Potential

by TheMissingDays

Graham falls into a situation that he could never imagine.

The Costume Box
2025

Chapter 1

Potential: Part 1 - Chapter 1

Chapter 1

A Forced Offer

Graham Hayes had no idea what he was doing here. Sitting at the table at a nice restaurant that was definitely out of his price range and sat across from his date. Sebastian was really out of his league. His smoky hazel eyes seemed to only accentuate his chiseled features. Graham focused on his menu. At thirty three this was the first date he had been on in well, ever. A side effect of growing up in a family that he had suspected wouldn't be accepting – and they hadn't. It went without saying that Graham didn't know what to do being just as experienced as some middle schooler on their first date. Worst of all his date probably knew that.

If Sebastian did know that he didn't seem to let it bother him and if anything had been very understanding and had not chided Graham for any faux paus he had committed which in Graham's mind he had done more than a few, or rather he suspected as much.

“You must be having trouble deciding what to get,” Sebastian chuckled no doubt noticing that Graham had been staring at his menu rather intently for the last five minutes.

“Uh oh well not really,” Graham said looking up. “Its just this food is a little more expensive than what I'm used to.”

Graham grimaced as soon as he said it. Was bringing up price considered tacky?

“Don't worry about it,” Sebastian said. “I got it, so get whatever you want.” Graham could only cringe inwardly at the reassurance being offered to him. Sebastian was twenty five, Graham was older, shouldn't he be the one offering to pay or taking the lead. It only made him more aware of how out of place this all was. He had his doubts when Tracy, his coworker had finally convinced him to sign up for the dating app. She had even gone as far as to write all the stuff in the profile for him. Graham had been taken aback thinking she had really oversold him. She had just said it was easier for someone else to see the good points in someone else rather than the person themselves, plus everyone lied a little on dating profiles.

Graham had gone through clicking on the photos of guys he found attractive. It had been nice and perhaps one of the first times in his life that he had so openly admitted to himself what sorts of guys he found attractive. He hadn't thought any of them would match back, a week later Sebastian had and they had started talking and now here they were.

Graham's phone buzzed on the table, he picked it up quick to see the message. It was just Tracy checking in.

“Something important?” Sebastian asked noticing how intensely Graham was staring at his phone.

“No its nothing,” Graham said sliding the phone into his pocket. He was wishing it was another sort of message

though. A message he was dreading all the same. He needed good news, but wasn't banking on it.

“I really don't mind if you need to step away,” Sebastian said casually.

“No its just a work thing,” Graham said.

“Oh yeah you work with homeless people right?” Sebastian said. “Tell me about that, I think its very noble.”

“Well,” Graham said taking in a breath, grateful that Sebastian was more or less lobbing him a softball. Work was an easy way to start conversations between adults. “We're a non-profit, we get recommended people that we can possibly help get off the streets. You know help them get proper paperwork, a job, finish school that kind of thing.” Graham was a little surprised at how he was describing it. He was making it sound easy. His job was anything but.

“I see,” Sebastian nodded. “Must be fulfilling, you know making a difference like that in someones life.”

“If only,” Graham sighed. The truth was for every person he helped there were so many that he couldn't. The message he was dreading was about one such individual. Cody, a nice kid about twenty one years old, been dealt a rough hand, a pretty common story. Graham had been hopeful that Cody could be the next success story, like Rhonda had been. However Cody had up and disappeared two weeks ago, a bad sign. Now Graham was just waiting for the inevitable message he had gotten so many times before. Either Cody had gotten picked

up by the cops or he was dead. Graham was hoping Cody had just gone on a drug bender and would pop up soon. Though he was starting to prepare for the worst. Talking about this was only making the anxious pit grow in Graham's stomach. He didn't know how many more failures he could take. How many before he would finally have t admit to himself that it was all for naught. That despite his best efforts things would never get better.

“What about you,” Graham said changing the conversation. “I don't think I ever got what you do?

“Me?” Sebastian said. “Nothing much. I work in procurement for my organization just getting them the things they need.” Graham was about to ask for more but the server came by to take the order.

After that the night seemed to improve. The topic of the food gave way to more casual conversation. Sebastian was also starting to really show his charismatic nature. Graham's nerves were settling and he was starting to fall harder for Sebastian by the moment. As they sat drinking their wine after the meal Graham smiled.

“Thanks for everything,” he said looking at Sebastian with a grateful expression. “I think I really needed this.”

“I could tell,” Sebastian chuckled. “You were pretty tense at the beginning there.”

“That easy to tell, huh,” Graham said. “Yeah I don't go on a lot of dates.”

“Really, a handsome fellow such as yourself?” Sebastian inquired.

“Oh please,” Graham said with a sarcastic look. “You want the truth? You're the first guy I've ever had a date with.”

“That is surprising,” Sebastian nodded. “So tell me, this a new thing for you? You know, liking guys.”

“Not new,” Graham said. “Growing up though I didn't think my family would be all that accepting.”

“Things good now?” Sebastian asked.

“Nope,” Graham said. “Came out when I was nineteen and I was pretty much disowned, haven't talked to my parents since.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Sebastian said with a solemn nod.

“Don't be,” Graham said downing the rest of the wine. “I'm better off without them anyways.”

Graham had grown up in a very conservative household. Coming out as a gay hadn't been the first thing to sour his relationship, merely the straw that broke the camel's back.

“You?” Graham then asked. Sebastian smiled.

“My parents are very supportive,” he said. “They've never had a problem with it. Honestly I owe a great deal to them. They've been the best, I wouldn't be as happy as I am today without them.”

“That's cool,” Graham said. “They sound nice.”

“Maybe you'll get to meet them someday,” Sebastian smirked. Graham raised an eyebrow. If Sebastian's comment was meant to allude to something else Graham was certainly hoping. Although he was careful to not let himself get caught up in imagining a life with Sebastian. This was only the first date. It was way too early to even start thinking like that. “So shall we move this date somewhere else?” Sebastian then said looking at Graham with a look that showed anticipation.

“Like to your place?” Graham asked.

“You don't want to go there, its a little crowded. How about your place?”

“S-sure,” Graham said. Holy shit it was actually happening for him. Something was going right. Sebastian lead Graham out to his car. It was a nice SUV. Graham didn't even own a car. Too expensive, plus in the city it was easier not to have one. Graham navigated from the passenger seat as Sebastian drove, the giddy nature only increasing between them.

Coming into the apartment Sebastian looked around. It was a small one bedroom and Graham was feeling somewhat self conscious of his meager abode.

“Its not much, but its home,” Graham said somewhat nervously.

“Its nice, very quaint,” Sebastian said. Graham grimaced, he knew Sebastian wasn't trying to be condescending. From the designer suit and nice car and his sophisticated demeanor it was easy to deduce Sebastian came from money. He probably

lived in some high rise somewhere. Probably raised in some big house as well. Before Graham could say anything more Sebastian swept him close holding Graham by the waist. “I'd be very interested to see the bedroom.”

Being held close like this was causing Graham's chest to flutter. Sebastian had been leading the night and was now showing off how in control he was. It was hitting all the buttons for Graham.

“This way,” Graham half squeaked as he pointed to the door behind him. His heart was beating as he walked into the room. “Like I said this is all new to me,” Graham said as he turned around to face Sebastian who was standing in the doorway. That's when Graham noticed the object in Sebastian's hand. It looked somewhat like a gun except there was a needle on the end. “W-whats that,” Graham stammered.

“Oh this,” Sebastian said holding up the object. “Just a little fun, at least for me.”

“I'm not really into the kinky stuff,” Graham said holding his hand up in front of himself.

“Nothing to worry about,” Sebastian smirked. “Just a little prick.” Sebastian came forward as he pushed Graham back onto his bed.

“Stop it get away,” Graham yelled trying his best to sound intimidating. Sebastian was already on top of him. Graham struggled to keep the object away from him, yet Sebastian was overpowering him easily.

“Yeah keep struggling,” Sebastian laughed. “Makes this more fun.” Graham could not hold back Sebastian as he was stuck in the side of the neck letting out a pained yelp. Sebastian then stood up placing the object off to the side. He looked down at Graham who was holding the side of his neck.

“There all done,” he said. Graham sat up trying to get to his feet yet his legs felt like jelly which caused him to stumble a little forward. Sebastian caught him and sat him up against the bed on the floor.

“What did you do?” Graham slurred.

“I gave you something amazing,” Sebastian said. “You're going to be fine.” Graham's eyes began to flutter as he started to feel drowsy. A whole host of worries began to filter though Graham's mind as panic set in. He feared that he would be waking up in a bathtub full of ice with some gnarly stitches on his sides.

“Its a real shame,” Sebastian said stroking Graham's face. “You are handsome, definitely my type. We could have had some fun.” Graham tried to utter some response, yet felt himself fall to the side going unconscious.

He came in an out of sleep. At one point he heard the sound of something unzipping. The next time he woke he felt himself curled up in complete darkness. He tried to stretch out yet found himself confined in small space before falling back into sleep. The next time he felt himself swaying like whatever object he was confined in was being carried, the last thing he heard was the sound of a motor.

Graham groaned. He felt his body stretched out now laying upon something soft. He managed to open his eyes to stare up at an unfamiliar ceiling. He sat up slowly with another groan as all his joints ached. He placed a hand at the side of his neck where Sebastian had stuck him letting out another groan. Graham then took a look at his surroundings as his eyes adjusted to the darkened room. He was in a small bed. There was a small lamp on a bedside table that was on a low setting. The sheets on the bed had some cartoon characters from some kid's show on it. Graham looked to his right to see another bed identical to the one he was in, although it was empty. At the front of the room was a large bureau dresser. A beanbag chair was in the corner near a full length mirror. The walls of the room were decorated with rocket ships and stars.

“What the fuck?” Graham said. He brought his hands up to his throat upon hearing his voice. It was high pitched. He then noticed how strange and thin his neck felt, he pulled his hands away looking at them as his eyes widened. They were also small. Graham tore away the cover to see the rest of his body. He let out a small yelp seeing his thin and waifish chest along with his legs that looked like sticks. His clothes were gone and he was now instead wearing a pair of briefs with red piping and waistband that were decorated with blue anchors.

“The hell,” Graham said with some alarm, he knew he didn't own clothes like this. Just then the door to the room creaked open as a woman walked in.

“Oh, you're up,” she smiled taking a step towards Graham.

“Stay away,” Graham said still in a panic as he backed up into the corner of the bed. The woman stopped and gave him a calming smile.

“It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you.” she said. Graham relaxed a little sensing that the woman meant him no harm.

“I need help, something happened to me,” Graham said shakily.

“Oh yes, I kind of figured. You've had a rough night so far, probably very sore,” the woman said as she went over to the door making a motion outside before another man came walking in.

“He's up?” the man said with a smile as he looked at Graham.

Graham examined the two people in the room. They looked to be middle aged, maybe late forties? The woman was in a white satin robe. She was skinny and had platinum blonde hair with two curlers at the end. The man was tall and clean shaven. The hair on top of his head combed over to cover a bald spot. He was wearing a dress shirt that had the top two buttons undone and an untied tie still around his shoulders with some black dress pants.

“Where is Sebastian?” Graham asked nervously expecting his date turned attacker to show up.

“Who is Sebastian?” the man asked looking to the woman who shrugged. Graham let out a sigh of relief, these people didn't seem to know Sebastian which meant they weren't associated with him. Graham was left wondering how he got

here. Had Sebastian abandoned him for some reason and these people had found him?

“I need to go to the hospital,” Graham said getting out of the bed wincing as his sore joints let him know that moving was going to be a task that needed some effort.

“Are you hurt sweetie?” the woman then asked.

“No or maybe, I don't know I am really sore,” Graham said wincing. “Something happened to me. I was attacked and...” Graham said as he walked towards the door coming to a full stop as he caught sight of himself in the mirror causing him to fall silent. He stood frozen seeing himself for the first time. His previously brown hair had reverted back to a lighter shade with the blonde streaks of his youth. It was moppish and feathered out at the ends. His face was round and his green eyes looked like saucers set against this small face, far more pronounced since they were practically bugging out of his skull at the moment. He looked like a little kid. It was if he was looking at a photo from his Mom's photo album. Graham felt his knees buckle. The woman caught him.

“Why don't you take a seat dear,” she said leading Graham over to the beanbag “We'll get this all sorted out.” Graham sank into the beanbag as the woman put a blanket over his shoulders.

“Can you tell me your name?” she then asked.

“Its Graham,” the boy said pulling the blanket around himself.

“Great,” the woman said. “My name is Gretchen, Gretchen

Callaway.” Graham's ears perked up a little. Why did that name sound so familiar?

“And I'm Gene Callaway,” the man said extending his hand out for a shake. Graham reached out shaking the man's hand. “Although I suppose you can just call me Daddy from now on.”

“Wait just a minute,” Graham said pulling his hand away. “Why would I call you that?”

“You'll have to call us something,” Gene said with a smirk.

“Mhmm,” Gretchen said with a nod. “You're a child and all children need parents.”

“I'm not a kid,” Graham yelped. “I don't know how this happened. But I'm an adult, I'm thirty three. Please you have to believe me.”

“Oh sweetheart there is no need to get excited. We know all about you already,” Gretchen said kneeling down and placing a hand on Graham's knee. “We've met before, you know.”

“W-we have?” Graham stuttered.

“Yes we have, about two years ago at that Governor's dinner.”

Graham searched his memories and suddenly he remembered. It had been a dinner where lots of non-profits had been invited to network with the well to do people. Truly it was for the rich who needed to figure out what charity they were going to donate to for a tax write off. Graham remembered that's where he had met Gretchen. He had talked

to her for a little bit. At the time she had seemed incredibly interested in the work he was doing. Graham then remembered that they had ended up getting a nice donation a couple of days later, but he had never followed up on who had made it, had it really been Gretchen?

“I don't understand, why am I here? What is going on?” Graham said looking from Gretchen then to Gene.

“A great thing has happened to you,” Gretchen said.

“How is this great?” Graham said practically pulling at his hair. “I look like a little kid, you people know I'm an adult. You keep acting like I'm not supposed to be freaking out about this.”

“With time you'll get used to it,” Gene said. “There is absolutely nothing to worry about. We'll be taking care of you. You're going to love it here.”

“I can't stay here,” Graham sneered. “I need to find some way to change back. I'm an adult, I have a job. People are counting on me.”

“Let me ask a question. Your job, was it fulfilling.” Gretchen asked.

“Yeah, it was,” Graham said getting a defensive. “I helped a lot of people, gave them a shot at a better life.”

“You certainly did,” Gretchen said.

“Its the same thing we're doing with you,” Gene added. “You could think of this as that good karma coming back and

rewarding you.”

“How is this helping me!?” Graham yelped.

“How many people have you not been able to help?” Gretchen asked seemingly changing the subject. “Despite your best effort, how many times was there simply nothing you could do?”

Graham took in a sharp breath. It was almost as if she could read his mind. Whenever Graham proclaimed the numbers that his organization could boast, there was always that bitter asterisks. The one that showed that for everyone they did help, there were several others they had failed.

“I...I try my best, sometimes it just doesn't work out.” Graham said before pursing his lips.

“Is that your fault,” Gretchen then asked, her stare boring straight into Graham's chest.

“Its you know...” Graham said trailing off. There were many reasons. Funding, lack of interest, people not cooperating. Graham could not be expected to control things that were, well uncontrollable.

“I don't think its your fault at all.” Gretchen said once again as if she were reading his mind. “We've had our eye on you for awhile Graham.”

“We?” Graham questioned.

“Our organization,” Gene said. “Golden Horizon.”

“You see Graham we've been watching you for awhile and we like what we see. Out there in the world there are so many people who can do great things, yet they are never given the chance. They are held back by small minded people who only want to use the system to enrich themselves while the rest of the world burns around them. Our organization seeks to end that. Think about it. What if those in power were all on the same page and could do what needed to be done to address the woes of the world. What if everybody was working towards the same goal?.”

“I still don't understand what this has to do with me?” Graham said as he fell back into the beanbag chair. “I'm a nobody.”

“That's not what we see,” Gretchen said. “You have more potential than even you are aware of. You could do great things if you were given the chance.”

“You turned me into a kid,” Graham muttered connecting the dots in his head. But why?

“There are many people that have the potential to do something great, but life has put shackles on them, have squandered that potential. Tell me Graham how was your childhood?” Gretchen asked.

Graham looked up cocking an eyebrow. “I don't see how that is important.”

“Do you feel like your parents gave you every opportunity you needed?” Graham sat silently thinking. Sure he wouldn't

call his parents great and he had more than a few gripes with them. Still its not like he had been living in squalor. They didn't accept him, but they hadn't outright neglected him. He had lived a fairly normal life.

“We weren't rich, but its not like I was some street urchin.” Graham said. He had heard enough stories from the people he tried to help to know what it looked like when parents failed their kids and made it so they were constantly living dealing with the bad hand they had been dealt.

“You don't need to lie,” Gene said. “Remember we know everything about you.”

“You don't know anything,” Graham said furrowing his brow. “Just because we weren't rich doesn't mean anything.”

“Of course,” Gretchen said. “We are talking about nature vs. nurture. Your nature is exceptional. But you needed more nurturing to bring out that potential. That's what we can do.” Gretchen said. “This is how it works. You're out little boy now, we are your parents. We will raise you in an environment where you are loved, where you will want for nothing. Every opportunity that you deserve shall be afforded to you, and you can become a truly exceptional individual who will effect real change in this world.”

“What?” Graham said as the enormity of the situation fell upon him. He could not believe what he was hearing. It all sounded crazy. These people were actually telling him they were his parents and he was their kid.

“Don't you see?” Gene asked. “You won't have to worry about finding your place or whether you will matter. Its a gift that people would kill for.” A small smile came to Graham's face as he observed the people in front of him. They smiled back thinking that he saw things from their perspective.

“You people are batshit insane,” Graham said still smiling out of pure astonishment at the unbridled insanity on display in front of him “Absolutely bonkers.”

Gretchen and Gene's face morphed into understanding looks, not for a moment put off by Graham's response.

“Its late,” Gretchen said. “You've had a rough night, perhaps we should talk about this more when you are more comfortable.”

“I'm not –,” Graham began to protest getting cut off by a groan as he found himself lifted up into Gene's arms the blanket falling away from him.

“Careful Gene,” Gretchen chided. “Poor thing is still sore.”

“Sorry Graham,” Gene said as he gave the boys bottom a few soft pats. Graham was sat in his bed.

“Open up sweetheart,” Gretchen said.

“Why,” once again Graham's protest was cut off as a spoon was plopped into his mouth. Graham tasted a bitter liquid in his mouth. Out of instinct he swallowed as his face scrunched up. “What the hell was that?” he gagged.

“Just a little something to help with the soreness and to help

you get back to sleep. Now lay down," she said putting a hand to his chest lowering him onto his back. Gene was there pulling the covers up and tucking them in tightly around Graham's body.

"Good night sweetie," Gretchen said.

"We're very happy you're here. Welcome to the family," Gene said. Graham laid in the bed, whatever they had given him was fast acting as he could already feel the soreness start to dull. He felt his eyes get heavy. A last though on his mind. Welcome to the family? This sounds like a cult.

Potential: Part 2 - Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Small World

Graham awoke keeping his eyes closed. He moved a little enjoying the warmth of the bed for a moment longer. What a crazy dream he had, it had all felt so real. He tried to think back on last night. It was weird he couldn't remember what had happened after getting back to his place with Sebastian, only what had happened in that messed up dream. Whatever had transpired between the two of them must have been wild and Graham had his suspicions that he was going to be waking up to a monster of a hangover. He gave one last sigh before opening his eyes. His veins ran cold as he stared out across the room at the bed from his dream. He sat up with a start seeing he was still in that room. The morning light making it undeniable that this was all too real. Graham looked down at himself to see he was still in the body of a child.

“Nooo,” Graham moaned. How could this be real? The door then opened as Gretchen came walking in.

“Good morning sunshine,” she said in a bubbly tone. She was dressed in a white blouse with a navy blue jacket and matching billowy pants. “Ready to start the day? How do you feel, still sore?”

“I feel fine,” Graham said rolling his shoulders, a little surprised himself that his soreness was completely gone.

“Great, then why don't you hop out of that bed so we can get you ready to go,” Gretchen said as she opened up one of the dresser drawers.

“Go?” Graham questioned.

“Yes, sir. We gotta get you to school.”

“I'm not going to school,” Graham said laughing a little at how preposterous it all was. Did they actually think he was just going to comply? Play this game of bizarro house.

“Of course you are,” Gretchen said not missing a beat. “Children need to be in school so they can learn lots of wonderful things. You're going to do great, if I remember you were a straight A student. I expect you to keep that up. Now for your first day I want you in a nice looking outfit, first impressions are important.”

