and producing a pair of blue and white briefs featuring Woody from Toy Story smiling goofily on the butt. “Are you gonna be a big brave cowboy for me today?” she joked.

Teddy cringed, looking down at the pile of laundry hoping for a better option. “I dunno...” he said skeptically.

Mom however was already in the process of getting him dressed, pushing him down on the couch again and pulling the underwear swiftly up to his belly button. “There.” she praised, ruffling his hair. “One rootin’, tootin’ cowboy. Now all you need are your boots and your hat!”

Theodore gasped, giving her a scandalized glare. “I need other clothes!” he insisted.

Mom rolled her eyes in amusement. “Of course sweetie.” she said, but left him there in nothing but his undies all the same. She reached down and picked up her laundry basket. “Mommy will help you get dressed before we head out. I just need to go and put the rest of this laundry away.”

Afterwards, Mom swept Teddy back up into her arms and took him to the kitchen where Uncle Rob was manning the stove. The sound and smell of crispy bacon sizzling in the pan wafted in the air. Mom placed Teddy into a booster seat, before pulling a strap across his belly and clicking it into place - securing him to the seat before pushing the chair as close to the table as it would go. Theodore knew that protesting would only be dismissed, and given his new height he really did need the extra boost to sit at the table. What he wasn't okay with was when he saw his Mom approaching with a bib in hand, no doubt meant for him.

“No, Mommy!” he squealed, trying to move away, which wasn't very far at all - not even realizing how naturally he had just called her mommy again.

“What's with you today?” Mom asked, befuddled by his reaction to something so normal.

“No bib, please.” Teddy said, his big baby blue eyes filled with a pleading look that even Mom couldn't resist.

“I guess you aren't wearing a shirt,” Mom said with an adoring smirk as she placed the bib back on the counter. “Mommy forgot you were trying to be a big boy today.”

“There you go pardner,” Uncle Rob said in a terrible approximation of a southern drawl, setting a plastic plate in front of Theo - who gave his Uncle a side eyed glance at the strange greeting.

“Noticed those undies of yours.” Uncle Rob chuckled.

“Oh yes,” Mom tittered. “Teddy wants to be a big boy cowboy today. I guess I'll have to find something for him to wear to go with that.” Theo felt an ominous dread from her comment. He could only imagine what sort of cutesy atrocity she would produce for him. Anything was probably better than the outfit he had been presented with before, but was it really necessary for her to treat him like her little dress up doll?

“It doesn't hafta be cowboys.,” Theo muttered. ,

“I probably don't have a whole cowboy outfit for you.” Mom said with a smile as she patted his head. “But I think I'll find something that will work so you can feel like a big cowpoke today.”

Theo grimaced a little. That wasn't what he had meant at all. Theo was about to say something more, when his Mom's face sort of lit up as a thought came to her. “Rob, didn't you say you had something for Teddy?”

“Oh yeah!” Uncle Rob said, grabbing a box off the counter as well as a sippy cup out of the fridge as he came and sat at the table next to Theo. “This will be perfect for you - especially since you've decided to be a big kid today.” Uncle Rob said as

he opened the box. He took Theo's wrist and wrapped a blue plastic strap around it. At the top of the strap was a small square display screen that looked like a smartwatch. Uncle Rob brought out his own phone and made a few swipes before the screen on Theo's wrist lit up.

Theo watched with interest. There was a picture of a sunny blue sky and a green field. Then a simple pastel approximation of a little white bunny came hopping into view from the side.

“Are you Teddy?” the bunny asked in an eager enthusiastic voice that played out of the watch.

“Go on, answer him,” Uncle Rob directed.

“Um yes,” Theo said, still not sure what this thing even was.

“That's such a cool name,” the bunny cheered as the background lit up with rainbows before returning back to normal. “I'm your integrated training assistant, but you can just call me Buddy!” the bunny said. “Hi Teddy, nice to meet you!” Buddy waved. Theo stayed silent as he watched the animated bunny continue to wave.

“Teddy, aren't you going to say hi?” Uncle Rob asked, motioning with his hand.

“Hi Buddy...” Theo said, still a little put off.

“I can tell we are going to be great friends,” Buddy said. “I know! Let's sing the friends song!” Theodore wrinkled his nose as tinny music began to sound out of the speakers, the

lyrics displayed in a bubbly font on the screen that for some reason he couldn't quite decipher. He looked away in embarrassment, waiting for the stupid song to end.

“Buddy is going to help you out with lots of things,” Uncle Rob told him, not seeming to notice his total lack of enthusiasm. “Pretty neat huh?”

“Yeah I guess...” Theo said, still a little gobsmacked by the pure babyishness of what he had just witnessed. Uncle Rob chuckled, mussing up Theo's hair before going back to the stove as Mom went up the steps to get herself ready for the day.

Teddy began to eat his breakfast of bacon and scramble eggs with his hands as the rest of the kids filed in. First was Jessica, who cuddled him affectionately before kissing him on the cheek. Theo moved his head away as she went and made herself coffee. It was incredibly weird to be treated like that by her, since they were the same age - even if Theo was the only one who knew it.

Luke was the next to make an appearance, coming down in a pair of monster truck themed pajamas as Charlie followed close behind. Charlie sat down and gave Theo a cheery smile. Luke took a seat right next to Theo. As he sat down, he spied the watch on his wrist.

“Is that a Buddy watch?” Luke exclaimed as Uncle Rob set a plate of food in front of him.

“It sure is,” Uncle Rob answered for Theo. “Teddy decided

that today he is going to be a big kid.”

“You have one too?” Theo asked Luke, hardly comforted by the news that he and Luke were now once again on more equal footing.

“Sure.” Luke said. “But mine stays in the bathroom. He helps me brush my teeth.” Luke said. He burst into a song set to the same lame annoying tune as the ‘friendship song’, albeit with lyrics about brushing your teeth. Teddy covered his ears.

“That's great, Teddy,” Charlie said, talking over Luke's somewhat obnoxious singing. “Guess that's why you got your undies on.” He added with a laugh.