“Lady, I know your bat shit and everything,” Graham said getting up out of the bed. “But if you think I'm actually going to do what you say, then you are crazier than I thought. I'm and adult, I am thirty three, I damn well don't need to go to school and I'm not going to act like that's not the truth.”

Gretchen turned around her expression being somewhat serious. For a moment Graham almost wanted to apologize but held back.

“I think you need to rethink that behavior,” she said. “I was

willing to overlook the swearing last night since I know this is all a lot to take in but my patience only goes so far, and I certainly will not tolerate disrespect.” Gretchen walked up to Graham with her arms crossed. Graham could only shirk down a little seeing how much bigger she was than him. Her expression softened as she knelt down putting a hand on his shoulder. “Lets get a few things straightened out. First of all whatever your life was before is no longer, I know that's a lot to take in, it'll take some time,” she said in a not unkind way. “Right now you are no longer an adult. I'm your Mommy and you are my very smart seven year old son who needs to get ready to go to school even if he is feeling a little nervous, understand?”

Graham found himself nodding. He didn't really no what else to do. It seemed to turn Gretchen's smile back on.

“Great so what do you think about this shirt.” she said holding up some article of clothing. Whatever shred of compliance Graham had disappeared as he looked aghast at the pee yellow polo held up in Gretchen's hands.

“I'm not wearing that,” Graham said looking on with disgust. “Its ugly.”

“Ohhh,” Gretchen said with some disappointment. “Mommy thinks you would look so dapper.”

“You're not my Mom,” Graham protested.

“I see we're a little grouchy,” Gretchen said. “I know lets play a game. Its called yes Mommy no

Mommy, it should help you learn some manners which you've seemed to forgotten this morning."

"I'm not playing any games," Graham said panic setting in as he eyed the door. Gretchen saw where his eyes were and leaned up against the dresser.

"Thinking about running?" she asked casually.

"I could," Graham said as if he were building himself up to do just that.

"You could," Gretchen agreed. "Lets play your game first and then we'll play mine."

"What?" Graham said being caught off guard by the comment.

"What do you think happens if you run? Of course that is if you get past me, which I say you probably have a good chance of doing."

"I uh," Graham stammered.

"I'll tell you, I'll shout for my husband, your daddy, but since we're playing hypotheticals lets go a step further. Lets say you get past him, I still think you have a pretty good chance at that."

"I'll run outside, get away," Graham said playing the game, he wasn't going to let her try and say it was hopeless.

"In just your undies? That would certainly be embarrassing," Gretchen smirked.

“It doesn't matter,” Graham said, at this point he wasn't really worried about dignity.

“Well then what?” Gretchen asked prodding the boy further.

“I just run, get as far away as possible,” Graham said.

“Won't get far on Merryweather,” Gretchen said.

“Merryweather, as in Merryweather Island?” Graham yelped.

“You've heard of it?” Gretchen asked looking almost proud like she had finally met someone who had heard of the small little podunk town she was from.

“Yes,” Graham mumbled. He knew of it. Merryweather Island was a small island located off the coast, practically in the middle of the giant lake. He had of course gotten the tourism fliers in the mail from time to time. It was a place that middle aged people came to for a day to shop at the upscale knick knack shops and drink overpriced wine. A place where rich people had summer homes that they abandoned during the winter.

“Then I guess you know there is only one way off the island, the ferry.” Gretchen said nodding.”

“Then I guess I'll get on the ferry,” Graham said shrugging his shoulders. As Gretchen had said they were playing a game of hypotheticals.

“You have money for a ticket? Although even if you did I doubt they'll let you on like that.” Gretchen said playing the logistics card. “Not too mention if you did run away I would

have to call the police."

"Great," Graham said. "I'll just tell them what you did. That you kidnapped me."

"That is if they believe you," Gretchen said. "Not too mention we have people on the police force. They would ensure that you got brought right back here."

"Then I'll avoid the cops and sneak onto the ferry," Graham retorted.

"Then what? Graham you need to see some reason here. Even if you managed to do all that no one would ever believe you. We also have people all over the world, working every sort of job you could think of. You would eventually be caught and even if they weren't one of our people no one would ever believe you were not a child. You would get placed into foster care. Is that what you want?"

Graham was silent. Shit, he had thought that perhaps he could find a way to slip her up, yet he had just been walking right towards the conclusion she wanted him to come too. He was trapped and now he knew it.

"We love you very much," Gretchen said as she hugged him. He tried to pull away but she only squeezed him tighter as he stopped resisting. "You are much better off here than anywhere else perhaps more than you've ever been. It will take some time but eventually you'll be happier than you've ever been. I know you will."

"Okay, fine, I get it," Graham said as he was released from

the hug.

“Great,” Gretchen beamed. “Now that we've played your game its my turn.” she held up another shirt, it was a checkered button up.

“I'm not wearing that,” Graham mumbled crossing his arms.

“That's not how you play the game,” Gretchen said in a sing song voice. “ You have to say yes Mommy I would like to wear that or no Mommy I don't want to wear that, and if you don't want to make a decisions I can always pick for you,” she said as she looked at the previous ugly shirt. Gretchen then pulled out another shirt. It was a dark green polo with outlines of dinosaurs all over it. Graham knew that refusing this one would probably put an end to the game and would see Gretchen make the choice herself.

“Yes Mommy I want to wear that one,” he said through clenched teeth. The other option was just too garish in his eyes.

“Wonderful,” Gretchen said as she pulled the shirt on over his head. “Now lets see about pants.” The first pair she presented him with were a pair of khaki slacks.

“No Mommy I don't want to wear those,” Graham said with some disgust. Gretchen frowned as she looked at the pants.

“Why not? You would look so dashing. C'mon don't you think they would look nice.”

“I'm playing your game,” Graham yelped fearing that she was

going to force him anyways.

“Yes you are,” Gretchen sighed as she put the pants back. “You're doing a great job as well, so Mommy will stick to the rules.”

Graham was feeling somewhat nostalgic in all the worst ways. The pants had reminded him of how he had dressed as a little kid, per his Mother of course. Looking at pictures of himself always gave him some secondhand embarrassment. He had always looked like such a dweeb that anyone could tell he had been dressed by his mother. As a kid he hadn't noticed, but as an adult he knew better.

“How about these?” Gretchen asked holding up a pair of gray shorts. “It is a little warm today.”

“Yes Mommy I would like to wear those,” Graham said resignedly not in the mood to keep playing this game and taking what was probably his best option at the moment.

“Wonderful,” Gretchen smiled kneeling down and holding the shorts out for him. Graham sighed putting his hands on Gretchen's shoulders to step in. She pulled them up and tucked the shirt into the pants. She finished the outfit off with a cloth blue belt with a red stripe which she buckled for him. Graham was about to protest the belt. The pants already had an elastic waist making the belt completely un-needed but it seemed his Mommy was more concerned with aesthetics than function.

After getting some socks on Graham was lead down a

hallway. There were lots of rooms in the long hallway. He walked down the stairway into a large room. There was a dining table with a chandelier over it where Gene currently sat reading a newspaper. There was a sectional couch sat upon a fluffy white carpet and a large tv on the wall. Further back through an archway was a kitchen area. There were some large windows that let in a lot of natural light into the room. As Graham looked around he could tell this was a nice house. Gretchen and Gene must be loaded.

“Look whose up,” Gene said setting down his paper as Graham and Gretchen approached the table.

“How ya feeling sport,” Gene said giving Graham a big hug.

“Uh fine,” Graham said stepping back as he flattened out his shirt.

“You look very nice this morning,” Gene then said smiling warmly.

“Doesn't he though,” Gretchen said placing her hands on Graham's shoulders. “Everyone is going to be so jealous when they see our boy, speaking of which where is the other one?” Graham looked around not seeing anyone else. Other one?

“Bathroom,” Gene said getting up from his chair. “Said he had a stomach ache.”

“I better go check on him,” Gretchen said as she hurried off towards another hallway.

“Breakfast is on the table kiddo,” Gene said as he ruffled Graham's hair before picking up a briefcase. “Better hurry up and eat so you're not late.” Gene said pulling out a chair so Graham could take a seat. Graham looked at the bowl before him which was filled with oatmeal and marshmallows in the shape of dinosaurs. “Hey it matches your shirt,” Gene said with a chuckle pushing Graham's seat in for him.

“Greeat,” Graham said with some dourness.

“Have a great day,” Gene said before he leaned down and kissed Graham on top of the head. The boy moved his head away glaring at the man who didn't see as he was already walking out the door.

Graham shook his head. These people were beyond crazy treating him like this. It was so bizarre at how readily they seemed to just act like nothing was amiss. Graham lifted up the spoon and began to eat. He found he was enormously hungry anyways. He made short work of breakfast even drinking down the whole glass of orange juice. The moment of quiet was much appreciated.

Gretchen came walking back out into the kitchen with another person in tow. Graham saw it was a kid who looked to be about his age or rather the age he looked. The boy had blond hair that was cut short in the back but long on top somewhat like a bowl cut just way more stylish. There eyes met immediately as Graham saw the kid had rather striking blue eyes. He didn't react at all surprised to see Graham, the grimace of his red lips not changing at all. The boy was

wearing a short sleeved striped red shirt with a gray long sleeves underneath with a pair of jeans. A modern and casual look which seemed to strike Graham as unfair.

“Finished eating?” Gretchen asked.

“Yeah,” Graham said pushing his chair out as he got up.

“Great, you boys need to get going, follow me.”

Graham followed the other boy to the door where two sets of shoes were waiting. The boy got on a pair of sporty looking shoes with red and black accents with velcro tabs. Graham looked at the other set of shoes no doubt meant for him. Green and black, kind of stylish if Graham was being honest. He got them on doing up his own velcro tabs. Gretchen grabbed two backpacks down from a hangar presenting them to the boys. Graham was less than pleased with the Hot Wheels branded bag its plastic front pocket looking like a giant wheel. It was better than the other boys though as his had a big beadied eye dog staring out from it.

“And lets not forget hats,” Gretchen said as she plopped a blue bucket hat with sea turtles on it on the other boys head.

“Mommy nooo,” the other boy whined. Graham looked at the kid with some interest. He was surprised the kid hadn't questioned his presence at all. Could the reason be because he already knew what was happening. Was he the same as Graham, had he been kidnapped as well?

“Its a sunny morning my love, you need a hat,” Gretchen said.

“But I hate this hat,” the boy grumbled crossing his arms.

“We can get you a new one soon,” Gretchen said. She then plopped a ball cap on Grahams head. He didn't really notice as he was still trying to figure out the other kid. He could possibly be like Graham but the way he had complained was so childlike, it sounded too convincing. The boys blonde hair matched with Gretchen, he could possibly be her son, biologically speaking. Not reacting at all surprised to see another kid in the house only made that more likely, since he fully believed whatever story his parents had fed him, or rather this was something that was just normal here. Graham found himself hoping that the boy in front of him was just a normal kid. If that wasn't true then that meant this kid was like him, and that didn't bode well for Graham in the slightest. Would Graham become like that, would he be gas lit enough to start to believe it? Or had this kid just given up?

“Now remember,” Gretchen said talking to the other boy. “Your brother is new so walk with him and when you get to school take him to the front office, Mrs. Bruno will take it from there. Can you be responsible for me?”

“Yes Mommy,” the boy chirped with a smile. Graham shook his head. Either he was a kid or he had gone full native. The door opened and the boys were off. They walked in silence. An awkwardness having descended between them. The boy looked over at Graham for a moment. Graham looked back at him.

“You need something?” Graham finally asked. The boy raised

an eyebrow.

“I was just wondering something,” the boy said. Grahams eyes widened was this the moment of truth?

“What,” Graham said almost defensively.

“Want to switch backpacks? I kind of hate this one,” the boy said showing his back with the smiling dog. Graham could only stare dumbfounded back at the boy.

“T-thats what you're worried about?” Graham stuttered as his face screwed up. “Are you an idiot?”

“Geez it was just a question,” the boy said with a shrug as he turned and began walking away. “But if you're that attached then forget I said anything.”

“I'm not attached, I just have other things going on,” Graham replied. The boy stopped turning to look back at Graham.

“Yeah so? You think you're special or something?”

“Wait a minute are you saying...that you're like me?” Graham uttered.

“What, an adult stuck in a kids body, sure am.”

“Hang on,” Graham said grabbing the boy by the shoulder and spinning him around. “If you know whats going on then shouldn't we be trying to do something, you know instead of walking to school?”

“Do what,” the boy said. “They really didn't tell you anything did they?”

“I know all about the organization and all that, and that the only way outta here is on a ferry, but you know your way around so maybe if we work together.” Graham reasoned.

“There is no point, you aren't getting off the island like that. We don't even have money for the ferry.” the boy said. Graham furrowed his brow. Paying for a ticket should be the least of their problems.

“I didn't mean right this second but we could at least come up with a plan. Start thinking of a way outta here.”

“Like I said there is no point. I'd say you gotta week tops.” the other boy said with a sigh.

“A week?” Graham questioned.

“Yep, you won't even want to leave after that. They're going to get right in your head.” the boy said.

“Holy crap, you actually believe all that stuff don't you? You want to be here.”

“I don't,” the boy said as his face turned hard. “I just know how screwed I am. You will too.”

“I won't give up, not in a week or ever.” Graham said.

“You say that now, but I think you already have. I mean when I was told I was getting a brother I expected to wake up and hear you screaming and fighting back, but you didn't. You got dressed and ate breakfast like a good little boy. My first morning I broke a plate.”

“Thats just...” Graham stuttered before falling silent.

“Uh huh,” the other boy said. “Like I said you'll assimilate in a week tops.”

The boys continued to walk in silence. Graham stared at the ground. The kid in front of him was like him. Yet instead of any sense of camaraderie the kid was writing him off. Graham knew he needed to do something. He had to work fast and the guy in front of him knew enough that he might just be useful. He needed to get him on his side.

“Hey, hold up,” Graham said coming up to the boy's side. “Look I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot. I don't even know your name, I'm Graham.” he said holding out his hand. The other boy looked at the outstretched hand a moment before shaking it.

“Cody,” he said.

“Cody huh?” Graham said the name being a reminder of his old life.

“Yeah its a pretty common name,” Cody said with a laugh. “You're not the first Graham I met either.”

“I suppose,” Graham said feeling more than a little melancholic at the moment.

“Yeah, the other Graham I knew was a pretty good dude.” Cody laughed.

“Good to hear my name isn't being besmirched.” Graham said chuckling a little.

“I miss that guy sometimes. He was really going to bat for me. A shame really.”

Graham stopped in his tracks. There was no way.

“Whats your name?” Graham said as his hands began to shake.

“I told you Cody,” Cody said cocking his head.

“Your last name,” Graham said shaking his head.

“Callaway, which by the way is your last name now too,” Cody said. “If you didn't already know that.”

“I mean before this, what was your last name?” Graham said almost whispering.

“Oh, it was Sutton,” Cody said looking away for a moment as if even saying it made him sad. He then looked up to see that Graham's face had gone white. “You okay dude, you don't look good.”

Graham's heart had hit the floor. Since he had gotten here he had felt like he had been stolen away to far off world where nothing made sense. Like he had fallen in a portal to a different reality. In some ways that made things easier. He just had to get out of here and he could leave it behind. That wasn't true though. This was his world, this was his reality and it felt very small at the moment.

Chapter 3

Potential: Part 3 - Chapter 3

Chapter 3

A walk with a Friend.

“No,” Graham said shaking his head. “No, this isn't real.”

“Now don't go having an episode. This is very real,” Cody said. “I know it sucks but at least wait until we get to school before you start screaming or whatever.”

“No, I'm talking about us. Me and you,” Graham said. “It's me. Graham. Graham Hayes.” Cody's eyes widened as he looked at Graham.

“Whaaa –“ Cody gasped.

“Get over here,” Graham said as he grabbed Cody and hugged him. “I was fucking worried about you.”

“Worried, huh,” Cody laughed awkwardly.

“Of course dude,” Graham said releasing the boy. “I thought you were dead.”

“I'm alive,” Cody said holding up his arms. Graham shook his head. Relief was setting in. Cody was actually okay. With everything else that had been happening he hadn't even thought about Cody since last night, a total difference where before his thoughts had been solely on whether or not he would ever see the man he had come to regard as a friend

alive again. As he looked at Cody he could see the man he had once known. Cody even as an adult had what many would say were boyish good looks. Although the last time Graham had seen him those looks had been covered up by a gaunt looking face and skinny physique that could be chalked up to his drug habit. Graham had instantly been hooked in by Cody's charm, of which he had a lot. He was an optimist at heart who seemed to actually believe he could get ahead. So much so that Graham had become a little protective of him moreso than the other people he had contact with. Perhaps it was out of some inkling that Cody was someone he just might have success with or maybe it was because the more Graham had gotten to know him the more he came to see him as a little brother type. The guy just needed someone to give him a break for once and Graham had decided he could be the one to do that. Cody had also helped out Graham a good deal. Lots of people trusted Cody and he had been able to vouch for Graham and his coworkers allowing them to make inroads into community's that had rebuffed their offers suspicious that they were just another bunch of do gooder bureaucrats who would pay them lip service and not actually do anything.

“You know man you've changed,” Graham said narrowing his eyes.

“Yeah, so have you,” Cody said with a chuckle.

“No, I mean what was with all that stuff blowing me off and saying I would only last a week or whatever.” Graham said crossing his arms. Cody had never been like that. He was the

type to put his arm around a total stranger and ask them how's it going.

“Oh that,” Cody said. “Sorry, if I had known it was you I wouldn't have acted like that. Its not a good idea to get friendly with others like us. Call it a defense mechanism.”

“What do you mean?” Graham asked.

“C'mon I'll show you,” Cody said with a groan as he began walking. They walked for a little longer, soon enough the sidewalk they were on was bordered by a chain link fence that looked into a playground of a school. Cody came to a stop.

“What do you see?” Cody then asked. Graham surveyed the schoolyard. There were kids playing and running around on a playground. There was a blacktop as well where some kids were playing basketball. Graham didn't see anything that made this scene look out of place.

“Looks like a normal playground with normal kids.” he said, part of him feeling a little squeamish that he was no doubt going to be on the other side of the fence in a few minutes.

“Most of them are normal kids, but some of them aren't.” Cody said with an expressionless face as if he was looking at something far off in the distance. “Some of them were in your exact position not too long ago. Like that one,” Cody said pointing to a kid who was at the top of the slide. He looked no older than six. He stood nervously looking at the slide before another kid came and pushed him down. By the time

he reached the bottom he was in tears as a teacher came running over lifting him off the ground and putting him on his feet as she was knelt down giving him a hug and rubbing his back. “He arrived the same time I did,” Cody said. “Said he was a navy seal. Tried to stab one of the teachers and fight his way out on the first day. Now look at him,” Cody said with a sad laugh. “I'm sure its the same for a lot of people on that playground. Most of them probably don't even remember they were adults and if they do they don't care anymore. Its whats going to happen to all of us. Its why I was keeping my distance. You never know when the person you meet is just going to be gone. Its just easier not to get too friendly.”

“That's impossible,” Graham said shaking his head. “You mean they just give up and start acting like how these people say their supposed too?”

“No,” Cody said. “Its different. Me and some of the others call it the fog. It just gets in your head starts making you act differently, think differently.”

“The fog,” Graham repeated.

“I figured seeing you this morning it had already taken hold of you. Have you felt anything like that?” Cody asked.

“I don't know,” Graham said. Had he? Is that why he hadn't run out the door. Had Gretchen really convinced him it was no use or had his mind already accepted her as an authority figure. Had he been scared of defying her? He couldn't let that happen he had to be more forceful, not act all nervous and scared. Graham began walking towards the entrance of

the playground.

“Where are you going?” Cody asked.

“To school,” Graham said. “Might as well get this over with. I'm not going to let this fog get to me though. I'm getting out of here before that. Just as soon as I get the lay of the land.”

“That's not our school, at least not yet,” Cody said motioning Graham to follow. “Our school is a little further away. It disguises itself as a private prep school. They only go up to second grade. Most students get transferred before that though.”

“Great so I'm some prep school kid,” Graham muttered.

“Gets worse than that,” Cody chuckled. “Mommy...I mean Gretchen, she's the principal.”

“Is that why I had to dress like this and she was going on about first impressions,” Graham said.

“Gene's the mayor too,” Cody said.

“Great,” Graham said sarcastically. “A bureaucrat. It all makes so much sense now. No wonder I had to get dressed up like a dweeb. Why aren't you all dressed up?”

“They let me wear normal clothes most of the time,” Cody said with a shrug.

“Well lets see how she likes this,” Graham said twisting his ball cap around backwards.

“Oh yeah you look ready to fight the system,” Cody said with

a laugh.

“I gotta do something,” Graham said.