“I thought Teddy wore diapers” Luke commented, pausing his song. He smirked with superiority as he emphasized the word. “Cuz of his axey-dents.”

“He does most of the time.” Charlie confirmed, reporting in a neutral factual tone as if it were no big deal. “But Mom lets him wear undies sometimes when we're at home - she says it's good practice for him.” Charlie explained before turning to Theo. “But my little brother is going to keep his pants dry all day today, right?”

Theo looked away as his cheeks flushed a little. He wasn't even going to dignify a question like that with a response. Ewan then came shuffling into the kitchen wearing only a pair of sweatpants as he sat down at the table.

“You and Teddy match!” Luke giggled, pointing out the fact they were both shirtless. Ewan looked across at Teddy and

smirked.

“I have pants on at least.” Ewan said. “Plus I got to show off my muscles.” He held his arms up and flexed showing off the burgeoning signs of a well toned physique. “Teddy's still all tubby .”

“I'm not tubby...,” Theo protested..

“It's called baby fat,” Ewan retorted, putting extra emphasis on the last word. “Look at that pudgy little tummy you got.”

Theo took in a deep breath as he looked down at his belly. His adorable toddler's tum was emphasized even more being pushed out a little thanks to the strap of the booster seat. Before Theo could even think of a good retort, Mom came back into the kitchen and unstrapped Teddy from his seat - lifting him up into her arms.

“Ready to get dressed, big guy?” Mom said in a sweet tone as she whisked him away up to the room he was sharing with Charlie. She set him on the ground in front of the crib he had woken up in. “Okay honey. I did my best with what we have here with us.” Mom said before picking up a white t-shirt that had big black spots all over it like a cow. “I know it's a cow and not a cowboy, but I also found a bandanna you can wear around your neck so you'll look like you're ready to go rustle up some horses!”

Theo found himself smiling as he lifted up his arms. His Mom went and pulled the shirt over his head. It's not like he had actually asked to be a cowboy, but the shirt itself was

innocuous enough. In fact, it was probably the closest thing he had to normal clothes. He remembered the winnie the pooh themed shortalls that his Mom could put him in if he refused. She then helped him put on some jeans, although Theo realized that the fly on the front was fake and the elastic waistband clung to his waist just below his belly button. Mom then took a red bandanna and tied it around his neck.

“Oh Teddy, you are every mother's dream. No matter what I dress you in, you always look adorable.” Mom said, taking a step back to admire her work.

“Moommy,” Theo whined. Her cloying comments were starting to get a little annoying.

“Sorry dear - I forgot you were being rough and tumble today.” Mom said apologetically. They walked out into the hallway where Luke was coming out of the bathroom.

“You look like a cow,” Luke laughed. “You know what sound a cow makes right?” Luke asked as he started to poke Theo's tummy.

“S-Stop it,” Theo stammered, taking a step back.

“Luke honey, Teddy is a cowboy not a cow.” Mom said patiently. “We just don't have any cowboy themed clothes.”

“A cowboy...” Luke said with some intrigue. “I can help!” the boy said as he bounded towards his room. A few moments later, Luke came running back out holding a brown bundle in his hands that he handed to Mom.

“They're from my costume box.” Luke said proudly - as if he had done something really worthy of praise.

“Oh Luke they're perfect,” Mom exclaimed as she showed Teddy that Luke had given her a brown faux leather vest and a tan cowboy hat. She put them on Theo, fussing with the hat so that it perfectly sat upon Theo's now completely blonde tufts of hair. “What should you say to your cousin Teddy?” Mom asked.

Theo pursed his lips - he was a little miffed to be honest. He felt he had gotten away with not being dressed in a completely ridiculous outfit for once, until Luke just had to shove his nose in. Theo concluded that when Luke got involved that's when things always got to be their worst - after all, it was Luke's fault that he had ended up in that stupid teddy bear costume a few days ago.

“Teddy, be polite and thank your cousin for letting you borrow his stuff.” Mom said, her voice tinged with just a bit of sternness.

“Thank you Luke,” Teddy mumbled. Mom was about to make him say it nicer, yet it seemed good enough for Luke who responded with a ‘you're welcome’ before skipping merrily off.

Back downstairs, Mom sat down on the couch with Theo on her lap - holding him with her arms around his tummy before turning on a cartoon while she looked at her phone. At first Theo wanted to protest a little - but for some reason whenever she sat with him like this it seemed to fill him with a warm

fuzzy feeling of security. He let himself sit back, putting the back of his head against her chest. Luke came down now fully dressed. He took a seat on the couch to join in on the cartoons.

Mom then got up to go and make a call, setting Theo on the couch next to Luke.

“Lukey, sweetie. Can you watch Teddy for me? Just make sure he doesn’t get up to any mischief.”

“Uh-huh!” Luke agreed, eager to show how big and responsible he was.

Theo however found the situation to be so completely mortifying that it seemed to jolt him right out of whatever toddler daze he had been caught up in. He looked over to the basement door, remembering what he was supposed to be doing. He wanted to get up and try to get back into the basement lab, but there were too many people walking around for him to be able to sneak down. Not to mention Luke was right next to him. For perhaps the first time in his life, the five-year-old had been put in charge over someone - and he was no doubt eager to prove himself.

Theo let out a little grunt, seeing that he was stuck - at least for now. He let his gaze turn back to the cartoon, and a few moments later his attention had been captured entirely by the tv.

Mom came back some time later, announcing they were almost ready to leave. She led Theo over to a bench by the

door where everyone's shoes were lined up. She grabbed a pair of shoes with a turtle motif complete with velcro straps, moving to put them on Theo's feet.

“Doesn't Teddy need boots?” Luke asked “Since he's a cowboy and all?”

“Well, we don't have any boots for him. So he'll just have to go without.” Mom dismissed, talking with a sort of forced smile that seemed to suggest that Luke's comments weren't exactly helpful at that moment.

“He could borrow mine!” Luke said, grabbing a bright yellow pair of rain boots and setting them on the ground. “They're my old ones actually, cuz Daddy said my feet got giant over the winter.”

Mom puckered her lips, but nodded her head, appearing to be mulling something over in her head.

“Those will work just great,” Mom said, smiling as took the boots and slipped them on Theo's feet. She then grabbed his hands, putting him on his feet. Theo took a couple of steps forward. The boots were slightly big on him, and he could feel them shift on his feet slightly as he walked. As Theo looked at Luke he certainly didn't seem to be big for his age - which only made Theo feel all the smaller. How little had he gotten that the boots that were too small for Luke were slightly too big on him?

Mom reminded Luke that if he wanted to bring any toys to the park then he needed to go and get them now, which sent

Luke scampering off. Meanwhile, Mom told Theo to wait and they would be leaving very soon. Theo stood waiting as he looked over at the basement door again. Everyone else was still rushing about, but just maybe Theo could sneak over and figure out some way to get the door open?

That was until he felt some pressure in his bladder. Theo was a little taken aback by how fast the feeling had come on. He felt for a moment like he could hold it while he tried to figure a way into the basement, but remembering the events of yesterday at the fair something told him it might become a more urgent need sooner rather than later. Theo decided to not risk it - figuring that he should take care of this lest he had another accident. He came up to the bathroom door and stood on his tiptoes, grasping at the handle, but found it wouldn't budge. The door was locked, and he was far too short to reach the thumb pad to unlock the door - just as he had been at six.

Suddenly, Theo remembered the password. With some grumpiness, he dutifully squeaked ' I gotta go potty!', yet the red L.E.D. light on the door did not change as it had the last time. Theo cocked his head, had the password somehow changed? Just then, the Buddy watch sprang to life on his wrist, and Buddy the Bunny appeared on the screen.

"Do you need to go potty?" Buddy prompted. Theo rolled his eyes - of course this stupid watch worked with the house. Why should he have expected anything different?

"Yes!" Theo said, rather annoyed as he looked at the cartoon

bunny on the watch staring back at him.

“Need some help?” Buddy prompted.

Theo watched as the screen split. On one side was a picture of Charlie's smiling face and on the other was his Mom - the same as their profile pictures Theo had seen on the computer the night before. His eyes went wide as he realized what the watch was asking him. There was no way Theo was actually going to call for help like this. To actually have to ask for help in the bathroom was humiliating!

“No!” he insisted aggressively, but the watch ignored him.

“Need some help?” it repeated, not even seeming to recognize the word.

Theo thought that he could probably just hold it until they got to the park where there were no smart locks on the doors. It might actually be the better choice. He could show his Mom that he didn't need her hovering over him all the time. Yet Theo was starting to doubt if he could even hold it another minute, let alone an hour or so. If he did have another accident, his Mom might put him back in a diaper. As humiliating as it was to wake up in one, it would be ten times worse to have to wear one out in public. The thought of his Mom having to change him on a park bench or something filled him with dread.

Theo grimaced. He couldn't risk it, not today - given what the outcome might be at failing to keep his pants dry at this age. With great ire, Theo made his decision.

“Charlie.” Theo said. As much as he hated to have to call on his younger brother, at least he didn't need to worry about Charlie being too overbearing. With how his Mom had acted this morning, he knew she would take it upon herself to do everything for him in the bathroom.

“Okay!” Buddy agreed as a simple little tune began to play out of the watch. A few moments later Charlie came around the corner with his phone in hand.

“Is this you?” Charlie asked with a confused look at Theo as he showed him his phone screen that had a message notification on it.

“I need to go po...I mean the bathroom.” Theo said as he unwittingly had a hand against his crotch. Charlie merely smiled as he used his thumb to unlock the door. Theo slipped in quickly just as Charlie began to open the door, before spinning around and slamming it shut before he headed for the toilet. Much to Theo's chagrin however, the door opened back up as Charlie walked in closing the door behind him. “Get out!” Theo shouted.

“Teddy, you know someone has to help you in the bathroom.” Charlie said with a sigh.

“I can do it myself.” Theo said, puffing out his cheeks and frowning his brow at Charlie - who looked unconvinced. Theo needed to do something different. No one would ever take his statements seriously anyway. “Let me try.” Theo begged, looking up at Charlie while he stuck out his lower lip. Charlie rolled his eyes.

“Okay but I’m staying in the room.” I

“Turn around!” Theo insisted.

“Alright, alright.” Charlie said as he turned to face the door away from his brother. Theo was going to take what he could get. He stepped onto the stool in front of the toilet and pulled down his pants and underwear. He was going to have to remember the trick with his lip later -maybe that was his ticket into the lab?

Soon enough, the family was at the park for a picnic. Theo whined a little as his Uncle threaded his arms through the loops of the orange harness he was currently being fitted with. Theo felt Uncle Rob pull the straps together in back, clicking them together with a definitive snap. Theo looked down, seeing the reins across his chest. They were no different than the reins parents sometimes put their children in to keep them from walking off. Yet curiously there was no leash attached to this harness.

“Daddy, why do I have to wear this?” Luke mewled as he pulled at the harness he had also been fastened with. “I’m not a baby like Teddy.”

“Because Luke, I need you to help me today.” Uncle Rob said as he dug through a bag in front of the boys. “Teddy is going to help me test these out to make sure they work for the kids who need them and you, Lukey, are my stress tester. And what is your job?” Uncle Rob asked with a smirk and a raised

eyebrow as Luke's eyes lit up.

“To break it!,” Luke exclaimed, hopping up and down.

“Atta boy,” Uncle Rob said as he mussed up Luke's hair.

“And what pray tell are you using Teddy as your guinea pig for?” Mom asked as she watched, clearly a little apprehensive about letting her sweet baby be used for the whims of her brother's experiments.