“You got off easy,” Cody said. “My first day I was in slacks, a sweater vest and a bowtie.”

“Speaking of which,” Graham then said as they continued to walk. “If she's the principal why couldn't she give us a ride, I mean we're going to the same place right?”

“That's because of me.” Cody said. “She usually isn't around in the morning. She used to make me go with her, but it was so boring having to sit in her office until school started. I begged her to let me walk. Gave me time to myself.”

“Surprised they agreed,” Graham said with some ire.

“Its a pretty safe town, so they could be reasonable.” Cody said.

“Yeah...reasonable,” Graham muttered under his breath. Still as Graham walked he took in the scenic sights. MerryWeather was straight out of a book of idyllic small seaside towns. There were cars meandering along the streets of small stores and people biking. Crossing guards stationed in the roads. To any other person this place would seem like paradise totally unbeknownst to the insidious machinations below. If this was the view of life that the organization sold as their goal for the whole world over Graham could certainly see how effective of a sales pitch it would be. They arrived on top of a hill. A sign in front of lush building spelling out “Merryweather Prepatory” spelled out.

“Some advice, they're going to mess with you in their,” Cody said. “Try to stay under the radar. Don't make yourself a target.”

“Got it, play along,” Graham said.

“Not too much,” Cody said. “Doing that makes the fog stronger. You gotta find a good balance.”

“You tell me this now?” Graham said raising his eyebrows.

“They won't screw you over in one morning. At recess I'll introduce you to a friend of mine. He'll have some tips I'm sure. He's helped me out a lot. Plus having support is good.”

“Alright,” Graham said taking a deep breath. “Lets do this.”

Chapter 4

Potential: Part 4 - Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Finding Zen

Cody had taken Graham up to the front office leaving him in the care of Ms. Bruno before being shooed off to class. It had been a little weird being introduced as Cody's brother. Ms. Bruno had not seemed at all surprised that Cody had shown up with a brother. Gretchen must have told her to expect him, Graham somehow knew that it didn't matter, she wouldn't have been surprised even if she hadn't been told before. Cody had already told him that everybody in the school was a Golden Horizon member. They all knew what was happening.

“Okay Mr. Callaway come this way,” she said walking towards a side room. Graham didn't move not really listening as he looked around with wide eyes. The school was certainly more upscale than he was used to. A front desk with granite counter tops and immaculately cared for fauna seemed so out of place for a school. Just how much money did these people have? “Graham sweetie did you hear me?” Ms. Bruno asked.

“Oh um sorry,” Graham mumbled shaking his head. Ms. Bruno smiled as she took his hand leading him into the room. There was a stool and a plain blue backdrop with a camera set up.

“Go take a seat, we need a picture for your file,” she said.

Graham sat on the stool as his picture was taken. He then had the scary thought that the only reason the school had a camera set up was because at any moment they might have a new student enrolling. Today it was him, tomorrow another poor soul would be sitting in his spot. He wondered if the former Navy Seal that Cody had pointed out earlier had sat nicely for his photo? Maybe Graham should have put up more of a fight. He reminded himself to play along as Cody had warned.

There was a knock at the door as Gretchen came in.

“Oh look Mommy is here,” Ms. Bruno said with a big smile. Graham fought back the urge to scowl.

“Looks like you made it,” Gretchen said giving him a hug and a kiss. “Did you smile for your picture?”

“Sure did,” Ms. Bruno said passing a plastic card over to Gretchen. “He's got the most adorable little smile.”

“Oh look at that,” Gretchen said admiring the card before showing it too Graham. “That will look wonderful in the yearbook.” Graham was surprised to see him self smiling, he hadn't even remembered doing it.

“Certainly better than Cody's,” Gretchen said turning to Ms. Bruno. “Remember we couldn't get him to smile at all.”

“We could always do a retake,” Ms. Bruno suggested. Graham pursed his lips upon hearing that Cody had refused to smile. Was this the fog, was he already being effected?

“C'mon then,” Gretchen said holding out her hand for Graham to take. “I'll take you to meet your teacher.”

“Sure,” Graham said hazily as he took Gretchen's hand. They walked down the hallway past kids going to and fro getting to their classrooms. Graham was looking around seeing that the rest of the school looked normal enough. He looked at many of the kids some who even said good morning to Gretchen. He wondered how many of them were still thinking like adults. He didn't hear much of Gretchen pointing out all the different areas of the school. Although he did notice when she was pointing out classrooms that the school didn't have a grade past second.

“You're going to love Mrs. Farmer, she is a gem,” Gretchen enthused. They came to a room at the end of a hallway. The door was open and Graham could hear the sounds of kids talking...but they weren't kids, he had to keep reminding himself of that.

Graham was lead in by the hand. The room quieted down a little as some kids saw the principal walking in and they were taking in an interest in the new boy at her side. Gretchen walked up to the front of the room, past the three circular tables where there were five seats each. Graham was now standing at the front of the room. He looked around taking it all in. There were wooden cubbies in the back. The whiteboard at the front had many things written on it. The date for instance and off to the side what looked like a schedule for the day. Off to the side was what appeared to be a loft. On the bottom were some computers their screens

lighting up the darkness. On the top were some pillows and small chairs.

“Good morning Mrs. Farmer,” Gretchen said cheerily. A woman with red frizzy hair arose from behind the desk coming to the front. She looked to be older, maybe in her fifties. She wore black rimmed glasses with a glittery chain attached to them. She had one of those infinity scarves around her neck. A simple red blouse and some tight fitting jeans.

“It certainly is,” she said.

“I have your newest student here for you,” Gretchen said letting go of Grahams hand and nudging him forward.

“Its nice to meet you, I'm Mrs. Farmer.” the woman said extending her hand. “Whats your name?

Graham took the woman's hand shaking it. Surely she already knew his name, whats more she also knew more. Every 'adult' here was an enemy.

“Graham,” the boy said.

“And does Graham have a last name?” Graham furrowed his brow for a moment. Was this a game.

“Hay –“ Graham began to say before a hand was placed on his head by Gretchen.

“You know your last name silly. Same as Mommy's.” Graham looked at her for a moment. Did she forget that she hadn't actually ever told him what it was. Or did she actually expect

him to remember it from their brief meeting from before. Gretchen's face seemed to morph into a mild confusion perhaps realizing that she hadn't told him. “Remember its...”

“Callaway,” Graham said cutting her off. Gretchen smiled widely. “Cody told me,” he said not wanting her to think he had remembered. Gretchen seemed to just nod.

“Nice to see you're not a shy one,” Mrs. Farmer said. “C'mon I already have a cubbie for your bag.” she said as Graham was lead to the back where the cubbies were. After he stowed it away he turned and saw Gretchen was over by Cody's table. She leaned down giving him a kiss to the cheek which caused his table mates to snicker as Cody wiped off the kiss with a reddened face. Gretchen left soon after Graham took his seat at a table with Cody.

“Okay class its time to make your lunch selections,” Mrs. Farmer said. She called tables up. When it was Grahams turned he followed his classmates to a board where they had clothespins with their names printed on them. They would attach their pin on their option for lunch. Three options were present. Pizza, chicken nuggets, or sack lunch if they brought one from home. Graham saw that most of the class had chosen the chicken nuggets. He took his own pin and chose the pizza. He had never been a fan of chicken nuggets and could only guess that they would be just as spongy as any other cheap school food option. Getting back to his table Cody leaned in close.

“Big mistake,” he chuckled. “The pizza sucks.”

Graham rolled his eyes. It was school food who really cared? As the rest of the morning rolled on Graham found himself becoming more confused, not because things were getting weird it was because of how all normal everything was. From the way Cody had been talking he expected something different. As far as he could tell this classroom was no different from any other first grade classroom. They did lessons in basic arithmetic, went over and reviewed spelling words and did basic lessons on things like photosynthesis. It was all a breeze for someone like Graham. He did notice that the other kids seemed to be acting normal as well. They answered questions like students and sometimes asked questions as well befitting their supposed age. Graham could not understand why they all seemed to be going along with it. He couldn't figure it out. How was sitting in a classroom all day being treated like a seven year old supposed to make him think he was one?

“Graham why don't you come up to the board and try this one.” Mrs. Farmer said. Graham looked up like a deer in the headlights. He hadn't been paying a lick of attention as his thoughts had been somewhere else. On the board were a bunch of math problems. He got up with some confidence. Even if he hadn't been paying attention it didn't really matter. He could do basic math.

“Just solve the problem,” Mrs. Farmer instructed. Graham didn't even take a moment to contemplate what twenty three plus twenty was. He wrote the answer quickly. “That was very fast,” Mrs. Farmer praised. “I think that deserves a gold

star.” she said placing a small gold star onto Graham's shirt.

“Uhh thanks,” Graham said going back to his seat. He felt a sense of pride well up in his chest before a moment later pushing it down. What was he so proud of? His heart started beating. Was this the kind of thing Cody had warned him about. Was the fog getting to him? He shook his head. No, he didn't feel any different. He had just gotten caught up in the moment. He didn't get praised a lot in his life. He just wasn't used to it, that's all it was. Another student was called up. A girl with her hair fashioned into pig tails. She however got the answer completely wrong. She looked genuinely downtrodden by it as the teacher showed her the correct way. Graham wondered if that would happen to him. But how? If they were being taught this stuff everyday how could they suddenly forget. How could learning make one forget?

The bell then rang as the teacher announced it was lunch time. The kids were lined up and lead to the lunchroom. They were then placed into lines depending on what they had chosen for their lunch. The chicken nuggets seemed exceedingly popular so Graham made it through his own pizza line rather quickly. Coming out into the lunchroom proper he saw long tables. Kids of all different ages seemed to be grouped up. Graham recognized some kids from his own class and took a seat next to them. He looked at the greasy piece of cheese pizza along with a fruit cup and a carton of milk in front of him. Graham decided to eat and keep quiet. He listened as the kids around him talked. It was weird to hear them talking, they all seemed to be having

normal conversations as far as kids went. But shouldn't at least some of them not be? He didn't know how often the school got new students. But should've at least some of them be acting more adult. Graham looked further down seeing Cody. He was balancing a spoon on his nose with a goofy smile being spurred on by the laughs of the kids around him. Graham shook his head. Cody had seemed pretty normal on the walk to school, he just chalked up all the kid behavior to Cody acting a certain way in front of their kidnappers as a form of appeasement. Graham started to wonder if Cody was worse off than he thought. Then again Cody had always been the class clown type, always lightening the mood when he could. Perhaps he was just playing to his audience. Hopefully that's all it was. Lunch came to an end as Graham found himself herded out to a playground. There was a large grassy field where some kids were playing soccer. Further off was a rather large and impressive playground with several spire towers and a multitude of slides twisting around. Graham wandered around not really sure what to do. He just wanted a quiet spot to think a little.

“Hey finally found ya,” Cody said coming up from behind and smacking Graham on the back. “C'mon I'll introduce you to my friend.” Cody lead Graham past the playground to small playhouse that looked abandoned. “No one comes here, they all think its for kindergartners and they don't use it because they don't want people calling them little kids.”

Coming in the playhouse Graham saw a kitchen area and a small table sat off to the side. A boy sat at the table shuffling

a deck of cards. Graham recognized him as one of the kids from his class. He was asian and had dark black hair that was combed over. He was wearing a checkered button up short sleeve. He looked up with some interest as Cody came in followed by Graham.

“Whose the kid,” the boy said.

“This is Graham,” Cody said taking a seat. “You know the guy I told you about, the one that was trying to help me. Guess he is sort of my brother now” The boy raised an eyebrow.

“That's...crazy,” the boy said as he clenched his teeth. Yeah, it was beyond crazy that it was mere coincidence that not only had both of them ended up here, but in the same family.

“Mikey right,” Graham said addressing the boy. He remembered that's what the teacher had called the boy.

“Yeah sure,” The boy said.

“That's not his name,” Cody laughed. “Its Zensuke, but he goes by Zen.”

“Don't tell him that,” Zen said looking beyond annoyed.

“Oh sorry,” Graham said. “Just thought I heard Mrs. Farmer call you something else.”

“That's the name my captors chose.” Zen said. “And I would appreciate if you didn't repeat my name.”

“Uhh Mikey or Zen?” Graham asked.

“Zen,” he said cooly. “Can't have people hearing that I'm still telling people my old name.”

“Yeah sure,” Graham said taking a seat.

“You staying?” Zen asked.

“Sure,” Graham said. “Cody thought we should meet.” Zen pursed his lips as he shot a weary look at Cody.

“That's probably not a great idea,” Zen said. “The things we discuss here are kind of a secret.”

“I can keep a secret,” Graham said.

“So you say,” Zen said. “But I don't exactly trust you.”

“Zen he's cool,” Cody piped up.

“I get he's your friend,” Zen said. “But he hasn't even been here a day. He could be fogged out by tomorrow and he might blab about our plans,”

“That's not happening,” Graham said. “I want to get out of here as much as anybody else.”

“We'll see,” Zen said. “For the time being though you are not someone we can trust.”

“Zen,” Cody said as the two boys shared a look. Graham stood up feeling awkward. It was clear that Zen did not want him around.

“I can see where I'm not wanted,” Graham said bitterly. He did take some offense that Zen pegged him as a lost cause.

Just as Cody had that morning. Graham had had enough of people telling him he was never going to succeed and the last person he wanted to hear it from was someone that was just as screwed over as he was. Graham left the playhouse. He didn't need this. He certainly wasn't going to lose sleep over not being let it into the secret club. Did Cody and Zen even realize how childish that was? That seemed to make some sense. They had been there longer. Maybe they were the ones so lost they didn't even realize it.

“Graham wait,” Cody said catching up to him. “Look I'm really sorry about him. He just being cautious.”

“Its fine,” Graham said. “I don't really need it. You can just give me the pointers later, right?”

“Yeah I can,” Cody said. “But they only help you so much. Just because you understand whats happening doesn't mean you can stop it.”

“Then whats the point?” Graham questioned. Cody laughed.

“Geez dude, figure it out,” Cody said placing a hand on Grahams shoulder as he cocked an eyebrow.

“You were the one who made me go to all those addiction support groups.”

“Well yeah, having a sense of community and support is important to foster...” Graham stopped himself frowning for a moment. “Okay I get it, but you know better than anyone that just going to a support group isn't the end all be all. Whats the point if it all useless in the end. You already said there is no

way out of this."

"I never said that," Cody said. "I said you aren't going to get out of here by just running off. Me and Zen got plans. The more people we got the better."

"I don't think Zen see's it that way," Graham grumbled.

"Zen can be a little stubborn, but once you get him to trust you he's a good guy. You can do that, you did it with me and lots of other people too."

Graham let out a sigh. It was easy for Cody to say that. He could make anyone trust him, that was one of his talents. Graham not so much. Then again he had got Cody to his side. Maybe that said something.

"Okay, I'll try." Graham said.

"Great," Cody smiled as he lead Graham back to the playhouse. Coming back in Zen was still sat at the table. Graham took a seat across from him.

"Done with your little tantrum?" Zen asked chidingly with a smirk on his face.

"I wasn't throwing a tantrum, I just don't care for assholes." Graham retorted. Zen put his hands up in front of him as if Graham was about to leap across the table at him.

"Quite the mouth your brother's got," Zen said looking off to the side at Cody.

"Zen just give him a chance," Cody said. "We need more

people if this is going to work.”

“I want out of here just as much as you,” Graham said.

“I'm not saying you don't” Zen said. “Everyone wants out of here at first. I just don't know if I can trust that tomorrow you're going to still want out.”

“I will,” Graham said with a nod.

“That's what they all say,” Zen said motioning with his head towards an empty seat near Graham.

“We used to have two other people but as you can see they're gone. One of them had been an oil rig worker and the other a navy seal, two tough sob's that's for sure.”

“Wait, you don't mean,” Graham said looking towards Cody.

“Yeah, the kid I pointed out to you this morning,” Cody said as if he were speaking of the dead.

“So you see, it has nothing to do with determination or resolve,” Zen said. “They can break down anyone here. They'll get you soon enough.” Graham looked at the empty chair feeling a chill run down his spine remembering the little boy who had been crying that morning. He couldn't become like that. He had to get out of here before that.

“Just give me a chance,” Graham said. “I'll do whatever I have to.”

“Okay,” Zen said. “As a favor to Cody I'll let you prove yourself. All you have to do is get in trouble.”

Graham raised his eyebrow a little. “That's it?”

“Thats it,” Zen said. “I don't mean a shushing from the teacher either, I mean cause enough trouble to get yourself removed from the class.”

“Zen no,” Cody said.

“Its the only way,” Zen said shrugging. “We'll know straight away then.”

“I don't get it,” Graham said. “You want me to get myself sent to the principals office, you do know that woman is my Mom now.”

“If they think you are too resistant they'll come down harder on you,” Zen said.

“And that's why this is a bad idea,” Cody said. “Graham don't do it. That's too risky.”

“That's why its the fastest way to see if Graham is going to be okay. Both me and you have gotten ourselves in trouble and we're still okay. So if Graham does it and doesn't come back to class a simpering little kid then that settles it.” Zen said.

“No way,” Cody said. “He shouldn't have to put himself in danger like that.”

“I'll do it,” Graham said.

“Graham stop,” Cody said shaking his head. “You don't even know what you are agreeing too.”

“It doesn't matter,” Graham said. “I'm not going to let myself

be changed. It doesn't matter what they throw at me.”

Zen smirked as he gave a small hum. “You may just end up surprising me.

Chapter 5

Potential: Part 5 - Chapter 5

Diagnostics

Graham sat at the table in the classroom. In front of him was a book. It contained lots of different stories. One by one the kids were called upon to read a passage. This particular story was about a boy and girl on a walk with their new puppy. The sentences were very simplistic. As Graham surveyed he could see their was a difference among the kids in the classroom. Some of them read without problem like Cody when he had been called upon, but some of them were actually having trouble, even having to sound out words.

“The dog was ru-run-running,” the girl reading stuttered out.

“Good job Suzy, you may take your seat,” Mrs. Farmer said. “Lets see who should read the next sentence? I know how about Graham.”

Graham got up from his seat as the other kids had done. He looked at the sentence he was to read. Bill ran after the dog. Simple no problem. Graham then caught sight of Zen who was looking out the window with a bored expression. After their talk in the playhouse Cody had told Graham not to worry about it. That Zen would eventually come around. Graham had only one problem with that. He didn't have the luxury of time. Graham somehow knew that running them through a normal school day wasn't just about keeping up appearances. There was a reason behind why they made him

come to school knowing full well he knew he wasn't a kid. This was all part of it. Sure, he would have been perfectly fine just keeping a low profile and figuring things out. He had Cody after all. He could get everything he knew out him after school no problem. Its not like Cody and Zen had some grand plan of escape either. If they did, they would have already done it. What Graham had decided to do wasn't to impress Zen into letting him into their club. It was something else. It was personal. Graham simply had to know. He had to know if he was strong enough to resist whatever they were going to do to him. He had to know if this was all hopeless in the end. If it was then that was it, he would just have to accept it. But if not, then that meant he could fight. He knew this was the moment, this was going to be what would define the future.

“Okay Graham read to the next period please,” Mrs. Farmer said.

“No,” Graham said snapping the book shut and tossing it on the table. Cody looked at him with a worried expression.

“Excuse me,” Mrs. Farmer said.

“I don't want to read it,” Graham said.

“You need to do as I asked,” Mrs. Farmer said not appearing to be bothered. “Its okay if you don't know some of the words you can sound them out.”

“I can read just fine,” Graham said.

“Then why don't you show us,” Mrs. Farmer said.

“You already know I can read.” Graham said. “There is no point to this.”

“The point is that this is reading time and this is what we are doing right now,” Mrs. Farmer said as she removed her glasses letting them dangle on the chain. “Now if you are not going to read then you take your seat and know that during afternoon recess you will be sitting on the wall.”

Graham pursed his lips picking the book back up and opening it up.

“Better,” Mrs. Farmer said.

“The boy ran after the dog,” Graham said. “When suddenly the dog turned around and bit the boy on the leg.”

“Graham,” Mrs. Farmer said as her voice rose in warning. Yet Graham didn't stop.

“Blood spurted everywhere and the boy was screaming,” Graham said as he started to become more animated drawing some laughter from the rest of the class. “The dog didn't stop there, he then went for the boys neck. He wasn't going to be some prisoner. The dog ripped out the boy's windpipe as onlookers screamed.

“That is quite enough,” Mrs. Farmer yelled as the rest of the class went silent looking on with wide eyes. “Just what do you think you are doing,” Mrs. Farmer said snatching the book out of Grahams hands.

“Just making the story more interesting ma'am,” Graham said

with a smile.

“Oh a class clown?” Mrs. Farmer said. “Well lets see how funny it is when you go to the principals office.”