“Tetherless child reins,” Uncle Rob said as he pulled two objects out of the bag. They looked like the plastic handles of retractable dog leashes. Where the button to control the leash would be however was a square touchscreen that looked like a smartphone. As Theo looked at it, he could tell this product was still very much a prototype. He wondered if Uncle Rob himself had built them in the lab back at home. Uncle Rob flipped a switch on both handles and typed on the touchscreens for a moment before nodding his head.

“Okay Teddy, Luke - you see that tree over there?” Uncle Rob said, pointing to a tall tree off in the distance. “I want you both to run to it as fast as you can.” Uncle Rob then raised his hand into the air and gave a three count before bringing his hand down swiftly as he shouted go.

Theo at first was not going to comply, yet upon seeing Luke take off the only thing he could think of was trying to keep up with him. He had this strange idea in his head that if Luke was doing something, he wanted to copy it. He wasn't exactly sure why - it just seemed perfectly natural. As if he needed to

prove that he could do it too. That he wasn't a baby. Keeping up with Luke was easier said than done however. Theo's short chubby legs didn't seem to want to run in a full stride like he was accustomed to, and the fact that he was wearing slightly oversized boots made him feel completely off balance.

However, about halfway to the tree, Theo saw Luke come to an abrupt stop. It looked like his feet had suddenly glued themselves to the ground despite his best efforts to try and move forward, almost as if he was pushing against something. Theo thought for a moment that he could now overtake Luke! He smiled. Everyone would think he was so great to have beaten the bigger boy to the tree! Yet a second later Theo found himself coming to a stop too - as if he had run into a wall. He bounced back a little, yet he felt no pain. It was more akin to running into the side of a giant balloon.

Theo tried to push through, but he found he just couldn't do it. He looked over to see Luke looking a little red faced as he huffed and puffed with a look of determination on his face. Theo tried to give one hard push, before he felt the harness tighten ever so slightly and he felt himself be pulled back. It wasn't rough, just enough to propel Theo gently backwards. However, walking backwards in the boots proved more difficult than forward, and Theo soon fell back on his butt - sliding backwards on his bum for a couple of yards until coming to a stop at Uncle Rob's feet.

"Looks like it works," Uncle Rob said, rather pleased with himself.

“Oh Rob, don't drag him across the grass on his butt like that!” Mom said as she got Teddy onto his feet, brushing off his behind a couple of times with her hands. “It'll stain his pants.”

“Sorry, just wanted to make sure the retracting feature wasn't too jerky,” Uncle Rob chuckled. “Right - so Ewan you get Luke, and Charlie you get Teddy.” Rob said, turning to the other boys as he handed them the handles. Ewan looked at it somewhat derisively.

“Do I really have to walk Luke around all day on a leash?” Ewan asked, as if he was somehow being inconvenienced greatly.

“I'm not a dog!” Luke protested.

“Quiet mutt.” Ewan said, pulling the handle quickly - which caused Luke to stumble a little forward.

“Ewan, knock it off!” Uncle Rob grunted before taking on a serious posture in front of Charlie and Ewan to show he meant business. “If I hear that either of you are using these things to pull these guys around like rag dolls, there will be serious consequences. Neither of you are too big for me to put these harnesses on you.” Uncle Rob said.

“Maybe you should just put it on Ewan now and be done with it,” Jessica said snidely from the sidelines.

“Shut up.” Ewan sneered, glaring at his sister.

“Enough.” Uncle Rob said, putting a hand up to silence any

bickering. “Now look - you don't even have to have them tethered to the receiver, you can just set it to a perimeter.” Uncle Rob said as he showed Ewan and Charlie how to set that function on the receivers. “Now while me, Aunt Deborah and Jessica go set up the picnic, why don't you two take Luke and Teddy to go play and set the area to the perimeter of the playground. In fact I don't want you guys enabling the tether function at all unless it is completely necessary,” Uncle Rob instructed.

Theo followed the rest of the boys as the groups separated, yet not before his Mom instructed him to mind Ewan and Charlie - and told him that they were in charge. Theo could only grumble at the reminder that his Mom saw no issue putting him under the supervision of his little brother once again. Stepping onto the wood chips of the playground, Ewan and Charlie began to fiddle with the receivers.

“Alright Luke try to walk away.” Ewan said. Luke tried to walk off the wood chips but just as with the test with the tree, he began to push against something invisible.

“You too Teddy.” Charlie said. Theo crossed his arms with a scowl that looked more like a petulant pout. “C'mon Teddy, remember we're helping Uncle Rob test this out.”

Theo let out a little groan as he rolled his eyes. He took a step towards the edge of the wood chips before he was stopped. However, he did not continue to try to break free as he took a step back - only doing the bare minimum so that Charlie would get off his back.

“Looks like it works.” Ewan shrugged. “Okay, you little kids can go play while me and Charlie do big people stuff.”

Luke protested that he wasn't a little kid, yet before Ewan could even retort he walked off towards the play structure. Theo stood planted in his spot, feeling grumpy. The desire to follow along with whatever Luke was doing did not manifest itself again.

“Aren't you going to go play?” Charlie asked. Theo shook his head as he crossed his arms.

“Oh c'mon,” Charlie prodded, assuming that Theo was just nervous of the few other kids on the playground. “I know, I'll go down the slide with you.” Charlie offered as he took Theo's hand and began to lead him towards the steps up the play structure. Theo at first wanted to pull his hand away, yet as they got to the bridge leading towards the tall tube slide at the top Theo almost felt himself get giddy at the idea of Charlie taking him down the slide.

Upon getting to the top, Charlie pulled Theo into his lap before shooting them off into the tube. For a split second Theo felt a rush of exhilaration, but as they came to the bottom back in the daylight, Theo immediately went and sat cross legged on the wood chips - a little taken aback by the waves of emotions that had just overwhelmed him. Charlie asked him if he had thought the slide was fun, yet Theo only gave a little whine in response.

“I want to go down the slide too!” Luke insisted, having seen what had just transpired.

“Then go.” Ewan said snidely with a flick of the wrist.

“I wanna do it like Teddy - I want you to go down with me!” Luke said, pulling on Ewan's arm a little before the older brother shirked him off. “Pleeease.” Luke pleaded.

“Fine, but only once.” Ewan said, clearly a little irritated as he followed Luke over to the steps.

Afterwards, Charlie tried to get Theo to do something other than sit - yet Theo held firm in his refusal. Giving up, Charlie and Ewan retreated a little and began to play on their phones with one another while Luke busied himself in the sandpit. Theo listened as Ewan and Charlie chatted about topics that he had joined in on so naturally yesterday. He found he wanted to go and try and join in again, yet knew that at his reduced age Ewan would probably just shoo him away. He bunched up his legs in his arms, content to sulk.

He mused on what could have gone wrong. How had he ended up younger than ever, especially since yesterday he had actually gotten older? It didn't seem to make sense, and he couldn't seem to find any pattern to it. Adding to his frustrations, he couldn't seem to come up with any sort of plan of how he was going to get back into the lab. Uncle Rob would never trust a three year old in there, and it didn't seem like he'd be getting older any time soon.

Theo found his thoughts drifting as he became increasingly bored. He looked around, spying Luke, who seemed to have made friends with another kid around his age. Eventually, the two of them wandered over to him, much to his annoyance.

“This is my cousin Teddy,” Luke said, pointing at him. “I have to help take care of him because he's little.” He boasted proudly.

“You do not,” Theo growled, standing up just to make their height difference less noticeable.

“Yes I do.” Luke replied, sounding somewhat confused. “Your Mommy made me watch you on the couch this morning.”

“You were not watching me!” Theo shouted back, insulted by the insinuation. As far as Theo was concerned, they had only been sitting on the couch together - it's not like Luke had any authority over him whatsoever. “I'm older than you...” Theo said, forgetting for a moment that he was the only one who even knew that.

“Nuh uh,” Luke shook his head. “I'm five and you're three.”

“Five is bigger than three.” the other boy joined in, holding one hand up with five fingers and another with three. “Don't you know how to count?”

“He probably doesn't.” Luke agreed. “He's only in preschool.”

“What's going on here?” Charlie asked.

“This is my friend Mason,” Luke said. “He's in my class! We were teaching Teddy how to count since he thought three was bigger than five.”

“I see...” Charlie chuckled a little. Just then, Theo felt a

rumble on his wrist. He looked down to see the image of Buddy Bunny pop up.

“Do you need to go potty?” Buddy asked. Theo felt his cheeks flush red as the two younger boys snickered. Theo jammed his hand into his pockets to hide the watch, yet the question repeated - only this time much louder.

“He's just going to keep asking until you answer.” Luke said in a knowing tone. The watch repeated its question again, louder than ever.

“No!” Theo spat out quickly, thankfully his answer seemed to satisfy the watch enough for it to cease its meddling.

“Why's he dressed so weird?” Mason then asked, pointing at Teddy.

“I'm not weird,” Theo protested, his cheeks flushing a little. He knew he stuck out like a sore thumb, but it's not like he had been able to pick out his clothes.

“Teddy wanted to be a cowboy today.” Charlie laughed as he pushed Theo's hat down a little, causing his hair to go in his eyes. “But he doesn't have a cowboy outfit, so we had to improvise.”

“That's my hat and vest,” Luke chimed in. Theo grumbled – as if it was in any way important where he had gotten the clothes from! “If he didn't have that he would just be a cow.” Luke giggled. Mason joined in too.

Theo seethed at the pair of kindergarteners laughing at him. It

was really starting to get to him, calling up memories of his lowest moments at Holyoke. Theo's instincts told him to go and hide behind Charlie. In Theo's mind at that exact moment, he only saw Charlie as his big brother, his protector who could save him from the teasing in the same way as he had done at the kindergarten ceremony. Yet that seemed to vanish as Theo became cognizant that he was in fact the oldest kid here. He couldn't run and hide, especially since his tormentors at the moment were nothing more than a couple of kindergartners! How could he ever live down the shame of running away from them?

Hide behind Charlie

Show Luke whose boss

Chapter Sixteen

“I’m not a cow!” Theo shouted, seeing red as launched himself at Luke - causing both boys to fall over onto the wood chips, tussling about. Theo felt himself pulled off, looking behind to see Charlie had him restrained as he pulled Theo against himself. Ewan had come over, seeing the commotion, and helped a surprised and shaken Luke off the ground - dusting some of the bits of wood chip off of him.

“Teddy, that wasn't very nice.” Charlie said, a little taken aback. “Apologize to Luke right now.”

“No!” Theo screamed. Luke deserved it and more. It was his stupid sweater that had embarrassed him at the middle school graduation, and it was Luke's big ideas that had seen him put into all sorts of embarrassing outfits and scenarios. Theo was positively at his wits end with the kid.

“Fine, guess we're doing it the hard way.” Charlie grabbed Theo under the armpits. Yet he wasn't actually strong enough to lift him up and carry him, especially while Theo was thrashing about. Charlie instead dragged him from behind as Theo continued to squirm and kick his feet until Charlie hoisted him onto a bench.

“You're going to sit on this bench and not get up for five minutes,” Charlie said as he took the receiver off his hip and began to fiddle with the touchscreen.

“You can't tell me what to do!” Theo growled back as he went to get off the bench, but found himself stopped by the same force that had held him back earlier. Theo was confused for a moment before he looked down at the harness across his chest. “You can't –” Theo began.

“You are on timeout, so either you can sit quietly or I'll have to give you more time - and if that's not enough I'll go get Mom.” Charlie stated authoritatively, crossing his arms in a posture that showed Theo he was completely serious.

Theo stood up defiantly on top of the bench. He toddled over to each side, testing the perimeter and even trying to go over the back - but he was stopped at every turn. Theo couldn't believe it. Charlie, his younger brother had actually managed to confine him onto the bench. He was on a timeout, all but confined to the naughty step, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. Theo fell back on to his butt as he was overcome with a feeling of abject powerlessness mixed with anger. His face crumpled as he began to loudly wail, not able to stop himself.