Principal? That meant Gretchen. Somehow that made this all the better. Graham realized that the woman would probably be embarrassed to hear her child was acting up.

“Noooo,” Graham said in a faux voice of distress. “Don't send me to Mommy. She might yell at me. That would scare a little boy like meeeeee.”

Mrs. Farmer already had the phone on her desk to her ear and was speaking into it. Graham looked over to see Cody looking up at him with a pitied look.

“Don't worry,” Graham said in a low voice. “I'll be okay, you'll see.”

The door opened and a burly man in a buttoned up blue shirt that looked too small to hold back his beer gut came strutting in.

“This one needs to go to Mrs. Callaway,” Mrs. Farmer said pointing at Graham. The man looked down at Graham.

“Alright kid, we doing this the easy way or hard way?” the man said placing his hands on his hips. Graham gave a look and saw Zen was intently watching.

“Hard way,” Graham said giving a swift kick to the man's shins. There was an audible gasp in the room. Graham saw Zen frown and eyebrows arch as he nodded his head no doubt

impressed. The man let out groan that sounded more like he was holding back a swear. Graham was about to go in for another shot but was stopped as the man lifted him up putting him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Graham played at struggling as he rained his fist down on the man's back. He knew he wasn't hurting the man, not that he really cared if he was. Though it did help him blow off some steam in the same way some people did with a punching bag. As soon as they were in the hallway Graham stopped. There really was no need to keep up his performance, his audience was gone. Graham thought the man might let him down but he was carried all the way to the front office before being set on his feet in an office.

“Now act like you got some sense and sit in that chair,” the man said. Graham rolled his eyes and sat down in front of a rather large oak desk. The name plate on the front designating that this was Gretchen's desk. The door was then shut. Graham looked around the office. It was smaller than he expected for a principal, especially given how lavish the front office was. There was the desk, a rather looking expensive leather chair behind it. A computer and some bookshelves filled with books behind it. Some of them looked like binders while others looked like normal books mostly about education theory and pedagogy which was hilarious to Graham that Gretchen might actually think of herself as any kind of legitimate educator of children. Graham thought about going through some of the binders to see if he could find anything interesting yet was stopped as the door opened and Gretchen came in. She shut the door before taking a seat

behind the desk. She gave a look that Graham knew. It was the same look he had gotten from his own parents when he had been a kid. She was not pleased.

“Is there anything you have to say for yourself?” she asked. Her voice measured and calm.

“No,” Graham said with a shrug.

“What you did was very disrespectful and very inappropriate, do you understand that?”

“No more than what you did to me,” Graham replied. “I'll accept disrespectful, but it was hardly inappropriate, we're all adults here, a little blood and gore is nothing to blush at.”

Gretchen shook her head. “Inappropriate for a classroom setting,” she said not bothering to rebuke Graham on his assertion that they were all adults. Graham ran his tongue over his front teeth. Gretchen was picking her words carefully. She was no doubt steering the conversation away from any mentions of Graham not being a kid. She had no doubt heard it all before from others. She probably didn't want to bother getting into the same old argument. That or admitting Graham was not a child went against the illusion they were creating here. Graham was a little disappointed she didn't want to argue. It was good mental stimulation.

“You know Mrs. Farmer works very hard to run her classroom. Do you feel good about yourself for messing that up? Would you like it if someone came and messed up something you worked hard on?”

“Nope,” Graham said shaking his head. He very much wouldn't like that and of course it had happened to him in the course of life like to anyone, then again he had never been complicit in brainwashing adults so he didn't feel the slightest bit guilty for it.

“Do you regret it?” Gretchen then asked.

“Not really,” Graham said with a smirk. Was she actually trying to give him an opportunity to show remorse lest she be lenient? The same line lawyers gave their guilty clients in hopes of a reduced punishment from the judge. That would only work if he was actually scared of the punishment. That's what he was here for wasn't it? Why should he be scared?

“That's a shame,” Gretchen said seemingly unfazed.

“Look can we just get this over with,” Graham said curtly. “Just give me detention or whatever it is you do here in this sham of a school and then we can be on our way.”

Gretchen raised an eyebrow before her tight smile returned.

“What am I going to do with you,” she mumbled as she began typing on her computer.

“Regretting your choice yet?” Graham asked not without some much added snark. “Not meeting your expectations am I?”

“Not at all my love,” Gretchen said. “Raising children isn't all sunshine and rainbows. I did think that maybe you would get through your first day without incident but I can't say this was

unexpected.”

“What,” Graham yelped. There was no way she had seen this coming. She wasn't about to try to pull the mother knows all card on him.

“You're a child, its to be expected that you may lash out when start to feel those big emotions you don't know what to do with. You haven't even had your diagnostics session yet. So I'm going to take it easy on you for the time being.”

“Letting me off easy?” Graham questioned. Was that really what was happening? Was Gretchen the kind of parent to go easier on her own?

“It's your first day sweetheart, I know it can be hard. So lets see if we can help you out,”

The door then opened as a tall man with a bald head and glasses wearing a white lab coat entered.

“Dr. Grosse, thank you for coming. I was hoping to ask a favor from you.” Gretchen said. The man looked slightly perturbed but nodded pleasantly all the same. “This is my son Graham he just started today.” she said. The man looked at Graham with a steely eyed gaze that made Graham flinch a little. It was almost as if he could feel the man's eyes on him. “He's been causing a little trouble today.”

“I see,” Dr. Grosse said. “My area though does not have to do with discipline.”

“That's not what I'm asking,” Gretchen replied. Graham could

almost see the sparks flying between the two of them. “He hasn't had a diagnostics test yet. I was hoping to put it off until tomorrow when the counselor I assigned to him is back in the office, but I think the sooner the better.”

“Mrs. Callaway my docket for patients is already full,” he said.

“Just a diagnostic test Doctor,” Gretchen said. “He will not be assigned to you further than that.”

“Well I suppose,” Dr. Grosse said as the side of his mouth twitched. “I do have some time. On your feet then boy.”

Graham got up, something about this guy was rubbing him the wrong way and he thought it in his best interest not to get on his bad side.

“I'll let you know when we've finished and we can go over the results.” Dr. Grosse said as he walked out with Graham following. They were headed in the opposite directions of the classrooms to a section of the school Graham had never been. Going down the hall there were lots of doors with a nameplate on the wall outside of each door. At the end of the hall was a the door with Dr. Grosse's name on it. His was a little different than the others. For one he was the only doctor and there was an added title 'Director of Therapy Services' Graham surmised that Dr. Grosse was no normal employee and probably had more sway than most.

Coming into the room Graham found a rather spartan looking office. The walls were bare. There was an area with some

medical looking equipment and some stacks of papers held in manilla folders. The one thing that seemed out of place was the desk that looked similar to the one in Gretchen's office.

“Have a seat,” Dr. Grosse said. Graham looked at the fold out black metal chair.

“No thanks I'll stand,” Graham said feeling just a tad bit nervous about what the man was possibly going to do to him. Dr. Grosse furrowed his brow pointing to the chair.

“You will sit,” the man said his voice edging into a growl. Graham took the chair as his mouth went a little dry. He was certainly no longer in Mommy's office.

“Good,” Dr. Grosse said his voice switching back to a pleasant yet professional tone. “If you do as I need you too then we will not have any further problems.”

“So what exactly am I supposed to do?” Graham asked.

“What I tell you too,” Dr. Grosse said as he brought some equipment over to his desk and began to plug wires in. “You're going to need to take off your shirt and shorts as well.”

“What, why?” Graham yelped. Dr. Grosse rolled his eyes.

“Are you going to question everything?” Dr. Grosse asked.

“I just want to know what you are going to do to me,” Graham said. “Its kind of creepy for you to ask me to take off my clothes. This is a school, that's not exactly a normal request.”

“Young man, I am a doctor, everything I ask you to do has its purpose. You do not need to question it. If you really must know I need to take some bio metric samples to complete your diagnostic now hurry up.”

Graham looked at the man for a moment not sure if he should comply. On the wall he spotted a degree. It was from a medical school and a rather prestigious one at that so Dr. Grosse wasn't lying about his credentials. Graham took off his shirt and his shorts. The room wasn't exactly warm and he felt a little chilly standing standing in just his underwear.

“Could have asked me to do this before making me sit,” Graham muttered under his breath.

Dr. Grosse either didn't hear or didn't care to respond as he began to attach small round sticky pads with attached wires all over Graham. One on his chest, another on his stomach, another went on his inner thigh and two were placed along his spine, one at the top and one just above his waistband.

“Stand still,” Dr. Grosse said as he went behind his desk as he began typing.

“I've never had a scan like this before,” Graham said. “What are you even scanning for?” Graham asked as he stood feeling not the least bit silly standing in just his nautical themed undies.

“Its proprietary,” Dr. Grosse said. “And you don't need to concern yourself with what I'm doing.”

Graham puckered his lips. If this guy was a doctor he must

have failed the part on bedside manner. It took several minutes for Dr. Grosse to get up from his seat finishing at the computer. He walked over and pulled the sticky pads off quickly and without warning. Graham yipped a little as each one was pulled away. For the first time he was happy he no longer had body hair.

“Get dressed and take a seat,” Dr. Grosse said. Graham got his clothes back on. He opted not to tuck his shirt back in in. It was kind of weird that Dr. Grosse had not tried to do it for him. At least in comparison to all the other so called adults. They seemed to be eager to make it seem like the simplest task was beyond him. Then again Graham couldn't imaging Dr. Grosse showing any sort of emotion or action that would even borderline on caring. He hadn't known him long but it was apparent that this guy was all business. Once Graham had taken his seat the doctor snapped a bracelet on his wrist. It was a plain black band.

“What's this?” Graham asked.

“If you need to know something I'll tell you,” Dr. Grosse said sitting back behind his desk.

“It was just a question,” Graham muttered. Suddenly he felt a shock on his wrist. “Owww what the!”

“Now you know,” Dr. Grosse said. “That bracelet is to help your focus. Keep you on task. Now to start can you please state your name and age into the microphone,” Dr. Grosse said as he pushed a small black recorder towards Graham.

“Graham Hayes thirty two OWWW,” Graham yelped again as another shock was delivered. “What was that for?”

“For being obstinate, I know you already know the answer to this question,” Dr. Grosse said. “This is no time for games.”

Graham glared at the man, he didn't really care if he got another shock. Dr. Grosse however did not deliver another. He simply met Graham's gaze with his own cold look. Graham had to concede he was not in control here. Dr. Grosse was not the type to play games of hypotheticals or try to reason his way like Gretchen.

“Graham Callaway, seven,” Graham said.

“Fine,” Dr. Grosse said as he went back to typing. There was no praise or condescending remarks. The man simply gave no reaction. “Parent's names please?”

“Gretchen and Gene,” no shock.

“I suppose that is correct,” Dr. Grosse said. “But what do you call them?”

“Gene and Gretchen,” another shock hit Graham's wrist.

“What the hell,” Graham seethed. “That's their names.”

“Children do not call their parents by their names. What do they prefer?”

“So what you're just going to shock me every time I don't say what you want me too?”

“I'll shock you when you do not tell the truth,” Dr. Grosse

replied. “These are very simple questions that you already know the answer too.”

“Sounds more like classic conditioning Dr. Pavlov,” Graham sneered. For the first time Graham saw the man give the faintest hint of amusement.

“I see someone listened in their pysch 101 class,” Dr. Grosse said. “However we are not doing any such thing as conditioning. We are doing an exam and for that you need to be serious. This is your last warning, I will not tolerate any games, now answer the question.” Graham lowered his head continuing to glare. There was no trick here. This was just a power move. Graham was just going to get shocked until he played along.

“Mom and Dad I guess,” Graham said through clenched teeth. He saw Dr. Grosse's finger hover over the button that would deliver another shock. “Okay fine, Mommy and Daddy.” he said quickly, breathing out a breath of relief as Dr. Grosse's finger retreated.

“Sibling?” Dr. Grosse then asked moving onto his next question.

“Cody, my brother.” Graham honestly had no problem with that one, in fact it was about the only good thing that had happened to him since coming here.

“Okay that's it for the basics,” Dr. Grosse said as he picked up the black box to speak into it himself.

“Subject's bio-metrics show he is a seven year old male, no

abnormalities from the procedure present. Subjects mental faculties also show no sign of harm. Appears to also be emotionally stable.”

Dr. Grosse then pulled out some paper and slid one in front of Graham along with a pencil.

“Please complete the sequence to the best of your ability,” Dr. Grosse instructed. Graham looked down to see a sequence of numbers with one of the them missing. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah,” Graham said before feeling another shock. “Aahh what was that for?”

“I expect you to show me some respect, its yes sir or no sir, understand?”

“Yes sir,” Graham glowered, he knew there was little point in fighting. This wasn't a game he was going to win. He looked down at the numbers and then wrote in the answer before pushing it back towards Dr. Grosse.

“Reasoning?” Dr. Grosse inquired.

“You take the previous number and divide it by the number before that one to get the next one in the sequence.

“Hmm not bad,” Dr. Grosse nodded as he gave Graham another one. Graham went through several more. Each time having to explain how he had arrived at the answer. The weird thing is that each one seemed to get easier than the last.

“Reasoning?” Dr. Grosse asked after Graham had finished the last.

“You add two to each number,” Graham said.

“Very good,” Dr. Grosse said. “Now we will be moving to a different test.” Dr. Grosse said as he turned his computer screen around to face Graham. To Graham's utter surprise the man then handed him a game controller. “Use this to fit all the pieces into each box. As Graham looked at the screen he saw different sized squares and different geometric shapes along the border. Graham found that he could move the shapes to the boxes with the controller. It reminded him of Tetris. It took him ten minutes as he did several squares. By the end he had got all of them filled.

“Was that fun?” Dr. Grosse asked as Graham handed him back the controller. Honestly Graham had actually found it fun. He wished he could have done more.

“Yeah it was,” Graham said. He caught Dr. Grosse give him a look. “I mean yes sir,” Graham added quickly feeling a tingling on his wrist of a phantom shock.

“Yes well, many of the kids like that one,” Dr. Grosse said. “One more test and then you are done, please look at the screen several images will flash, you just need to recall as many as you can.”

Graham watched the screen intently. Several images began flashing in quick succession. Graham at once feared that this could be some sort of hypnotic brainwashing yet the images seemed innocuous enough. A car, a flower, a house, a frog, nothing seemed to jump out at him as being suspicious. They seemed to be completely random images. The screen then

stopped.

“What do you remember?” Dr. Grosse then asked. Graham listed off what he remembered. He was sure he had gotten most of them. “Okay then,” Dr. Grosse said standing and walking around the desk. He removed the cursed bracelet from Graham's wrist. “Your mother is waiting. Stay seated while I talk with her.” the man said before going out the door. Graham sat feeling relieved to be done. Except for the wrist shocker nothing had really been that bad. He noticed that the door was rather thin. He could hear Gretchen and the doctors voice's on the other side. He decided to get closer to see if he could make out what they were saying. He crept over and put his ear to the door.

“So he did well then?” Gretchen said.

“His logic and spatial reasoning are very good, exceptional I would say as well as memory recall. He is exactly where you would expect someone like him to be.”

“I see,” Gretchen said. Graham cocked an eyebrow. It almost sounded as if she were disappointed.

Hadn't the doctor just said he was exceptional?

“He may be too advanced. First grade may not be meeting his needs. You have already discussed with me your plans going forward. I think he would be a good candidate for an advanced curriculum.”

“We haven't made any decisions regarding that yet,” Gretchen said. “I would like to have a chance for all of us to settle in

first before we make any choices about that."

"The sooner the better," Dr. Grosse said. "It is important for them to gain a sense of normalcy, too much change may hinder that."

"Its too early," Gretchen replied. "Its only his first day. I just want to make sure we make the right choice here. We need to take in account what is best for their needs, not what we prefer."

"I understand," Dr. Grosse said. "I will have the report on your desk at the end of the day. He is free to return to class now."

Graham heard the handle begin to turn as he scampered back to his seat.

"Alright dear, time to go," Gretchen said. Graham got up from his seat and went to Gretchen's side. He was actually happy to go with her if it meant getting out of here.

"Here," Dr. Grosse said with a small tin in his hand. "This is for you." Graham held out his hand and the doctor shook what appeared to be a small white mint into his hand. Graham looked at it not really knowing what it was for. "Its for doing a good job," Dr. Grosse said. "I don't have candy." Graham looked up at the man with a confused look. Was this his version of a sucker at the end of a doctor's appointment?

"What do you say honey," Gretchen prodded with a smile.

"Thank you sir," Graham said still a little off put.

“You're welcome,” the doctor said. As Graham walked with Gretchen he popped the mint in his mouth. He could still taste the pizza from lunch and his breath probably didn't smell great. Gretchen took his hand in hers and Graham did not resist

“Did your test go well?” Gretchen then asked, as they continued walking

“I hated that,” Graham said

“Were the test hard?” Gretchen asked.

“No not really,” Graham said. “But the Doctor kept on shocking me.”

“He did,” Gretchen said sounding a little displeased.

“Yeah every time I didn't say what he wanted me too...it really hurt,” Graham whimpered a little as his mouth frowned.

“I'm very sorry to hear that, I'll have a talk with Dr. Grosse about that. I don't like that he uses such methods, completely unnecessary.”

“Do I have to go back there again?” Graham then asked with some worry.

“No, you don't,” Gretchen said squeezing his hand a little. “You've been assigned a different counselor, Ms. Redding. You'll meet her tomorrow. I think you're going to like her. She is very nice.”

“That's good,” Graham said comforted by the idea that this

Ms. Redding was a nice person. Gretchen then came to a stop looking at Graham.

“We need to fix your shirt,” she said. Before Graham could question it, Gretchen had already unbuckled his belt and was re-tucking his shirt into his shorts.

“Mommy I don't want it tucked in,” Graham mewled yet gave no resistance as Gretchen was re buckling his belt.

“I want you to wear it tucked in right now,” Gretchen said. “It makes you look respectable. I want everyone to know what a good smart boy I have.” she said giving a kiss to his temple. Graham rubbed the spot he had been kissed. Not out of disgust, moreso out of fear of being seen kissed by his Mom in public.

“They already think I'm bad,” Graham said.

“You're going to need to apologize to Mrs. Farmer when we get back.

Graham nodded. “I will.”

Gretchen brought her hand up to his cheek softly stroking it with a smile.

“You are going to do such wonderful things.” she said. “You're going to make me proud, right?”

“I will Mommy,” Graham smiled back.

Chapter 6

Potential: Part 6 - Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Fogging out.

Graham was back in the classroom at his table. He had already apologized to Mrs. Farmer under his mother's watchful eye. The teacher had seemed to accept the apology without reservation. Graham was happy for that. He had been upset sure, but that wasn't her fault and after his time with Dr. Grosse he knew there were far worse people around. Mrs. Farmer had been nothing but nice to him. She had even given him the gold star sticker still on his shirt. There was no reason for him to make things hard for her. She was working hard. Graham started to feel a little guilty. Why had he gone along with Zen's plan? Surely getting to join the club wasn't that great. Especially if all it did was get him in trouble. Getting into trouble was the last thing he needed to be doing. He couldn't be rocking the boat. That wasn't smart.

Mrs. Farmer was up at the board introducing the new spelling words. Graham focused in as she asked for a volunteer for the next word. Graham knew this was a good opportunity. He was good at spelling. He would get it right and then Mrs. Farmer would know he could be trusted. It was important to him that he be trusted. Graham raised his hand waving it through the air just to make sure the teacher saw him.

“Okay Graham you seem eager to try out one,” she said

motioning him forward. Graham got up going to the board and taking the marker from her hand. “Okay your word is shut.”

Graham concentrated sounding the word out in his head. He wrote S-H-A-U-T onto the board looking at the teacher expecting her to tell him it was correct.

“Not quite,” Mrs. Farmer said. “You have an extra letter in there.” Graham looked back at the board. How could it be wrong? He had sounded it out. “You only –“ the teacher began.

“Wait don't tell me,” Graham yelped before his mouth snapped shut upon hearing how loud he had been. “I-I want to figure it out myself,” he said in a slightly embarrassed voice.

“Very well then,” Mrs. Farmer smiled. “Take your time and think it over.” Graham puzzled at the word as he repeated the word over and over in his head. Then suddenly like a flash of lighting it made sense. He erased the A with his finger.

“Like this?” Graham asked looking at the teacher.

“Great job,” Mrs. Farmer said clapping her hands together. “That's exactly right.” Graham smiled as he took his seat feeling proud that the teacher had not needed to tell him the answer. He looked over to see Cody looking at him with a strange look. Almost as if he was worried about something.

“You knew that, right?” Cody asked keeping his voice low.

“Yeah,” Graham lied. “I got it right didn't I.” Cody merely nodded his head turning his attention back to the board.