Charlie turned his back to stop himself from being swayed by the sight of his crying brother, and also to show Theo that no amount of pity seeking behavior would be tolerated. Theo's crying lasted for only a minute before subsiding into a sequence of mewling whimpers and sniffles. After the five minutes was up, Charlie sat on the bench next to Teddy, putting a comforting arm around him. Theo let himself slump against Charlie's side, completely exhausted from his tantrum.

“I'm sorry Teddy, I know that wasn't fun,” Charlie said. “But you know why I had to do that, right?”

“But he m-made me m-mad,” Theo winged, finding it hard to even speak.

“I know, but just because someone makes you mad it doesn't mean you can hurt them - you have to use your words.” Charlie said. “Remember - you're a big boy now, you gotta act your age.”

Theo's eyes went wide. The words “act your age” resounded in his mind, along with other terms such as “diagnostics”, “pending”...and “user Charlie Parks.” Theo tried to recount what had happened last night - not the night he had been eleven, or six, or even fourteen, but the night he had arrived at the house when he had been eighteen. For some reason, Theo could only surmise that the answer was somehow in there. Something had happened that night that had set all of this off.

“What did you do?” Theo asked, shooting up into a sitting position as he looked at Charlie with a bewildered look. Charlie only looked back confused. “Last night you said something, what did you say?”

Charlie looked back thoughtfully, before shaking his head.

“Say?” Charlie asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Try to remember last night!” Theo whined, speaking with a seriousness and an urgency that belied his apparent age.

“Well we got to Uncle Rob's house late, and so we went to

sleep right away..." Charlie began to recount.

"No, we had a fight!" Theo interjected, grabbing onto Charlie's shirt as if to shake him from whatever false narrative was in his head.

"You mean you fought with Mom." Charlie said. "Because they only had that old crib for you to sleep in..." Charlie chuckled.

"That's not right!" Theo said as his heart beat fast - he could feel it, there was something here. "You said something to me."

"I didn't say anything to you," Charlie said. "By the time I put on my pajamas and came back into the room you were already asleep."

Theo sat back on his feet. That just couldn't be. Something had happened, yet even as sure as Theo was he couldn't fight back the creeping doubt that he was grasping at straws. What was happening to him was far too big to just be the result of some off-handed comment uttered in the heat of an argument. Thousands of words were uttered in that house every single day, and yet nothing to Theo's knowledge had ever happened like this.. Theo was about to question Charlie more, to try and get him to remember something, yet he stopped as a more worrying feeling overtook him. It had come on fast again - and seemingly out of nowhere.

"You okay Teddy?" Charlie asked, noticing the instant change in Theo's expression to one of panic.

"I need to go potty," Teddy blurted out as he shot to his feet,

unable to stop himself from hopping from one foot to the other.

“Let's hurry then.” Charlie said, taking off towards the bathrooms hurriedly in an effort to get his little brother to the toilet before he had an accident. Unbeknownst to both boys however, the tether function of the reins activated on its own as Charlie outpaced Theo, who now could feel himself being pulled along. Theo tried to keep up, yet the pulling of the leash along with his awkward steps while he tried to run in his boots was too much for his degraded sense of balance, a small dip in the grass was all it took to send Theo tumbling onto the ground - face planting hard. That's when Theo felt it.

The sudden shock of the fall had been enough to break the dam, and as Theo got into a seated position he could feel the warmth spread through his underwear before soaking through to his pants and spreading up his backside.

Charlie turned to see Theo sitting on the ground looking down at his crotch, his mouth hung open a little. Charlie doubled back, and a look of concern came to his face. It was too late.

“Oh Teddy...” Charlie said, taking a knee next to Theo as he rubbed his back. Theo looked up at Charlie, blinking as fresh tears came to his eyes.

“My pants are wet...,” Theo moaned, his voice quivering in shame.

“Looks like you had an accident.” Charlie said, trying his best

to appear supportive to try and stop Theo from breaking down into another meltdown. Just then, the watch on Theo's wrist rumbled to life once again.

“Uh-oh! Did you go wee-wee?” Buddy Bunny asked. “Don’t worry, accidents happen!” The watch began to play the same cheerful tune - thought this time with lyrics about how accidents happen. Mom came walking up a few moments later. She looked down at Teddy with a gentle smile and an expression that seemed to suggest that she was none too surprised.

“Let's get you cleaned up,” she said, plucking Theo off the ground before she carried him across the lawn of the park. Theo was crying very loudly now, drawing the attention of all the people they passed by - who could all see clearly what he had done.

“M-m-mommy...” Theo found himself whinging, lips quivering pathetically as his frazzled three-year-old brain tried to process the supremely humiliating sensation in his pants. At least at eleven he’d had some semblance of emotional regulation to mitigate the embarrassment, but now all that Theo could feel was that his entire world was ending. He’d peed himself - just like a baby. He was supposed to be a big boy! “Mooooommy!” he cried, desperate for comfort as she sat him down gently on the nearby bench.

To make matters worse, all the crying, and whining and snotty-faced hiccupping soon attracted the attention of Luke and Mason. Abandoning their game on the playground, the

two curious boys approached the bench.

“Did he pee himself already?” Luke asked, hardly holding back a superior snigger.

“It’s just a little oopsie.” Mom responded neutrally, opening up her bag to produce a roll-up travel changing matt decorated with playful orange foxes against a forest green background. She reorientated Teddy on the bench, pushing a strong hand against his chest to force him to lay down. “It’s not a big deal.”

Mason looked equally amused. “He’s not even potty trained?” he asked with a smirk.

“Nope.” Luke reported. “He was trying to be a big boy, but I guess he still needs diapers.”

“Like a baby.” Mason pointed out.

“Yeah, like a baby.” Luke echoed.

Despite his vulnerable emotional state, the boys’ presence once again enraged the sobbing three-year-old. Kept lying flat against the changing table by his mother’s hand however, there was nothing he could do but scream. At three years old however, he was rather good at screaming.

“GO AWAY!” He bellowed, his face puffing up like a red hot tomato.

The boys just tittered, seemingly even more amused by his rather babyish outburst.

“I SAID GO AWAAAAAY!” he continued to shriek, now writhing around wildly under his mother’s grip like a feral kitten. He kicked, and scratched, and fidgeted, but Mom knew what she was doing and it was all for nothing - the boy remaining steadfastly in place with his butt stuck on the changing mat. In fact, all his wriggling only served to make the sodden soggy material of his underwear rub uncomfortably against his legs, but he didn’t care - just desperate for the interfering pair of five-year-olds to get out of his face.

“Why is he so whiny?” Mason commented, covering his ears, but he didn’t look particularly uncomfortable.

“Boys, I think it's for the best if you give Teddy some space.” Mom intervened, talking in a quiet calming voice.

“Why?” Luke asked innocently. “Can’t we help?”

“Yeah! I know how to change a baby. My Mom lets me help with my little sister.”

“No!” Theo objected at once, reinvigorating his useless efforts. “NO NO NO!”

“He’s feeling a little grumpy and sad.” Mom explained. “Why don’t you go and play with Charlie?” she suggested, pointing over to where Theodore’s former little brother was chatting to Ewan on the swings.

The boys looked a little disappointed, but acquiesced, wandering away out of view. With the threat of that particular humiliation out of the way, Theodore managed to calm down

a little, but he was still very upset - breathing rapidly in and out. The situation was simply intolerable. There he was, in the middle of a public park, wearing a ridiculous hodge-podged together cowboy outfit, sodden wet underwear between his legs, with his Mom preparing to pull down his pants! The outrage of his eighteen-year-old brain collided with the pure chaos of his three-year-old emotional state, a high-pitched sustained whine coming out of his mouth and tears starting to gather in the corner of his eyes.

Somehow, in the back of his mind, a still fully cognizant part of Theodore couldn't help but feel this was all his own fault. Charlie had been right. He'd been acting like a little brat, taking out all his own personal grudges and vendettas. Even at eighteen, he'd been a terror: he was a constant pain to his Mom; he'd ignored his cousins; he'd been a terrible brother to Charlie. He hadn't acted any better over the past few days, either. His toddler mind wasn't capable of any more advanced reasoning, but at that moment Teddy knew that was why all of this had happened. He'd made the wrong choices, he hadn't acted his age, and now he was right where he deserved. He only wished he'd worked it out sooner. The thought was hardly comforting.

"It's okay, teddy bear. It's alright." Mom comforted him, her soft hand gently rubbing his shoulder. "Mommy's just going to get you out of those soggy undies, and into a nice fresh diaper - alright?" she narrated.

"N-n-noooooo." Teddy objected through a cascade of stuttering sniffles and huffs. Even as he prepared himself for

another desperate fight however, his Mommy's gentle touch seemed to deflate all the energy out of him. "No Mommy... no diaper..." he managed to croak all the same.

"Oh, Teddy." Mom commiserated, taking the thick crinkly pair of Winnie the Pooh themed Huggies out of her bag and laying it beside him on the changing mat as she began to carefully roll up his cow pattern t-shirt and vest, laying a soft moisturized hand on his bare belly. "I'm sorry, my sweet baby boy." she said earnestly. "This is all my fault."

Theodore blinked in confusion, taken off guard by the bizarre remark. How was it his Mom's fault? He was the one who'd said all those hurtful things, who'd acted like an entitled stropky toddler, who'd peed his stupid pants! He sniffled, looking up at his Mom with big wide sorrowful blue eyes. "I'm sorry Mommy..." he whined.

"You don't have to be." Mom reassured him. "I was pushing you too hard. And I shouldn't have." She smiled. "You weren't ready. I should have let you grow up at your own pace." She started to pull down his shorts, patting his thighs. "Now. Let's get you in that diaper, shall we?"

The three-year-old felt himself freeze up, the wind stinging at his bare thighs. Somehow, Theodore got the feeling that the current moment was supremely important - as if whatever he decided to do would have implications far beyond the crinkliness of his underwear. He sniffled, turning his head to glance at Ewan, and Luke, and Charlie all chatting happily together near the playground equipment. The idea of putting

on the diaper still felt so strange and alien and horrible to him, the most extreme iteration of the creeping regression he'd been fighting against all these past days, but at the same time the idea of going on fighting felt even more horrible. Did he even deserve to be big again?

Insist on no diaper

Don't resist

Chapter Seventeen

Theodore let out a final moan of protest, but resisted no further. Being big was so complicated, and being little was so simple. Mommy would take care of everything. The thought was like an impossibly heavy burden being lifted off his chest, all of his anxieties, and vendettas, and pesky self-conscious big boy sensibilities seeming to flow out on his breath and fly away on the wind into the vast cloudless blue sky.

The boy let out a happy satisfied chortle and closed his eyes, feeling his Mommy hook a finger into his soiled underwear and pull them away. Suddenly, Theodore felt the Buddy Bunny device start to buzz on his wrist. There was a strong gust of wind, a strange tickling sensation enveloping the little boy's entire body - just as it had when the computer had changed his outfit in the lab the previous day.

When he opened his eyes again, Theodore found that his arm was bare - and the Buddy Bunny device was gone. Blinking in confusion, he sat up ever so slightly and looked down at his torso to find that he was no longer dressed in the cow print shirt and vest, but rather in the same striped t-shirt and bright yellow Winnie the Pooh overalls his Mom had suggested that morning!

“Just a moment, sweetie.” Mom insisted, gently pushing back down into a prone position as she disposed of not a soiled

pair of Toy Story briefs, but rather a soaked diaper - tying it up and stowing it safely in a disposable bag. “Phew-ee!” she commented with a chuckle. “You really went pee-pee, huh?”

Theodore felt vaguely that he should have been mortified by the comment, but instead he found himself giggling along - wriggling around restlessly as his mother cleaned him up with some baby wipes and went about securing a fresh diaper around his waist. The boy smiled in satisfaction, not at all perturbed by the pungent baby powder smell or the feeling of the papery bulk under his butt.