Soon enough the bell rang announcing it was time for afternoon recess. The kids lined up and soon enough they were out on the playground. Graham looked around wondering what to do. He didn't see Cody or Zen anywhere. He figured they were probably at their clubhouse. He didn't really want to go their. They probably wouldn't let him in. Not that he was going to let that bother him. What was so fun about sitting in some old playhouse anyways? Still they were the only two kids he knew here. Graham walked along the field before stopping to watch some kids playing kickball. The kid at the mound kicked the ball and sent it sailing towards Graham. It landed in front of him bouncing up in the air. He reached up grabbing the ball. A red haired boy with freckles came running up to him.

“Hey, nice catch,” he said holding his hands out.

“Thanks,” Graham said tossing the ball back towards the other boy. The boy looked at Graham for a moment.

“You want to play?” the boy asked. “We could use another guy.” Graham thought for a moment. Kickball did sound kind of fun, and it beat just walking around alone.

“Graham there you are,” Cody's voice sounded out. Graham looked over to see Cody running up to him with Zen walking behind. “Geez dude how do you disappear like that, we were looking for you.”

“Oh hey Cody and Mikey too,” the freckled boy said smiling as he saw the two other boys. “You know this kid?” Cody looked at the other boy. His mouth twitched a little before he put on a small smile.

“Hey Dean, yeah this is my brother, Graham.” Cody said putting a hand on Graham's shoulder.

“Your brother?” Dean said looking a little confused for a moment before he nodded with a smile.

“Well that's cool he was just about to come play kickball with us. You and Mikey could join too, it would be just like old times.”

“We can't,” Zen said sounding just a tad standoffish.

“Why not?” Dean asked putting a hand on his hip.

“We're busy,” Zen said averting his gaze for a moment. Almost as if he didn't want to look at the boy for too long.

“Don't tell me you guys are still playing pretend in that old playhouse,” Dean laughed a little. “You know that's real little kid stuff, how can you even find that fun?”

“You used to like it,” Zen said furrowing his brow.

“Why don't you come play with us again,” Cody suggested. Zen gave an alarmed look at Cody who ignored him. “Then it really will be like old times.”

“I can't do that,” Dean said with a chuckle as he shook his head. “I'm in second grade if anyone some me playing in the

playhouse they would call me a baby, not even the kindergartners play in that thing."

"Too bad," Cody said as he put an arm around Graham's shoulder and began to lead him away. "Door always open though, stop by anytime," he said with a wave. Graham looked back to see Dean shrug as he jogged back to the game.

"Hey Cody, I think kickball sounds fun," Graham said.

"Now now Graham there will be plenty of time for that later," Cody smiled as they continued to walk. "We got things to discuss."

"Yeah well I would kind of rather do something other than sit around and talk," Graham said as he twisted out of Cody's arm.

"Too bad," Zen said grabbing Graham by the arm and pulling him back in the direction of the playground. "You're coming with us."

"Yep, we got lots of stuff to do," Cody said grabbing Graham's other arm as they continued to walk towards the playhouse. Graham felt like he was being kidnapped.

"I thought you guys didn't even want me in your club?" Graham whined.

"Its not a club," Zen said with a grunt. "And who said nobody wanted you?"

"You did," Graham said.

“You're in now,” Zen said. “So you're coming.”

“Congratulations,” Cody said with a smile. Getting into the clubhouse they all but pushed Graham into one of the chairs. Zen took the chair opposite while Cody stood in front of Graham as if to stop him from running away.

“How are you feeling?” Cody then asked.

“Fine,” Graham said a little confused as to why Cody was asking that.

“You don't seem fine,” Cody said.

“What do you mean?” Graham asked.

“Shut?” Zen said. “You couldn't spell shut correctly?”

“I just messed up,” Graham said feeling a little self conscious. “I got it right afterwards.”

“Graham you're thirty two,” Cody said. “Wake the hell up.”

“I'm not,” Graham began before he fell silent. His mind began buzzing. All of a sudden things felt a little wobbly as if he were about to fall out of his chair. He grabbed his head which seemed to pulse with some pain. He took in a sharp breath and it almost felt like the world came into focus. It felt as if he was just waking up from a dream that had felt so real in the moment but now being awake he could clearly distinguish between what was real and what was fake.

“What the hell was that?” Graham questioned more to himself than to the other two.

“Phew, you came back,” Cody said collapsing into his own chair. “I really felt like you were gone there.

“I don't understand,” Graham said shaking his head.

“That's the fog,” Zen said looking as if he just blown out some smoke from a cigarette.

“But when did it start?” Graham yelped. “I didn't even realize. Everything was normal and then...”

“It sneaks up on you. Sometimes it comes out of nowhere. Kind of like the first hit of a drug, once it hits you have no idea whats happening.” Zen explained. Graham was still reeling. It had felt so strong. All those emotions, his thoughts, it was hard to even wrap his head around it. He tried to think back over the last hour. When had it set in? He had felt completely normal during the diagnostic exam. Even when Gretchen had come in. It had to have been when he had been walking back with Gretchen. But what had set it off? What had they done?

“You guys brought me back though,” Graham said taking in a deep breath. “As long as we keep an eye on one another we'll be okay. I mean it didn't take much to snap me out of it.”

“It was your first hit,” Zen said. “It won't stay that easy.”

“Yeah,” Cody said. “That's why I said you had to find a good balance, its kind of like micro-dosing, building up a resistance over time.”

“But one day that stops working,” Zen looking off the side

with a sneer. “Then you end up like Dean.”

“So you knew that kid...like before?” Graham asked.

“He's the one that started this group,” Zen said. “When I first got here there were three other guys but they all got fogged out. For a little while it was just me and him. Then Emil and Cody came but now its just me and Cody.” Graham could now see why Zen had been so distant with the kid. It must be hard for him to see him like that.

“How long have you been here?” Graham then asked.

“Coming up on a year now,” Zen replied.

“A year!” Graham exclaimed. Now he could see why Cody had wanted Graham to meet Zen. If he had held out for a year he obviously knew something. “How in the world have you lasted that long?”

“Because I can't become like that. My fiance is waiting for me. I have to get back to her, but I can't leave like this, not until I find a way to reverse this.”

Graham looked on in astonishment. Is that all there was too it? You just had to have a strong enough will?

“But wait, I mean other people have come through here. I mean surely they also wanted to get out, so how come it didn't work for them?” Graham asked.

“Who knows,” Zen said. “It affects everyone differently some people last a day others a year.”

“Graham the important thing is that you find something to keep you moving forward. The thing that you can concentrate on. You have to find the thing that makes you want to reclaim your old life so your brain doesn't get distracted by the fog.” Cody said.

Graham thought for a moment. What was that for him? His job? Not really. He certainly had a passion for it but its not like he could be compelled to move a mountain for it. Unlike Zen he didn't have any loved ones either. He knew he didn't want to be here. But what was he fighting to get back to, a sense of normalcy? Was that enough?

“So what did they do to you anyways?” Zen asked. “When you got taken away.”

“I had to do a diagnostics's exam with this guy, Dr. Grosse.”

“Dr. Grosse!” Cody yelped as he stared daggers at Zen. “I told you that was dangerous.”

“It really wasn't that bad,” Graham said trying to sound confident.

“Dr. Grosse is the worst one here,” Cody said. “Most of the other counselors think they are helping, but that guy...I think he just enjoys breaking people.”

“Its not that big of a deal,” Zen shrugged. “Dr. Grosse is my counselor and I'm still here.”

“You mean you have to see that guy all the time?” Graham asked feeling a tinge of fear in his stomach and thanking his

lucky stars that Gretchen had told him he would not have to do the same.

“Yep,” Zen said. “Me and him have an agreement. I act like his good little test subject and pay lip service to his new little methods and he gets to look good to the rest of the organization and in exchange he agreed not to transfer me out until I complete second grade.”

“You act like a guinea pig for him just to delay getting transferred?” Graham asked raising his brow. That didn't exactly sound like a pleasant arrangement and not worth it in the end.

“I have to take what I can get,” Zen said. “Getting sent to the other school just means they've beaten you. Its practically a death sentence.”

“But he could break you before you get to the second grade. Then it won't matter what arrangement you had, right?”

“He probably thinks he will,” Zen said with a shrug. “But I can take it. He won't win. So tell me what did he do to you?”

Graham recounted everything that had happened and all the test he had taken. Zen nodded along as if Graham was recounting the steps to building a car and Zen was the elder mechanic making sure Graham had done everything correctly.

“Hmmmm,” Zen hummed as he sat back. “Doesn't seem like he tried anything really devious on you.”

“Well I didn't really like getting shocked,” Graham grumbled

rubbing his wrist where he had received several shocks.

“Oh he got you with the shocker, eh.” Zen chuckled.

“Yeah isn't that like some sort of conditioning or something, is that why the fog got me?” Graham wondered.

“No, I think he just uses that so you don't give him trouble.” Zen mused.

“Asshole,” Graham growled upon finding out that the shocks really had no real greater purpose. He felt better now that he had tattled to Gretchen about it.

“Then what?” Cody asked.

“Nothing else really,” Graham said. “He gave me a mint and then I came back to the classroom.”

“Don't eat those mints,” Zen then said. “Its a mild sedative. Make you nice and relaxed so you let your guard down. That lets the fog take a stronger hold of you.”

“So that was it,” Graham said slapping the table. Of course, how could he have been so stupid. The most innocuous thing had ended up being the most dangerous. There seemed to be some wisdom in the old adage never take candy from strangers. The irony that the rules of childhood just might save him here was not lost on Graham.

The bell then rang announcing the end to recess. The last hour of school proceeded on normally. The kids had P.E that day. The teacher had them playing some sort of tag game. Graham noticed that Zen had let himself get out immediately

as he went and took a seat on the side. Graham decided to to do the same as he went and let a little girl tag him out. Graham took a seat on the sidelines next to Zen.

“Still feeling okay?” Zen asked acknowledging Graham without looking.

“Yeah, just fine.” Graham nodded. He then spotted Cody who looked fairly into the game himself. He smiled a little looking at his friend. The boy had a smile plastered on his face. It was nice to see. For as long as he had known Cody he could tell how hard he had to try to maintain his optimistic attitude. There was always a certain sense of sadness to it. Right now though Graham couldn't see it. Graham then frowned. Maybe that wasn't such a good thing. Was Cody experiencing the fog right now?

“Hey Zen, can I ask you a question?” Graham asked. Zen gave him a harried look as he looked around to see if the teacher was around.

“Cool it with the name,” Zen hissed.

“Oh sorry,” Graham apologized. “Mikey right?” Zen nodded.

“Whats your question?” Zen then asked.

“Its about Cody,” Graham whispered as he leaned in close. “Is he being affected by the fog too?”

“We all are,” Zen then said. “But if you're worried about him, don't be. He hasn't been here long, but I've only seen him get swept up completely like once. He's strong. At least he seems

that way.”

“Yeah he is strong,” Graham agreed.

“What was he like before?” Zen then asked. “I mean you knew him.”

“Honestly he seems to be the same.” Graham nodded. “He just seems good at putting up with whatever bullshit comes his way. Even when things got rough for him out on the streets he would just buck up and grin like it was no big deal.”

“Wait,” Zen said. “Cody was homeless?”

“He didn't tell you?” Graham questioned.

“Not really, he just said he moved around a lot.” Graham felt stupid. He really shouldn't be the one to talk about Cody's past. Graham was definitely tasting the foot that was in his mouth now. Of course Cody wouldn't have mentioned it. People always acted differently around you when they found out. Either they gave you pity or acted like you were a parasite.

“Don't tell him I said anything. Don't treat him differently,” Graham said.

“Why would I?” Zen questioned. “Doesn't change anything.”

“G-good,” Graham stammered.

Soon after the school day came to an end and Graham found himself grabbing his backpack out of the cubbie with his name. The kids were lead out to the front and then released to

where they needed to go. Some were sent to the pick-up line where parents waited, other went for the buses.

“We're walking,” Cody said as he motioned for Graham to follow. They began to walk as Graham realized they were not going the same way back home.

“Hey I thought home was that way,” Graham said pointing down a street.

“We can't go home after school,” Cody said. “No one's there right now. We're going to Daddy's office.”

“Oh,” Graham said as he jogged to catch up. “Hey you know you just called him Daddy.” Cody looked at Graham a little before smirking as he shook his head.

“Sorry, force of habit. I gave up that fight a long time ago,” Cody said.

“I get that you have to call them that to their face, but shouldn't we try not to call them that when its just us?”

“It doesn't really matter,” Cody said.

“But that could help the fog, don'tcha think?” Graham asked.

“A name is a name,” Cody said. “What really matters is how you feel about the people you are talking too. Kind of like when you kiss up to your asshole boss to his face but say nasty shit when they're not around. They aren't my parents and they never will be.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Graham nodded. Cody knew how

to appeal to people, that was certain.

The boys walked for awhile before coming to a small building. It appeared rather old, maybe turn of the century. A sign designating it town hall was on the manicured front lawn. Graham followed Cody through the front door. Gene was standing at the front desk chatting with the receptionist. He smiled upon seeing the boys.

“Looks like schools out for the day,” Gene said putting a hand on both boys shoulders so they were on either side of him. “Carol I don't think you've met my son Graham yet.”

“Oh I've already heard so much about you from your Daddy,” Carol said as she gave Graham a smile.

“And my you look so nice today, don't you.”

“His mother made sure he looked sharp for today,” Gene laughed as he gave Graham a slap to the back.

“She did a good job,” Carol gushed. “Absolutely adorable.”

Graham felt his face flush a little red. Not only was this totally condescending it was downright embarrassing to be cooed at like this.

“Daddy can I get a soda,” Cody whined thankfully taking the attention off of Graham. Gene sighed as he fished his wallet from his pocket.

“I suppose, but you need to share with your brother, and remember you can only have the root beer. No caffeine,” Gene said as he handed Cody a dollar.

“I know,” Cody said as he ran off. Gene then grabbed Graham's hand as he lead him over to a door that had Gene's name on it with mayor written across the bottom.

“You can wait in here, I should only be about thirty minutes more, sound good?”

“Yes sir,” Graham nodded as he walked into the office. He heard Gene let out a small chirp but nothing more was said.

Graham was left to look around the office. It was rather plain, Graham would have expected something more for the mayor of Merryweather. It was a small town, but it was a rich small town. Then again they probably used that money on places where tourist were actually going to be. There was a desk and a computer at the front. On the wall to the back were some news clippings and in the center was the actual key to the city, merely decoration of course. There were some filing cabinets. Graham went to them immediately to snoop but found them all locked. There was a small table with some files on it. Graham opened up some of them to see what they were. It looked like a lot of graphs and tables, and something about waste management cost. Nothing but normal government work Graham sighed as he closed the folder.

“Looking for something?” Cody's voice came from behind. Graham jumped a little to see his new brother walking into the room with a bottle of root beer and two plastic cups as if they were about to share a bottle of whiskey.

“Just seeing if there was anything interesting,” Graham said. “I mean he is the mayor.”

“I already scoured this place,” Cody said taking a seat on the ground at a small round coffee table near a couch in the back of the room. “If he does keep anything here related to Golden Horizon then its most likely locked up in the filing cabinets or its all digital and its on the computer.”

“Makes sense,” Graham said as he sat across from Cody at the table. Graham had already deduced from past comments that not everybody on the island was a part of the cult, so Gene wouldn't keep anything like that lying around. That secretary though was definitely one of them with the way she hadn't even questioned Graham's presence.

“You want some?” Cody asked holding up the open bottle of soda.

“Yeah, sure,” Graham said as he watched Cody pour him a cup. “Surprised they even let us have soda.”

“They really aren't bad parents,” Cody said which caused Graham to cock his head. “I mean you know for psychopathic kidnappers,” Cody added quickly. As Graham took a sip he watched Cody dig out a folder from his backpack and open it up.

“What are you doing?” Graham asked.

“Homework,” Cody said fishing a pencil out of his backpack.

“Really,” Graham chortled. “Didn't think you were so studious.”

“Better here than at home. Mommy is the principal she is

definitely going to check and believe me she is going to want to help. She'll make you go through every problem and question with her. If I get it done now and its right she'll have no reason to try and go through it."

"I see," Graham said as he went into his own backpack and got the homework out. The boys worked filling out their worksheets and in no time they were both done. After all it wasn't hard. As Graham finished up he sat back. It had been a long day and he hadn't exactly slept well last night either. He put his head on the table coming close to actually falling asleep. Soon enough Gene came in informing them it was time to go home. Graham followed out to the car. Climbing in he found two booster seats. Cody plopped down in his getting his seat belt on and Graham followed suit. At least it was just the bottom and he wasn't being strapped in.

Driving through the town Graham watched the passing scenery. It was certainly a nice place, the scenery was nothing to sneer at as they drove past the lakefront. A sad thought made its way across Graham's mind. On the other side of the lake was a whole different world, one where he was an adult. It hadn't even been a day but that life felt more like a distant memory now.

"Graham did you hear me?" Gene asked. Graham immediately straightened up realizing he was being talked too.

"Oh um sorry sir," Graham said. "What did you say?" Graham saw Gene give him a curious look in the rear-view

mirror.

“I was just asking how your first day went?”

“It was fine,” Graham replied.

“Cody helped you out, right?” Gene then asked.

“Yeah, he did.” Graham then said giving a nod towards Cody.

“Good, good,” Gene then said.

Eventually the car pulled into the driveway and Graham was sat on the living room couch with Cody as a cartoon played on the tv. Cody had already explained there were parental locks on the tv so this was the best they could hope for. Graham did'nt much mind. After his stimulating day it was kind of nice just to sit back and veg out to some mindless entertainment. That was until he felt a pressure in his bladder. Graham sat up looking around. It was an urgent need thanks to the fact that Graham hadn't once gone to the bathroom that day and the soda no doubt had gone right through him.

“Where's the bathroom?” Graham asked looking at Cody as he scrunched his legs together.

“Down the hall and to the left,” Cody said pointing towards the hallway. Graham gave a hurried thanks as he scampered off. He made it to the the bathroom and stood in front of the toilet, he quickly unbuckled his belt and pulled his shorts and undies down as relief spread through him. As Graham stood part of him didn't want to look down. Yet he had too as he let out a groan. Looking at his new body and its smaller

dimensions, not too mention how big the world around him now seemed. It hadn't yet become normal, it still filled him with a sense of unease and Graham hoped that it would never actually start to feel normal. He got himself re dressed and then walked out of the bathroom. He could hear the tv still playing. Graham looked down the hallway and decided he didn't really want to go back to watching cartoons. He hadn't had the chance to fully explore the house and now seemed as good a time as any.

Chapter 7

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Chapter 7

Notes

Graham wandered down the hall of his new home, scratch that the house he was temporarily staying at, this could never be considered home. The bathroom was at the end where he had just come from. He opened another door to find a large bedroom. This was no doubt the master bedroom where Gretchen and Gene slept. There was a large tv on the wall and a bureau to the side. The room looked pristine as the bed was made and there was not a single thing out of place. A vanity mirror with makeup and hair accessories set out. There was also and en-suite bathroom. Graham closed the door. He really wasn't comfortable poking around other peoples rooms, a possible holdover from his childhood. He was never allowed in his parents bedroom.

Looking into another room he found a guest bedroom. The bed was still unmade. He guessed this is where Cody had slept last night as to not be disturbed by his arrival. Graham went to open another door but found it locked. What could they possibly be keeping back there he wondered? There was another hallway to his right. Graham walked down it. The first door he opened appeared to be a home office. There was nothing of interest in there. The next door Graham opened had a staircase. Graham wandered down to find a finished

basement. There was a whole home entertainment set up with seats and a rather large couch. There was also a pool table and further back a sliding door that lead out to a backyard. Graham saw there was a play set still half built. On the patio was a Jacuzzi. Graham made a note about asking to use it. If he had to be here then he might as well enjoy some of the amenities. He imagined how relaxing it might be to take a soak. Then he remembered the mints and thought better on it. The last thing he wanted was to relax.

Graham went back upstairs he came to the last door and opened it up. It appeared to be some sort of sitting room, sun room? There were houseplants lining the wall and an impressive bookshelf on the wall. An old style rug was on the floor. Graham heard the sound of a piano and saw that Gene was sat at a piano playing.

“Hey Graham, exploring?” Gene asked as he noticed Graham standing in the doorway.

“Oh sorry, I didn't know anyone was here,” Graham said taking a step back.

“That's alright,” Gene said. “Hey why don't you come over here,” Gene said motioning Graham closer.

“Y-yes sir,” Graham said walking over to Gene who grabbed him and sat him on his lap in front of the piano.

“Whats up with all that yes sir stuff?” Gene chuckled. “There is no need to be so formal you know. We're family. You can just call me Daddy or Dad, alright?”

“Sure...Dad,” Graham said meekly. It still felt weird to call this stranger by that title. Yet for some reason Graham did find himself becoming a little less tense.

“We haven't really had a chance to talk, its been a busy busy day hasn't it?” Gene said as he began to poke at the keys of the piano. “You know I just got off the phone with Mom not too long ago.”

“Oh yeah,” Graham said as his nerves began to rise.

“Hmmmhmm,” Gene said. “She said you had a little trouble at school today.”

“Maybe a little,” Graham mumbled.

“Sounded like you were causing all sorts of trouble. Did you think it was going to be funny?” Gene asked. Graham shook his head as he gritted his teeth. He could feel heat rising up in his cheeks. Where did this guy get off trying to lecture him like a child? Did they really think that's what he was? That he was already like Dean, who was more interested in playing kickball than finding a way to escape, or like the other kid who had been reduced to tears at being pushed down a slide?

“I didn't do it to be funny,” Graham said.

“Didn't think so,” Gene said as if he could hear Graham's thoughts. “I think you were just upset.”

Upset? Graham had to give the man credit. Although upset was not the word he would use. More like absolutely furious.

“Maybe I am upset,” Graham said as he reached out playing a

low note on the keyboard.

“Upset about what I wonder?” Gene mused. It took everything in Graham to not start screaming at the man.

“You really want to know?” Graham asked.

“Of course. You can tell me anything,” Gene said removing his hands from the piano and wrapping them around Graham as if he was preparing for the boy to start thrashing wildly in an attempt to attack him.

“Okay then,” Graham said using every fiber of his being to keep his voice measured and calm. “I'm pretty upset that I was abducted and changed just so some crazy people can make me into something that they deem better and without even asking if I was okay with it. There was nothing wrong with me. Maybe I wasn't reaching whatever potential I seem to have, but it was still my life.”

“Do you play piano?” Gene asked.

“N-no,” Graham stammered completely caught off guard by the response.

“I think the piano is a wonderful instrument. There is just something about it that no other instrument can really compare to.” Gene said as he put his hand back on the keys. “Play this key,” he instructed pointing to the C. Graham reached out pressing the note. “Its a nice note isn't it. But it can't really do much on its own. After all its just one note. So we add another,” Gene said as he played a chord. “You see, much different, you could probably make something nice just

fooling around yet if we had a plan we could do something even better." Gene said pulling some sheet music off the top and putting it in front. He began playing the music. "When we put all these notes together in exactly the right spot in the right sequence they then transform into something beautiful."

"Its just music," Graham mumbled.

"No its not that simple." Gene said. "A composer sat down took those singular notes and transformed them into the best versions of themselves. Each note is important in the grand scheme of the composition."

Graham put his hands on the keys pressing down to make a rather discordant mush.

"What if the composer is no good, what if they're the only ones who think its good?"

"This composer is not," Gene chuckled. "They know what they are doing. Each note they have chosen is just what they need."

"You can't know that, music is subjective." Graham said. Just because they thought they were doing what was best didn't mean that everyone would think that way. This was about power, about control.

"Its not about me," Gene said. "There is no singular composer here. Our composer is the simple wish for peace and happiness. You understand? Each note is being placed where it can become bigger than itself. Once that is done a beautiful song will play."

Graham thought for a moment. He had questions about the actual organization of this cult. Had Gene just confirmed that there was no one person at the top. Maybe that's how they thought about it. But was that true ? Was this by committee or was someone at the top?

“This song is still being written, so its hard to fully grasp what it sounds like. You just need to trust that this is all for the best and the ending song is going to be a wonder, okay? Do you understand?”

“Yeah, I get it,” Graham said.

“You will know a happiness you didn't think possible,” Gene said as he shifted Graham off his lap before standing up. “I'm going to go start looking for something for dinner, feel free to keep playing,” Gene said as he left the room.

Graham sat picking at the keys of the piano. He was in a heap of trouble. There was nothing more dangerous than people who thought they were right. He couldn't let himself become a note in some deluded song. He didn't want that for Cody either, even Zen. It wasn't fair, none of them had asked to a part of this. He remembered Gene had said something about this being a gift, that people would kill for it. Well then why couldn't they just go and take those people and leave the rest of them the hell alone. Graham didn't want to change the world. Sure he had tried to alleviate some of the woe, spread a little happiness what was so wrong with that? Isn't that what you were supposed to do?

Sometime later he heard his name called. Graham walked

into the kitchen to find everybody sat at the table. He took a seat next to Cody as Gene placed a plate of spaghetti in front of him.

“Eat up its my specialty,” Gene said taking his own seat.

“The sauce is straight out of aisle six,” Gretchen laughed. Graham ate quietly. The spaghetti was good, he recognized the sauce as the one he usually bought himself. Gretchen and Gene kept themselves busy talking about the goings on in town. Graham noticed Cody was slurping down the noodles. If there was one good thing about this it was that Cody was getting three square meals a day, which was certainly a change for him.

“So Graham did you get a chance to look around the house?” Gretchen asked.

“Yeah I did,” Graham answered.

“He found me in the study playing piano,” Gene said. “In fact I think that's what he was doing up until now.”

“Oh do you play?” Gretchen asked with some interest. Graham thought about responding with a snarky comeback, didn't they already know everything about him?

“No,” was all he said.

“If you're interested maybe we can get you some lessons,” Gretchen suggested. “You know I think

Mrs. Perry teaches kids out of her house.”

“That might not be a bad idea,” Gene enthused.

Graham didn't reply instead stuffing his mouth with more spaghetti. Is this what they meant by every opportunity, piano lessons? He didn't even want to learn piano.

“The boys really should take up an instrument,” Gretchen then said. “What do you think about that Cody? Any instrument you want to learn?”

Cody swallowed the mouthful he had before shaking his head. “I'd rather play basketball or something,” Cody said which got a hearty laugh out of Gene. Graham could only grimace. Sometimes he wished he could be more like Cody. This was probably eating him up just as much as Graham yet here he was putting on a smile and a show while Graham could only stew about. Dinner came to an end as Gretchen told the boys to bring their plates to the sink. As Graham handed his over Gretchen caught him by the arm.

“You've still got dinner on your face,” she chuckled grabbing a washcloth and wiping Graham's face.

“There all clean,” she said giving him a kiss to the forehead. Graham spun on his feet as his face burned making a quick exit out of the kitchen.

“Alright boys is all your homework done?” Gene asked standing next to the table.

“Yeah, we did it,” Cody answered.

“Then lets see those folders,” Gene said. Graham followed

Cody over to the hooks where their bags were. Graham followed along with Cody and presented his folder to Gene. The man took a minute to look over the worksheets before he signed them, obviously being some requirement that parents needed to look over the homework. “Did you go over the spelling words?”

“Oh well no,” Cody said. “Guess I forgot that part.”

“We can go over them while you two take a bath then.” Gene said. Graham felt his stomach twist.

“B-Bath,” he stammered.

“Of course its bath night you know so lets go upstairs.”

“Wait a minute I don't take baths.” Graham protested.

“You do in this house,” Gene chuckled. “No stinky boys allowed I'm afraid.”

“I'll just take a shower,” Graham said crossing his arms.

“Then who is going to help you with your hair and back hmmm. I don't think I can trust either of you to get behind the ears either.”

“We could take separate baths,” Cody said looking a little shy himself. “I don't mind waiting.”

"Nonsense,” Gene said as he picked up Graham throwing him over his shoulder. “There more than enough room for both of you little goblins,” Gene said as he grabbed Cody putting him over the other shoulder. Graham tried to squirm as he was

carried up the stairs, yet Gene had him.

“Cody do something,” Graham exclaimed noticing Cody was not putting up any resistance.

“Do what,” Cody asked as he frowned and shrugged. Graham felt his arms go limp as it dawned on him that this was happening. Just as with all the other humiliations he had already faced that day there was very little he could do to stop it.

In the bathroom the tub was being filled as Graham looked at the large claw foot tub that was going to fit the two of them comfortably. The bathroom was white tiled. He could see two sets of toothbrushes on the counter where the sink was. Two sets of towels were already hung up on the wall as well. Cody was already taking off his shirt as Graham stood frozen in spot.

“Graham you gotta take off your clothes to get in the tub,” Gene said as he pulled Graham's shirt off.

“S-stop,” Graham yelped stepping back and covering his bare chest.

“What are you so embarrassed about?” Gene asked looking genuinely confused.

“Isn't obvious?” Graham yipped. “I don't want to be naked in front of people.”

“Really Graham, we're all guys here,” Gene said with a click of his tongue. “Look Cody doesn't mind.”

Graham looked past to see Cody naked as the day he was born climbing over the side of the tub and splashing down into the water. “Besides I've already seen you nakie,” Gene chuckled. “Who do you think got you dressed last night?” Graham once again felt his face heat up feeling completely violated. “So you see there's really no reason to be all modest. So get those bottoms off and lets go.”

Graham stood grinding his teeth a little. He saw Cody giving him a look that seemed to show he could sympathize with Graham. With a final groan Graham quickly pulled off his shorts and undies with one motion and quickly hopped into the tub.

“How about some bubbles,” Gene then said as he poured some mixture into the water and a frothy crop of bubbles began to form. Graham pulled the bubbles to him self creating some cover. “Alright you two get soaped up,” Gene said presenting two rags to the boys. Each of them took them covering their top halves in soap as Gene called out what part to do. Graham deliberately did the opposite. Gene didn't seem to mind as long as he was washing something. “Now since there are two of you I think you guys can help each other out. Cody turn around and let Graham do your back.”

“Uh sure,” Cody said as he put his back to Graham. The other boy tried to go quickly although not too much, he didn't want to be scrubbing Cody hard. “Wonderful now its Graham's turn.”

As Graham sat letting Cody wash his back he could feel the

awkwardness between the two of them. He wondered if Cody was picking up on his own feelings of awkwardness. Graham shook his head, that simply wouldn't do. He didn't want Cody to feel weird because of him.

“You missed a spot,” Graham said.

“Huh what I did,” Cody questioned.

“Yeah right here,” Graham said spinning around and splashing some water into Cody's face.

“H-hey,” Cody sputtered laughing a little as he splashed back.

“Okay boys no splashing,” Gene said not able to stop himself from laughing a little. “Now lets get your hair washed. Gene took some shampoo and lathered up both boy's heads. “Keep your eyes closed wouldn't want any stinging eyes.” Graham let out a little huff. He just wished the guy would get on with it. “Okay how about a countdown. 5, 4” Gene began. Both boys remained silent. “Can't go until I get a countdown,” Gene prodded.

Graham and Cody hesitated and then counted down to one together.

“Splashdown,” Gene cheered as two cups of water were dumped on the boy's heads washing the shampoo out. “There all clean, now for those spelling words.”

“We already know how to spell,” Graham said with some haughtiness.

“We'll see,” Gene said. “And I think I know a way to make

this fun," he said as he went below the sink digging around for something. "Here they are," Gene said as he pulled a plastic bowl out from the cabinet. "I knew we still had these lying around," he said as he plopped the plastic bowl into the water. Graham watched it float lazily atop the water. Inside were a bunch of magnetic letters one might find on a fridge door. "We can stick these on the back wall and spell out the words, sounds fun right?" Neither boy mustered a response. "Okay, Cody you first," Gene said brandishing the list of words they were to review. "Your word is hat."

Gene proceeded down the list as the boys spelled out the words by attaching the letters to the back wall. Unlike that day at school Graham did not have any issue's spelling nor did Cody. Which was a plus in his book. They both still had their knowledge and were not experiencing any temporary slip ups.

"And that's it," Gene said standing up from the toilet. "You guys didn't get any wrong, I must have two super spellers."

"It was easy," Cody said.

"Yeah...easy," Graham grumbled. He did kick himself a little for going along so easily with the task. He should have spelled out a swear word or something.

"Okay, I'm going to go get the dishwasher going, you guys got ten more minutes to play," Gene said checking his watch. "And no splashing," he reminded before exiting the bathroom.

"Finally," Graham said as he sat back against the tub. "He put

his head back closing his eyes. “I don't know how you've made it this far without going crazy.”

“Yeah it was rough,” Cody said. “Still you did pretty good for your first day.”

“Honestly, its only because you were here. Having someone I knew helped me not go mental.”

“Yeah it was hard,” Cody said in a small voice. “I'm glad you're here now.”

Graham looked up to give Cody a raised eyebrow.

“Not that I'm glad you're messed up in all this,” Cody added quickly. “Just...you know that I don't have to go through this all alone anymore.”

“I get it,” Graham smirked. “If I have to go through this I'm glad that you're here with me.”

“You know though, it was pretty funny how red you got when we first got in here,” Cody chuckled. “I really thought you might actually turn into a tomato.”

“Its embarrassing,” Graham said as his voice cracked. “This body is so small,” Graham said lifting an arm out of the water. “Geez even going to the bathroom was mortifying.”

“You want to compare sizes?” Cody asked with a coy look.

“What!,” Graham shrieked. “No way, I don't even want to look at myself, I definitely don't want to see you.”

Cody laughed. “Relax, I was just kidding, and now you're a

tomato again.”

“I'm probably bigger than you anyways,” Graham said crossing his arms as he rolled his eyes.

“Ohhhh,” Cody said in goading tone.

“Well it would only make sense, I am taller,” Graham replied.

“What no way,” Cody retorted. “Back to back right now,” he demanded. The boys then sat back to back as Cody used his hand to measure.

“Told ya,” Graham mocked as he felt Cody just barely touch the top of his head.

“Its like not even a half an inch,” Cody pouted.

“You'll get there soon little brother,” Graham said with a smile as he patted the top of Cody's head.

“We're the same age,” Cody frowned.

“Dude no we aren't,” Graham said his face becoming serious. Cody's face dropped a little in realization.

“Yeah, you're right we aren't.” he said quietly. Gene then came back into the bathroom telling the boys it was time to get out. Graham waited until Cody was out and wrapped in a towel and shooed out of the bathroom before he got up. Gene already had another towel in hand and wrapped him up. Graham was then sent on his way. Coming into the room Graham saw Cody in the corner in just a pair of bright orange Scooby Doo undies. He was flexing in front of the mirror.

Graham smirked watching him for a moment seeing that Cody was totally unaware of his presence. Graham then spotted some clothes neatly folded on his bed. He walked over and found a pair of undies with Spiderman on the butt and blue piping. Graham rolled his eyes and put them on finally discarding his towel. He looked over his shoulder to see Cody still at the mirror.

“Are you just gonna look at yourself all night?” Graham asked. Cody turned around not seeming the least bit embarrassed.

“Just taking advantage,” Cody hummed. “I never really liked seeing myself without a shirt on before, I mean was so gangly.” Graham walked over to the mirror taking a look at himself. It still made him feel weird as if the reflection wasn't his.

“Its still so weird,” Graham grimaced. “I guess I don't really remember being like this. Everything just feels so weird.” Graham then lifted his arm up seeing his hairless armpit,” especially not having body hair anymore.”

“Yep, soft smooth skin,” Cody smiled. Graham turned away from the mirror and going back to his bed. It was becoming a little too much for him.

“Don't tell me you actually prefer your body like this.”

“There are some good things about it,” Cody said. Graham turned around about to question how Cody could even say such thing but fell silent as he noticed Cody was running his

hand along his own arm with a sort of sad look. Graham realized that Cody's comment had very little to do with the fact that his body was smaller now. Something had been taken from him, and it wasn't something anyone would want back.

“You know I used to have a scar,” Cody then said as he noticed Graham staring at him. “Right here,” Cody said pointing to a spot on the side of his stomach. “It was a pretty gnarly one.”

“Surgery?” Graham inquired.

“Nope, from when I got stabbed,” Cody chuckled.

“You got stabbed!” Graham said as his eyes went wide.

“A long time ago,” Cody nodded. “Got jumped by some dudes.”

“I didn't know that,” Graham said.

“Not really a story I tell,” Cody said. “But look, now its like it never happened.”

“I guess that's kind of nice,” Graham said. Cody went to his bed picking up the shirt and pulling it over his head. Graham looked at his own pajamas. He held up the two pieces in either hand looking at them with some distaste. They were white with lemons all over them and on the front of the shirt was a giant toucan. Graham wasn't really sure what the connection was. He pulled on the pjs finding that they clung to his body in a way he was not used too. He usually slept in

baggy t-shirts and gym shorts.

“What is up with these,” Graham said turning around holding out his arms and with a disgusted look on his face.

“They ain't that bad,” Cody said. Graham saw he was wearing a similar pair except his had bananas instead of lemons and a monkey on his shirt. “I think they're really soft,” Cody said.

“They are soft,” Graham had to concede wrapping his hands around his arms. The door then opened as Gretchen came walking in.

“Ready for bed boys,” she said.

“Wait, you're making us go to bed?” Graham mewled. “Isn't it like kind of early.”

“Its seven forty five,” Gretchen chuckled. “Bedtime is eight o'clock so that gives us fifteen minutes for a story. Now get into those beds.” Cody crawled under his own covers. Graham let out of a huff of air and went to his own bed. He was tired, he had been tired all day. Gretchen took a seat on the end of Cody's bed a book in hand. As Graham laid in bed, he listened to the story. It was some kids chapter book to be sure. Some story about a kid doing some hare-brained science fair project. As much as Graham wanted to show that he wasn't tired he couldn't help but let out a yawn. Gretchen seemed to have perfected a reading voice that was so calm and smooth he couldn't help but be lulled into a sleepy state. Gretchen was soon done reading as Graham heard her close the book.

“Good night my loves,” she whispered. Graham heard the sound of a soft kiss before the footsteps approached his bed. He felt her give him a kiss to his forehead as his covers were pulled up to his chin. There was a warm feeling in his chest as he curled up under the covers falling into a deep peaceful sleep.

Chapter 8

Potential: Part 8 - Chapter 8

Something to Hold onto

Graham was sat in the playhouse at the school. He drummed his fingers on the table, he was happy to be at morning recess if only to get out of the classroom. His second day of school wasn't quite as exciting as his first. The veneer of mystery had fallen away and was replaced by abject boredom. Which was probably a good thing. The last thing he wanted was for himself to find first grade level school work in any way stimulating.

A cool breeze blew in through the window causing Graham to huddle up a little. It was springtime and Graham found that the mornings around here were cool but would warm up in the afternoon. He wasn't going to complain about the clothes that had been set out for him that morning though. A bright yellow shirt with some surfboards on the chest and some tan cargo shorts. Apparently since he had dressed up yesterday Gretchen was going to give him something super casual that day. Still he wished that he had followed Cody's lead and grabbed a hoodie at least. The real reason he hadn't is because they had all looked so juvenile. Plastered with cartoon characters all of them. Cody was wearing one that was orange and had a hood that looked like a fox with ears to boot. Still it looked warm and Graham probably should have just bucked up and bit the bullet. Its not like anyone here would make fun of him. Graham was more surprised at how routine this all

seemed now. Like everyone had just fallen right into the natural role they had been assigned. That worried him. He just hoped that feeling would pass, that he wouldn't forget that this wasn't normal. This wasn't his life. He needed a reminder.

“What did you do before you got here?” Graham asked looking at Zen who drew another card off the deck he and Cody were playing with.

“What do you mean?” Zen asked.

“Like your job or whatever?” Graham asked. He needed to remind himself that Zen wasn't a kid. It was kind of hard. He had only known Zen like this after all.

“Oh, I was a roadie for bands and stuff,” Zen said.

“Anyone I would have heard of? Graham asked as he raised an eyebrow.

“Mostly metal bands,” Zen said. “Biggest one I ever worked for was Ghoul Death,”

“I think I've heard of them,” Graham said.

“What are you so interested for,” Zen then asked putting his cards down as if these questions were somehow annoying him.

“I just want to talk about something adult,” Graham said. “You know so I can remind myself that we aren't a bunch of kids playing cards in a playhouse.”

“That won't help,” Zen said.

“Well then what!” Graham said slamming his hands on the table. “What are we even doing here? We should be coming up with some plan or whatever.”

“We are,” Cody said.

“Doesn't look like it,” Graham grumbled.

“We're gathering info,” Zen said. “And you and Cody are better able to do that than me.” Graham cocked his head to the side. “Look, your guy's parents are the principal of the mindfuck school and the mayor. They know more than a lot of people, they got the info you just need to get it.”

Graham sat thinking over the idea. He guessed it was mostly true. Then again where was he even supposed to start?

“Yeah, I'm working on it,” Cody said with a sigh, this was not the first time Zen had said this too him.

“Its going to take time,” Cody said looking at Graham. “Its not like they're going to leave stuff out for us to see.” Graham nodded.

“So there is nothing to do in the meantime,” Graham said with some frustration.

“Just keep your eye on the prize, that'll keep you sane,” Zen said.