Just as Mom was refastening the crotch snaps on Teddy’s overalls, Charlie came over. “He needed a change?” he asked his Mom.

“Yep. But now he’s fresh as a daisy.” Mom reported.

Charlie nodded, offering the little boy a sweet big brotherly smile “Wanna go down the slide again?” he offered.

“Uh-huh!” Teddy found himself answering, getting clumsily up on his padded bottom before stumbling off the bench. He looked up, the sight of Charlie’s genuine enthusiastic smile filling him with a ecstatic unfamiliar euphoria. He waddled forward, embracing Charlie in a tight hug. “Love you...” he mumbled into his t-shirt.

Charlie chuckled. “I love you too, buddy.” he agreed.

Chapter Eighteen - Epilogue

Teddy was flat on his back as he looked up at the ceiling of the living room. He had woken up from his afternoon nap not too long ago, so he was only wearing a plain red shirt and a diaper. As the summer had ended and the new school year had started, Teddy found this to be the hardest part of his day – the wait. He rolled onto his side grabbing his fox stuffie and pulling it close, snuggling it into his chest. His Mom had once told him that it used to belong to Charlie. Teddy always liked to hear that Charlie had given him his precious fox. Just knowing that it had once been Charlie's always made Teddy feel cool. He wanted to do anything that Charlie did.

“Teddy, it's three o' clock!” Mom said, coming into the living room and standing over him. Teddy sat up with an eager expression.

“I gotta go wait!” Teddy said, getting to his feet before scrambling up the stairs . He was hopping up and down as he waited for his Mom to open the front door. Teddy then sat cross legged on the carpet in front of the door as his Mom made sure the screen door was locked - he was in position. The sun was warm as Teddy's eyes were fixed on the top of the hill that led down into their cul-de-sac. It would only be a little longer.

As Mom went into the kitchen to prepare a snack, Teddy became a little bored. He started playing with his fox, making

it prance all around himself. He was about to go grab some more toys to play with, until he heard the low rumble of the engine announcing it was time. Teddy watched the big yellow school bus come to a stop at the top of the hill.

“Mommy it's here!” Teddy shouted out as he got to his feet. Mom came and stood next to him as Teddy began hopping up and down again. “Can I go, can I go?”

“Get your shoes on first,” Mom chuckled as she brought over a pair of rubbery green clogs. Teddy slipped his feet in as his Mom pulled the straps up at the back to secure them to his feet.

“Now I can go!” Teddy said as he went to push open the screen door.

“Not yet,” Mom said, still knelt down beside him as she pulled him back to her side - wrapping her arms around his waist and giving his diapered bottom a few gentle pats. “You know the rule.”

Teddy let out a high pitched whine of anticipation as he watched the kids getting off the bus.

“I see him!” Teddy yelped, seeing Charlie descend the stairs of the bus and begin walking down the hill towards the house.

“Just a little longer...” Mom said. Teddy watched Charlie walking down the street with one of his friends. He was getting closer and closer, yet he was still going much too slow for Teddy's liking. Finally, Charlie crossed into the driveway after waving goodbye to his friend.

“Now?” Teddy asked, looking up at Mom.

“Now.” Mom said, nodding her head as she opened the screen door. Teddy bolted out the door, running just as fast as his little chubby legs would allow.

“Charlie!” Teddy squealed, waving his hands wildly in the air. Charlie smiled before kneeling down to catch Teddy in his arms as he hugged him. He lifted him off the ground before he carried him back towards the house.

“I missed you so much.” Teddy said, nuzzling into Charlie's shoulder.

“I just saw you this morning!” Charlie laughed.

“You were gone so long.” Teddy mewled a little. In his mind it felt like he hadn't seen Charlie in ages.

“It wasn't that long,” Charlie said. “Plus I bet you had lots of fun stuff to do today. What did you do in daycare this morning?”

“I painted a picture!” Teddy said smiling.

“Oh yeah?” Charlie asked. “Of what?”

“Lots of colors.” Teddy said, shrugging his shoulders. The boys made it back into the house to their waiting mother.

“How was school?” Mom asked.

“It was good.” Charlie said. “I got an A on my test.”

“Great job!” Mom said, leaning over and giving Charlie a

kiss on his cheek. "I made a snack for you boys, it's on the kitchen table."

"Is it cookies?" Teddy asked with a curious look.

"It just might just be." Mom smiled. "But you're coming with me first." Mom said as she took Teddy out of Charlie's arms. "Couldn't help but notice that somebody's got a soggy diaper and needs a change."

Teddy smiled as he put his hands up in front of his mouth.

"I gots a wet diapee!" Teddy giggled.

"You know Teddy," Mom said, looking at him thoughtfully for a moment. "Maybe tomorrow we should pick up some training pants at the store. What do you think, ready to be a big boy?"

"I don't know..." Teddy said with a frown. The whole idea did sound a little scary to him - what if he couldn't do it?

"C'mon Teddy I bet you could do it!" Charlie said.

"Really?" Teddy asked, sounding just a bit unsure.

"Of course." Charlie smiled. "You're my little brother, you can do anything. And me and Mom will help you too, it will be easy."

Teddy smiled. If Charlie was so sure that he could do it, then it had to be true.

"I can be a big kid!" Teddy said, clapping his hands together. "And then I'll be bigger than Charlie, and I'll go lots of places

by myself.”

“Don't you go getting too big on me now.” Mom said. “Both of you boys are staying right here with me for many years to come.”

“Ok,” Teddy said, nodding his head. “I'll stay.”

“I'm glad you agree.” Mom chuckled as she started to carry Teddy off to his room to get changed. She tickled him a little, eliciting squeals and giggles from her little boy. “Momma's not ready to say goodbye to her little teddy bear just yet.”

Teddy put his head down on his Mom's shoulder. He was perfectly happy with that thought. He was here with his loving mother, and his dependable big brother. Why would he ever choose anything different?