“Yeah, just gotta hang on long enough to get out,” Graham said.

“That's not what I mean,” Zen said. “I mean the reason you need to get out of here.”

“Reason?”

“Geez, do you really think its that simple.” Zen said. “Everyone wants out at first that's not going to keep you going. Its gotta be something bigger than that, a reason you can't possibly fail.”

“The reason I can't fail?” Graham repeated back.

“Yeah I mean c'mon, what do you got to live for?” Zen asked. “For me its getting back to Andrea. I'm gonna marry that girl and there is no way I'm letting myself be turned into a little kid.”

Graham remembered that Zen had said something about a girl before. He then looked to Cody.

“What's yours?”

“I guess I just want to live life on my own terms,” Cody said leaning back in his chair. “All my life I feel like I've been a leech or useless. Recently thanks to you, I actually felt like I would be able to live a normal life, so I just want the chance to do that. I can't do that here. Having to grow up again and then have my whole life decided for me in service to some cult, no thank you.”

Graham bit his lower lip. He wondered what his was, what was his reason for escape, something so strong that he couldn't fail. Something that could fill him with an

unbeatable resolve. He didn't have a family to speak of, he cared about, what else did he have? His job, but that wasn't something he would fight tooth and nail for. His old life? Sure, it was average, not that Graham minded. He was more than happy to go through without much bother. Like Cody he didn't want to be some pawn in some cult's grand plan. But was that enough to keep him going?

“You don't have to have an answer right now,” Cody said Graham's brow furrowed in concentration.

“Just something to think about.”

The bell rang announcing the end of recess as the boys made their way to line up. Sitting back in the classroom. Graham couldn't pay much attention to whatever banal lesson he was supposed to be learning.

“Graham, are you listening?” Mrs. Farmer called out. Graham looked standing up somewhat frazzled grabbing the reading book off the table.

“So just read starting from the top,” Graham asked.

“No sweetie, I wasn't calling on you to read,” Mrs. Farmer chuckled. “Its time for your counseling appointment. With Ms. Redding according to this,” Mrs. Farmer said looking at a clipboard.

“Oh okay,” Graham said hearing a couple of snickers from his classmates.

“Cody you also see Ms. Redding correct?” Mrs. Farmer

asked.

“Yep,” Cody said nodding his head.

“Then can you show Graham to her office for me?” she asked.

“I can do that,” Cody said standing up. Mrs. Farmer smiled as she handed both the boys hall passes.

Graham followed Cody through the school as they went to the area where Graham had gone when he had been with Dr. Grosse.

“So like what do they do in these counseling sessions?” Graham asked feeling a little nervous.

“I can't say for sure, its different for everybody.” Cody said. “You nervous?”

“Uh no, should I be,” Graham lied.

“Maybe,” Cody said giving Graham a frown. “They are going to mess with you, that's what the counselor's do. The school stuff I think is just about putting us in an environment that they want to be normal for us, but the counselors there the ones that are going to actually make you think you belong here.”

“How do they do it?” Graham asked.

“Not sure,” Cody said. “All I'm saying is that if the school is the gears the counselors are the ones cranking the lever.”

“That's helpful,” Graham huffed a little.

“Don't worry so much,” Cody then said patting Graham on the shoulder. “Ms. Redding is nice and all, just remember she is one of them at the end of the day.” The boys came to a stop in front of one of the doors. The name plate on the wall read 'Claire Redding' in white letters. “One more piece of advice. Don't talk about your old life.” Cody said.

“They know all about it don't they?” Graham asked.

“Yeah, but I don't think they like it when you talk like that. They'll come down harder on you.”

“Like how?” Graham asked hoping that Cody could give him anything. “What did they do to you?”

“I've never talked with her about my old life,” Cody said. “I'm just telling you what Zen told me. He said that's how they got Dean. He told Zen that he stopped answering questions if they didn't address him by his old name. Dean said they didn't like it, and well a week later he had been fogged out.” Graham nodded, he supposed that made sense. Do something they don't like they would just come at you harder.

The door opened as a woman stood in the doorway. She was of average height. Her brown hair was tied back into a ponytail. She was wearing a light red sweater and some black pants. She smiled showing off two little dimples on her cheeks as she looked down at the boys.

“Cody this is a surprise, I don't think you're scheduled for today.” she said putting her hands on her hips.

“Mrs. Farmer asked me to bring Graham to you office,” Cody said smiling back. As Graham watched him he couldn't shake the feeling that Cody was'nt being pleasant as an act. Somehow Graham felt like he was the third wheel in a friend group.

“Oh so this is Graham,” Ms. Redding said looking at Graham with an interested look.

“Yep, he's my brother,” Cody said sounding just a little too excited.

“That sounds cool,” Ms. Redding enthused. “Bet you two get along great.”

“He's a pretty cool brother,” Cody said as he smiled at Graham.

“Well If you say so then it must be true, I'm sure we'll be getting to know one another real fast,” Ms. Redding said. “So Graham why don't you come in and Cody you better hurry back to class before they miss you.”

“Sure,” Cody nodded. “See ya Graham, bye Ms. Redding,” Cody said with a wave as he walked off.

Coming into the room Graham took a look around. It was smaller than Dr. Grosse's office. It didn't have the same clinical feeling to it. The floor was carpeted. There was a couch in the corner and two beanbag chairs.. Some inspirational posters were on the wall with pictures of animals on them. One that caught Graham's eyes was of a chimp smiling wide that said 'Its cool to talk about feeling's

written at the bottom. Two chairs were sat in front of a desk that was neat and had a folder with Graham's name on it sat in the middle. There were also some filing cabinets and a much larger metal locker with two doors on it, that looked like something found in a gymnasium where the equipment was kept. A large fern in next to the desk finished off the room.

“So where would you like to sit?” Ms. Redding said closing the door. “You could sit on the couch or the beanbags if you want.”

“I'll stand,” Graham said.

“Okay if that's what makes you comfortable, bud,” Ms. Redding said taking a seat at her desk. Graham took a seat, he didn't appreciate the condescending title she had addressed him with but he was at least grateful that she wasn't like Dr. Grosse. The counselor made no comment at Graham deciding to take a seat as she flipped open the folder with his name.

“Graham Callaway age seven,” she said reading. ``Hmmm looks like you did really well on your diagnostic test.”

“It wasn't hard,” Graham said. “Any adult could have done it.” Graham then clenched his fist. Shit, he had just done the one thing Cody told him not too. He studied the counselors reaction expecting to see some sign of disapproval, yet she just smiled.

“Of course Mr. Hayes, no problem there.” Graham frowned upon hearing his last name. He felt an anger well up inside of

him. It was almost too easy to see what she was doing, and he was not in the mood to play along.

“Ms. Redding with all due respect don't do that,” Graham said clenching his teeth.

“You don't need to call me Ms. Redding, you can just call me Claire.” she said. Graham let out a deep sigh.

“Seriously, don't. Its apparent what you are doing, and I don't appreciate it.”

“What am I doing exactly?” Claire asked with a clueless look.

“So we're doing this, fine,” Graham snapped. “You think by appealing to my adult self and letting me call you by your first name like we are equals that I'll drop my guard so you can easily mess with my head.”

Claire chuckled a little. “Think you got me figured out, huh?” Graham rested his cheek against his fist as he looked at Claire with a weary look. “I'm not trying to trick you, far from it. We both know how you got here, want to talk about it?”

“Why would I want to talk about it,” Graham muttered. “Not like it would make a difference.”

“You seem angry about it.” Claire said with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Why shouldn't I be?” Graham said a louder than he meant before a moment later getting his anger under control. Claire wrote something down on a notepad. “What'd you just write?”

“Just some notes for me,” Claire said not even looking up.

“Yeah, guess I have a lecture from Mommy after this when you tell her I got mad,” Graham said with some bitterness. He could hear Gretchen now nagging him about being respectful towards adults. It had only been a day and she had already taken up residence in his mind as the nagging mother figure.

“Oh honey, that's not how this works,” Claire said. “Nothing that we talk about gets reported, I may give some observations or reports to your parents but that's all they are. They won't know what you say to me. This is a safe place for you to vent or talk about whatever you want.”

“Oh yeah,” Graham said sarcastically. “Like venting is going to make me feel better.”

“We need to do something with your anger,” Claire said.

“Maybe I want to be angry, its better than just thinking about how screwed I am.”

“Do you think that's helpful?” Claire asked.

“Just shut up will you,” Graham spat out. He then looked up with some panic. He hadn't meant to say that out loud. Now he really felt like he had crossed a line. He expected Claire to bring out the shocking bracelet. Instead she just looked at him with calm expression.

“You have every right to be angry, that is a valid emotion to have given whats happened.” Claire said. “But what do you think happens then?” Graham breathed a sigh of relief to see

that she wasn't going to chastise him right that moment for his outburst.

“I don't know, I stay angry,” Graham said his voice dropping into a low whisper.

“Anger doesn't last forever. Human's cant keep up such a strong emotion forever. Eventually anger will turn into bitterness."

“So what you're saying is I should just forget, that I should just be happy about it?” Graham said. As if that was even an option.

“Graham what I want you to understand is this,” Claire said leaning forward. “What happened to you is something you are allowed to be mad about,”

“Oh well that's just great,” Graham said sarcastically. “Thank you so much for giving me permission.”

“I wasn't finished,” Claire said holding up a hand. “You are not dead, you have just arrived at a new chapter in your life. My job is to help you transition to this new era and hopefully show you that there are things that you can look forward too.”

“You mean look forward to being a cog for some cult to use?” Graham questioned. Shutting her down before she could start in with the spiel seemed somewhat pleasant to Graham. That and he didn't really need to hear from another person about all of his so called potential and how he could do great things with his new life. This wasn't his life as far as he was concerned. The cult had done this to make him into a

tool for them and them alone. “You think I will accept your little cult, and be happy that I get to be a part of it?”

“Graham, that has nothing to do with me,” Claire said. “How you feel about Golden Horizon is none of my business. I merely want to help you be able to move forward.”

“Whatever,” Graham dismissed. “You're just like them, you think this is so great, that I should be happy to be a kid again, that I should learn to love my new parents who just go on and on about how they love me? How could I ever do that. They kidnapped me and now expect me to be grateful for it.”

“I think that I just want you to have a more positive outlook,” Claire said, she looked a little taken aback, as if what Graham had said rattled her. Not a lot, but a little. “I can see you have some resentment towards your new Mom and Dad, so lets talk about your parents, the ones you had before.”

“No thanks,” Graham said looking off to the side.

“Why's that?” she asked.

“Because you're just going to spin things, to make it seem like I'm better off now. That somehow all this is some reward. That Gretchen and Gene can somehow give me something that my real parents didn't give me.”

“Maybe we should change the subject,” Claire said opening up a drawer and pulling out a stack of cards.

“Are we playing a game now?” Graham asked cocking and eyebrow.

“Something like that,” Claire said.

“Why?”

“Because I can see you don't want to talk a whole lot right now. We also don't have much time left and it is my job as your counselor to identify things that we can work on together and this will help,” Claire said.

“And what if I refuse?” Graham said crossing his arms as he furrowed his brow.

“Then you will be making my job very hard,” Claire said a matter of factly. “So you gonna participate or not?”

Graham waved his hand through the air. At this point he didn't much care. Claire had been putting up with him with some patience. Then again he didn't feel she deserved any more than what he was giving. She was still one of them.

“Its simple word association, I hold up a card and you tell me the first word that comes to mind.” Claire then held up the first card which had an elephant on it.

“Elephant,” Graham replied with a stone faced expression. Claire held up another card with a butterfly. “Butterfly,” Graham said.

“Do you think that's clever?” Claire said searching through the deck.

“You said the first word,” Graham said looking like he did'nt understand what he was doing.

“You know that's not how this works,” Claire said raising an eyebrow.

“I'm just a little kid,” Graham smirked. “I don't know how anything works.” Claire didn't respond as she held up a picture of a hammer. Graham decided to humor her a little.

“Break,” he said. Claire gave a little smile. As more cards came up Graham gave his one word responses. He didn't really know what this was supposed to do, it seemed harmless enough. He didn't really put much stock into psychoanalysis exercises though. Claire then stopped putting the cards before she started to write on her pad. Graham sat watching her for a moment.

“You're writing a lot,” he noted.

“Curious?” Claire asked not looking up.

“I guess,” Graham shrugged. “But I know, you can't tell me what it is,” he said imitating the voice of what a stereotypical psychiatrist might sound like.

“Not at all,” Claire said holding up her notepad. “Graham Callaway is a highly intelligent individual. Shows signs of distress and anger. He is defensive and lashes out occasionally with obstinate actions and feigning ignorance. Given the nature of his situation and past traumas he is a guarded individual who has difficulty in being open with people. Areas to explore would be self-esteem and trust issues.”

Graham was silent. Hearing it all out in the open he couldn't

disagree with the prognosis. Claire may just be good at her job, it was shame she was using her talents to do this.

“Sound about right?” Claire asked.

“I guess you might have got one or two things right,” Graham conceded with a grumble. “But I don't think I have trust issues,” even he didn't believe himself when he said it. “I don't see how me being suspicious of you people means I have trust issues, it makes perfect sense.”

“These are things that we can work on,” Claire said.

“I do trust people,” Graham yelped. Claire's lips puckered a moment at Graham's outburst.

“Then tell me, who do you trust? Right now in this whole world who do you trust?”

Graham licked his lips in thought. Who did he really trust? He had never given much thought to it. His family, no way. Gene and Gretchen? Hell no. Friends? He didn't have many of those if any really. Sure there was Tracy who had made him an exaggerated dating profile. But they were work friends, its not like they hung out. The more Graham thought he began to see how true Claire's assessment had been. He was a guarded person who preferred to keep to himself. That didn't seem weird to him. He had been busy with work, a job that now seemed like the furthest thing of importance to him but which had dominated his life.

“Cody,” Graham said. “I trust Cody.” That was the truth. There was nobody else. Claire smiled as she looked at the

clock on her desk.

“Looks like our time is up for the day. You can return to your class, want me to walk you back,” she said getting up and coming around the other side.

“No, I can get back just fine,” Graham said walking towards the door.

“It was very nice to meet you,” Claire said holding the door open. “I think we are going to become very good friends.”

Graham walked out the door, shaking his head as soon as it was shut. Walking back to his class he wanted to scream. She had done nothing but play mind games with him. In fact he was starting to see the point of it all. She had been trying to get him to admit to his own weaknesses. In practice that might actually be something a real counselor just might do. Yet there was a glaring difference. A real counselor would then empower someone to confront those weaknesses, that's not what these people wanted. They wanted Graham to run a way from them. To surround himself in the safety of being a child again where he wouldn't have to confront those things. They wanted him to feel like he wasn't able to be an adult anymore that he was better off now.

The rest of the school day plodded on. Graham felt like he was on auto-pilot through lunch. At recess he sat in the playhouse with Cody and Zen. He still couldn't shake off the tumultuous storm inside of him. He knew what they were trying to do, he had it all figured out. He should have expected nothing less, so why was he still so bothered by it

all? Graham got up from the table and left the playhouse without a word. He walked to the playground sitting on the platform that lead to the monkey bars. Cody followed taking a seat next to him.

“You okay?” Cody asked.

“Just peachy,” Graham said.

“Want to talk about it?

“No,” Graham said as he rested his chin in his hands. He was getting real sick of that question.

“You mind if I stay?” Cody then asked. Graham nodded. Cody then stood up taking a small leap as he got onto the first rung of the monkey bars. He stopped in the middle as he flipped over so that he was hanging upside down by his legs. He stayed there hanging swaying back and forth a little. His shirt falling down exposing his tummy and showing the yellow waistband of his undies.

“What are you doing?” Graham finally asked.

“Playin,” Cody responded.

“Well stop it,” Graham said. “You look ridiculous not too mention we can all see your underwear.”

“So what,” Cody laughed. “Nobody cares.”

“That's the problem,” Graham muttered as he continued to stew. Cody then hoisted himself up so that he was sat on top of the monkey bars. Zen came wandering over.

“What are you doing?” he asked looking up at Cody.

“Sitting, want to join me, beats sitting in that old playhouse.” Cody said waving the other boy up. Graham expected Zen to respond with some snide remark. If anyone was going to be on his side then it would be Zen. Surprisingly the other boy shrugged as eh climbed onto the platform before climbing up to sit next to Cody.

“Come on Graham,” Cody called. “Its a nice view.” Graham was about to refuse yet was stopped by the approaching footsteps of one of the teachers.

“Cody, Mikey get down from there this instant.” she said pointing.

“Why, we aren't going to get hurt,” Cody said.

“That is not the proper way to play on the monkey bars,” she said.

“Their monkey bars,” Zen said putting on an innocent voice. “This is how monkey's would play on them.” It was obvious to Graham that Zen was enjoying this exchange.

“You are boys not monkeys,” the teacher said. “If you don't get down both of you are going to be on the wall for the rest of recess.”

Cody let out a little mewl as he slipped down landing onto the wood chips followed by Zen. The teacher pleased that her direction had been followed then left.

“Bitch,” Zen whispered under his breath. Cody was on the

platform once again. He leapt and swung his way across the bars getting to the end as he leapt off onto the ground.

“Pretty good,” Zen smirked. “Betcha I can go faster.”

“Bet,” Cody crowed. Zen got to the platform, once he started Cody counted Zen's time out loud. Cody stopped counting at six seconds.

“Told ya,” Zen said as he hit he ground.

“What, no way that was faster than me,” Cody protested.

“It was so,” Zen snickered.

“Graham who was faster?” Cody asked looking at Graham.

“You guys are fogging out,” Graham said bluntly.

“No we aren't,” Zen said shaking his head as he leaned up against one of the support poles.

“You're literally sitting here having monkey bar races,” Graham retorted.

“We're just keeping ourselves physically fit,” Cody said.

“Suuuureee,” Graham said nodding his head up and down.

“He probably couldn't make it all the way across.” Zen said. “What with those twiggy arms.”

“I can too,” Graham said standing up.

“Then prove it,” Cody said goading Graham with an impossibly irritating tone.

“You guys are being so stupid right now,” Graham said furrowing his brow.

“Told ya,” Zen snickered.

“Fine,” Graham said puffing out his chest, “If it will shut you two up.” Graham began to make his way across the monkey bars. As confident as he was starting out, halfway through he found his grip faltering. It had been years since he had done this, not too mention he wasn't one for the gym. He would jog most mornings, but most of the time he ended up walking most of it. His hand slipped on one of the bars that sent him down to the ground.

“Did'nt even make it halfway,” Zen said shaking his head.

“You gotta work on that dude,” Cody added. Graham stood up his face red at his pitiful showing.

“Who cares about this shit? So what I'm not great at playing on a playground like you two children.”

“It's important,” Zen said. Graham looked at with an incredulous look. Was Zen fogging out? “Think about it, to get out of here who knows what will have to do.”

“Zen's right,” Cody nodded. “We don't just sit in that playhouse doing nothing. We've been keeping ourselves physically fit as well. A healthy body leads to a healthy mind.”

Graham cocked an eyebrow at Cody. He had no doubt picked up that tidbit at the meetings Graham had pressed him to

attend. At least it proved that he had gone at least once.

“I'm not fat,” Graham said holding out his arms as if to show off his thin physique.

“I'm not saying you have to lift weights,” Cody chuckled. “But it will help think about things like agility and whatnot, you didn't last very long during tag yesterday in gym class.”

“I wasn't even trying,” Graham said. “And neither did Zen.”

“Zen never tries,” Cody said nudging the other boy. “But he's fast.”

“So am I,” Graham said, he wasn't sure if that was true, certainly not as an adult but he was a kid now.

“Then lets test it,” Cody said. “You have until the end of recess to catch me and Zen we'll stay on the playground too, its good to have obstacles for training purposes.”

“Fine you're on.” Graham said. Cody proceeded with a countdown before he and Zen took off. Graham first went after Zen yet lost him when Zen went up a slide and Graham lost his footing sliding back down to the bottom. He then spotted Cody on a cargo net. Graham went after him but Cody was faster than even Graham anticipated. This was going to be a bigger task than Graham could have imagined. As recess continued Graham still hadn't managed to catch either boy, but he seemed to be less frustrated as time went on. In fact after a while he forgot about proving himself. This was actually becoming fun. Shooting down slides jumping off bridges crawling under platforms. It had been a long time

since Graham had thrown himself into an activity so wholeheartedly.

The recess bell rang as Graham came to a stop breathing hard and resting his hands on his knees .

“Didn't even get one of us,” Zen said laughing.

“That's why we train,” Cody said slapping Graham on the back. “How do you feel.”

“Great actually,” Graham said.

“Nothing like a good workout,” Cody nodded. As Graham walked back into the school he found his mood had brightened. The frustrations of that morning had faded. For a moment he was worried that he had fogged out. He had just played tag like a kid despite Cody framing it as training for their escape. As Graham thought more on it he decided that it was okay. He was just feeling better from the endorphin rush. Its not like he had forgotten he was an adult. The more Graham formed his hypothesis about how this all worked it seemed to make sense. The school was a conditioning agent, that was no doubt, but just forcing someone to act like a kid didn't turn them into one, that was where the counselors came in. It was a two pronged approach. It wouldn't work unless both parts were present, as long as Graham continued to guard himself against Ms. Redding he would be okay, at least for the time being.

The day came to an end yet during the end of day announcements he and Cody were told to go to the principal's

office. There was oooh from the rest of the kids in class, as if the two of them were in trouble. Graham rolled his eyes. They definitely weren't in trouble, especially if it was both of them being called. Getting to the office, Gretchen was already waiting for them.

“There are two of my favorite boys,” Gretchen said smiling as she put a hand on each of their heads. “You boys are coming with me this afternoon,” she said.

“For what?” Graham asked as he followed her out of the school.

“We're going to the store to get measurements done,” Gretchen explained.

“Measurements?” Cody inquired.

“We have the golf outing at the country club this weekend,” Gretchen said. “And you two have a very special job.” Graham didn't like that one bit. As they drove Gretchen explained the whole thing. The boys would be done up like old time caddy's that people could take pictures with.

“I don't want to do that,” Graham said at once.

“You're doing it,” Gretchen replied. “You are a part of this family so you can help out once in awhile.”

Several possible responses popped up in Graham's mind, the biggest one being that he had never asked to be apart of this family in the first place. Instead Graham sighed. Its not like everyone in the car didn't already know that one.

“It'll be fun. You get to dress up, it'll be just like Halloween.” Gretchen said.

Getting their measurements done was pretty painless. Graham was just waiting for the moment when they would actually have to try on the clothes yet it never came.

The rest of the night proceeded on normally. Gretchen got some drive thru for dinner as a reward for the boys behaving at the store. Graham and Cody did their homework, hung out for a bit, were given a bath and then put to bed.

As Graham laid in his bed that night his frustrations had returned. This whole country club business was not sitting well with him. Here he was being forced to be a prop for a bunch of rich people. It was so typical of this place he thought. In the grand scheme of things that's what he was, a prop, to be used for Golden Horizon's agenda. Graham fell asleep that night coming up with different ways he could mess up the event. He had a couple of good ideas. He would just have to wait for the day to come to decide which one he should go with.

Chapter 9

Potential: Part 9 - Chapter 9

No help

Graham was stood in his room as Gene was in front of him affixing a bow tie to his shirt.

“Dad do I really have to wear this,” Graham mewled pulling a little at his collar.

“Now, now Graham you're helping out, besides these clothes are not uncomfortable.”

“You're not the one wearing them,” Graham grumbled. Gene chuckled as he stood up placing a a page boy hat on top of Grahams head. Graham stomped over to the mirror to take in the full picture. He could do nothing but scrunch up his face. He looked ridiculous.

He was wearing a brown button vest over a white shirt. The hat matched the vest. He pulled a little at the red bowtie. The worst part was the red and black checkered pants that bunched up at his shins showing off the loud argyle socks.

“Here's are other caddy,” Gretchen announced coming into the room with Cody in tow. His outfit wasn't much different except for his blue hat,vest, and bow tie. “They look so spiffy standing together don't they?” she said with her hands covering her chest.

“They are very handsome,” Gene added.

“This is so stupid,” Graham said. He knew he was going to be on display that night and part of him couldn't help but complain.

“Graham,” Gene said in a more serious tone as he knelt down to eye level. “This is going to be a very important event. They don't let kids come usually so you need to be on your best behavior, understand?”

“That's right boys,” Gretchen chimed in. “This is an opportunity to show everybody how mature you are. Do you promise to be good boys?”

“I promise mommy,” Cody smiled.

“Wonderful, Graham?” Gretchen said giving Graham an expectant look. He grunted. “Graham,” Gretchen said her voice laced with a warning. Graham pursed his lips. Why should he have to promise anything? Its not like he even wanted to go.

“I promise,” he relented.

“Great,” Gretchen said as if the boys had signed some binding contract. “I need to put on some perfume and then we'll go.” she said leaving the room as Gene followed. Cody was over at the mirror striking a pose with his arms crossed over his chest.

“You seem happy about this,” Graham said.

“This outfit is wack,” Cody smirked. “But I guess I can put up with it for a night. Besides this thing is at a country club,

they'll probably have some good food."

"How can you think with your stomach at a time like this?" Graham asked cocking his head.

"Beats the soup kitchen," Cody laughed as he walked out the room. Graham shook his head. Same old Cody ever the optimist and finding the silver lining. Graham sighed leaving the room ready for the night to be over.

The country club was done up that night as Graham looked out over the patio where the party was taking place. Plain colored lights were strung up in the air. Tables with white clothes and place settings were everywhere. There were a lot of people already there. They weren't dressed like this was a black tie event more casual, clothes more befitting a warm spring night.

Graham and Cody were placed in front of a backdrop of the country club from back in the day in black and white. Gold letters across the top spelled out the word Looking Back for the Future. The pictures ended up being worse than Graham could imagine. All of the people there thought that it was a hoot of course. Graham and Cody found themselves being ordered around in different poses by the photographer. Sometimes they would just be standing next to people other times they had to pose like they were offering a club to someone. One man decided to get a shot of himself flipping a coin to Cody who pocketed the coin afterwards.

The man simply chuckled. "You earned that one kid." he said before sauntering off. Cody looked a little more than pleased.

“Panhandling?” Graham said snarkily. Cody looked a little ashamed at first before he furrowed his brows.

“Dude, shutup,” he said gruffly as he turned away from Graham who in turn immediately felt bad about what he had said. Graham was in a bad mood and being forced to smile wasn't helping, yet Cody didn't deserve to catch any flak from him.

“Um sorry,” Graham squeaked out.

“Its fine,” Cody said giving him a small smile before the photographer called them back for the next photo.

After a solid hour it seemed everyone had gotten their photo op and not a moment too soon. Graham's feet were sore as he sat down on the bench with long sigh.

“Glad that's over,” Cody said taking a seat next to him.

“You and me both,” Graham agreed. Gretchen came over setting a bag down on the bench next to the boys.

“Great job you two, did you have fun?” she asked.

“No,” Graham chortled.

“Sorry to hear that,” Gretchen said pleasantly dismissing Graham's attitude. “Its over now though so you can relax.”

“We can go?” Graham asked with some hope.

“I just meant the pictures are over,” Gretchen clarified.

“I want to get out of these clothes,” Graham mewled putting

his head back.

“Lucky for you, Mommy thought to bring a change of clothes for you,” Gretchen said patting the bag. “Just wait for Daddy to finish up with his conversation and then he'll take you to go get changed.” Just then a lady called Gretchen's name and the woman walked away. Graham rested his chin on his hands with a huff.

“You are such a grouch right now,” Cody noted.

“What am I supposed to be happy about?” Graham asked.

“Its not that bad,” Cody said. “Things could be worse.”

“Worse?” Graham questioned. “Being kidnapped and slowly being brainwashed into a child seems pretty bad.”

“Okay, we got problems,” Cody agreed. “But still things could be worse. We have a roof over our heads, three square meals a day, and we're being forced to live in a pretty nice house. It may be a prison but I don't know too many prisons with video games.”

Graham sat back. He guessed he could see where Cody was coming from. Sure they did have their fair share of problems which were a big deal. But at least they could deal with them in comfort.

“Video games?” Graham said in an effort not to be mean to Cody.

“Yeah, you haven't seen them yet, there down in the basement. We could play them when we get back to the

house maybe. That is if you aren't going to be grumpy all night.”

“Fine,” Graham said giving Cody a small punch to the arm. “I'll stop being so negative just as soon as I'm out of this ridiculous outfit.”

“Its a deal,” Cody said.

As Graham sat waiting he was finding it hard to try and turn his mood around. He looked over to see Gene was still talking to people, they were all being rather loud and laughing. No doubt the alcohol was starting to get everyone buzzed. The more time passed the more annoyed he became. Just how long were they going to have to wait? Graham sat watching the people pass by when he noticed something peculiar. Everyone here had a small gold pin with some symbol he couldn't quite make out. It occurred to Graham that this was indeed a Golden Horizon event and all the people here were members. With that in mind he began to closely take notice of the people. These were after all his enemies and it would be good to try and identify them. As he looked around he didn't really see anyone here he recognized. All the adults at the school were certainly part of this but none of them seemed to be attendance, such as Mrs. Farmer and Ms. Redding. Maybe they weren't high up enough. It only made sense. Gene was the mayor, and Gretchen was the head honcho of their brainwashing center so it made sense they must be big deals. As Graham looked around though he noticed that Dr. Grosse wasn't around. Surely he had to be high up as well. Though if Graham was being honest that guy

didn't seem to be one for parties. In fact Graham would go as far to say that Dr. Grosse probably didn't even really care about the goals of the organization. If he was the type of person that Zen had painted him as he probably liked his job a little too much and that's all he cared about. Just like Sebastian.

As Graham remembered his date from hell, he kind of hoped he was around. Graham began to think about what he would do if he actually saw him. Probably take one of the golf clubs they had used as props for the photos and aquatint it with Sebastian's stupid face. Graham's fantasy of revenge could only occupy him for so long as he looked to see that Gene was still talking. With a huff Graham stood up grabbing the bag and putting it around his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Cody asked.

“I'm going to go and get changed,” Graham declared.

“Maybe we should wait,” Cody said frowning a little.

“Oh c'mon,” Graham groaned. “We've waited long enough. Besides they can't get mad at us for dressing ourselves now can they. We're adults we don't actually need help.”

Cody looked at Graham and then at Gene before coming back to Graham.

“Yeah, lets go,” he said getting to his feet. Graham walked into the clubhouse spotting some bathrooms not far off. The boys walked in finding it empty. Graham plopped the bag onto the ground as he started digging around to find the

change of clothes. Footsteps approached and a moment later four boys came sauntering in. They stopped upon seeing Graham and Cody standing in the middle of the room. They looked older yet still young to Graham, most likely middle schoolers.

“Is it Halloween or something,” a boy with acne on his cheek said. The rest of the guys laughed. As they started to circle. One of them flipped Cody's hat around on his head while another boy swiped Grahams right off his head holding it up above him like a cat toy. Graham glared back not jumping for the hat. The other boy seeing he was not going to get a reaction dropped the hat onto Graham's face which he swatted to the ground.

“Who dresses like this to play golf?” one of the boys mocked as the rest of them snickered.

“We weren't playing golf,” Cody said. Graham shot him a look to say shut up.

“So what you just like dressing up like dorks,” the boy laughed.

“Look we don't want any trouble,” Graham said sensing that these kids were up to no good.

“How old are you?” the boy with acne then asked.

“Thir...” Graham began before falling silent and mumbling seven.

“Whats that couldn't hear you,” the boy with acne said.

“He said seven,” Cody piped up.

“Really could have sworn he was about to say three,” the boy in a black hoodie behind Cody said.

“Yeah I definitely heard that too,” the acne boy smirked.

“I'm seven,” Graham asserted clenching his fist as he said it. He hated saying it still.

“I don't know, sure you're not babies, you look little.” the hoodie boy laughed. Graham was about to argue yet before he could say anything he heard Cody let out a yelp. He spun around to see the boy behind him had him held an inch of the ground holding Cody up by his underwear. Graham's eyes widened. His legs moved on their own as he barreled into the hoodie boy.

“Let him go,” Graham screeched using all his strength to push the boy back. Cody was released and a moment later Graham found his arm pulled back behind his back as the older boy had him in an arm lock.

“Nice Toy Story underwear dork,” the acne boy crowed. “Mommy pick those out for you?”

Cody didn't respond as he readjusted his pants, his face burning red.

“What is your deal, leave us alone.” Graham yelled.

“Why should we,” one of the other boys said. “This is too much fun.”

“Yeah, since our other plans were ruined you guys will have to do,” the acne boy said. “Now what should we do with you two?”

“We could hang them up here,” one of the other boys said opening one of the stall doors and pointing at the hook on the door.

“Nah,” the boy who was holding Graham said. “They'd break it.”

“What about that tree on hole eight,” the other boy said. “You know the one by the road.”

“Oh that is perfect,” the acne boy laughed as he grabbed Cody by the arm. “C'mon you two lets go for a ride.” The boys were pulled from the bathroom as the older guys formed a circle around them and the acne boy in the center.

“You two stay quiet,” the acne boy said holding them close in headlocks. “You make one peep and we'll pants you right here and take your pants with us.” Graham's mind was racing. He was trying to figure some way out of this. Neither option was very good. Either he make some noise and be left running around pants-less or he let these guys take them to wherever they were going to face some other fate. A hanging wedgie in a tree? Did kids really still do stuff like that, Graham thought that was stuff that just happened in movies? Then again Merryweather was no normal place, maybe they did do stuff like that here. Graham found himself sandwiched between two boys in a golf cart while Cody was taken to another one. Graham found himself letting out a little anxious

squeal. Holy crap this was actually happening and the worst part, he was actually scared. He was getting bullied by kids less than half his age and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

“Idiots actually left the keys in here,” one of his captors said starting up the golf cart.

“Excuse me who are you?” a voice rang out. Graham looked over to see a young girl about seventeen years old standing with a green polo denoting she was an employee with her hands on her hips. The other boys stared back in silence before a moment later they were all scattering and running off into the distance.

“Hey wait,” the girl called out before groaning deciding not to give chase. She then turned to look at Graham and Cody still seated in the golf carts.

“What were you guys doing with the golf carts?” she asked.

“They made us,” Graham said hopping out. “We didn't have a choice.” The girl shook her head.

“Well this is no place for you to be playing, are your parents around?”

“They're at the party over there,” Graham said pointing towards the patio area.

“Lets get you back then,” the girl said taking Grahams hand as she walked over to where Cody was. She extended her hand towards him. As Graham looked at Cody he realized

something. Cody looked terrified. “Its okay sweetheart,” the girl coaxed. “I know those boys were causing trouble, its not your fault.” Cody frowned as he took the girls hand.

Back at the patio the boys were immediately spotted by a concerned Gretchen and Gene.

“Where did you two go, you were supposed to wait.” Gretchen said.

“We went to go and get changed by ourselves,” Graham asserted.

“I see that didn't happen,” Gene said.

“It looks like some older boys were going to take them out on a joyride in the golf carts,” the girl said.

“Although I don't think these two were there by choice.” Cody broke away from the girl and went to Gretchen's side as he began to cling to her hiding his face.

“Cody,” Gretchen said as her voice turned to worry. Graham looked on with concern. Had Cody actually gotten so scared that he was now fogging out?

“They were messing with us,” Graham said. “Its not a big deal.”

“Who are these boys?” Gretchen insisted her mama bear side coming out.

“Probably these troublemakers we've been having a problem with,” the girl sighed. “They sneak out here, usually just to

steal stuff from the snack cart.”

“Sounds like an issue for the police,” Gene said.

“We try,” the girl said. “Problem is they are gone by the time the cops get here.”

“I'll have a talk with the chief about this matter,” Gene then said flexing his influence as the mayor.

“Sounds great,” the girl said.

“I can't thank you enough for keeping my boys safe,” Gretchen said.

“I didn't do much,” the girl chuckled.

“Still,” Gretchen said as she then looked at the boys. “Go with Daddy he'll help you get changed.” she instructed. The boys followed Gene to the bathroom where the bag with the extra clothes was waiting. Graham wasted no time in getting the caddy outfit off and pulling on the tan shorts and blue button up. Gene helped him do the buttons even though Graham hadn't asked. The last part was a pair of sandals which Gene snapped onto Graham's feet.

“Cody aren't you going to change?” Gene asked noticing Cody had been standing still looking at the ground.

“Yeah,” Cody said quietly not even looking up from the ground. Gene furrowed his brows for a moment before looking at Graham.

“Hey bud, why don't you go on ahead, Mommy should have

some food for you," Gene said pulling out Cody's clothes from the bag.

"Uh sure," Graham said. He gave one last look back to see Gene had Cody in a hug before he left. Back on the patio Graham was sat at a table with some food in front of himself. He ate waiting for Cody to show up. He wondered what was taking so long. He was definitely worried about Cody. Some time later Cody came out in a matching outfit to Graham. Cody sat at the table looking at the food. Graham noted his puffy red eyes. He had been crying.

"You gonna eat?" Graham asked.

"Not hungry," Cody said as he continued to sit motionless. Graham pursed his lips as he looked at Cody.

"Are you okay, you're not fogging out are you?" Graham asked.

"I'm fine," Cody said as he got up from the table and walked off to stand near Gretchen who seemed to welcome the company as she put an arm around him and carried on with her conversation.

The night came to an end as Graham found himself standing in his bedroom. Gretchen had told them to get their pajamas on. She had set out a Sonic the Hedgehog pair for Graham which he found to be at least somewhat agreeable. Cody was sat on the floor with his head resting up against his bed as he picked a little at the his leg and blue and red striped pajamas. Graham couldn't take it anymore. Sure they had had a shitty

night, but all their nights were shitty.

“C'mon man,” Graham said placing his hands on his hips. “You got to get over it. So what those guys were jerks to us, but we can't let ourselves get sidetracked here. They are nothing.”

“Its not them,” Cody replied as he kept his eyes to the grounds. “Its just...”

“Just what?” Graham asked. “They pushed us around, but so what. If you hadn't noticed we're getting pushed around by everybody these days.”

“You just don't get it,” Cody grumbled. Graham crouched down.

“Then tell me,” Graham said. “Put a little trust in me.” Cody looked up at Graham. He then stared off to the side.

”Its not those guys,” Cody began. “Its just reminded me of something, and for a moment I felt like I was back there.”

Graham bit his lower lip. He hadn't anticipated this. All of his worries about Cody fogging out were dashed away and were now replaced by the understanding that what Cody was dealing with had nothing to do with being a kid.

“About the time you got jumped?” Graham asked recalling Cody's story from earlier in the week, when he had shown Graham the spot where he had a scar that was now gone.

“Look, can we just not talk about it,” Cody said standing up abruptly.

“We should though,” Graham said. “I mean it sounds like you haven't dealt with this.”

“Last I checked you weren't a therapist,” Cody said gruffly.

“I just want to help,” Graham said. It was true he had no experience in counseling whatsoever. Right now though he was the best Cody had.

“I don't need therapy,” Cody said. Graham could hear the shaking in his voice. In fact he could see Cody's whole body trembling. “I need something, anything to take the edge off. I can't stand this. You want to help, tell you what.” Cody said placing hand on each of Graham's shoulders. “Go and distract Gene and Gretchen, just long enough so I can sneak some liquor up here. I'll even share with you.” Cody said as a smile formed on his face. Graham's eyes widened. He didn't like this one bit. Cody's smile was not the normal one there was something unnerving about it. He looked like a mad scientist from those kids shows Graham had been watching all week. Cody looked like he was about to flip the switch on the death ray.

“The last thing you need is alcohol,” Graham said. Cody's face instantly screwed up.

“What do you know,” Cody shouted as he turned away stomping over to the bureua and slamming his fist down. “Some friend you are. I help you out all the time, and then the one time I ask you for something you refuse.

“Cody, you know that isn't going to help,” Graham said.

“JUST SHUT UP,” Cody bellowed as he used his hands to sweep the lamp and a pile of clean clothes of the top of the bureau onto the floor. Graham stopped as he looked at Cody. The loss of appetite, the shaking, the irritability. It dawned on Graham all at once. These were symptoms of drug withdrawal. Graham's mind went into overdrive as all the pieces fell into place. Cody had still been using drugs up until he had gotten kidnapped and the regression had not reversed that part of his history. The door to the room opened up as Gretchen came in.

“Is something going on in here, I heard a bang?” she asked before her eyes went to the floor to see the mess. She then looked up to see Cody breathing hard with the desperate look on his face. “Oh Cody darling, whats the matter?”

“I-I don't feel so good,” Cody said shakily as he took a step back. Gretchen walked forward lifting Cody up into her arms. He struggled a little yet Gretchen held him close.

“Oh sweetie you've had quite the fright tonight didn't you? Those boys were so mean. It's okay though Mommy has you. I know,” she said as if an idea had suddenly struck her. “Lets go and get you a nice warm glass of milk and a cooking that will make you feel better.” Gretchen carried Cody from the room. Graham felt himself stumble back as he fell onto his bed. Things had suddenly taken a very serious turn. How could he not have thought of this? He knew what Cody's background was. He had been working with Cody for awhile to get him off drugs, but things took time, in fact there had been some talk of Cody going to rehab. Here now they were

though. Cody had been forced to go cold turkey and with the added stress of his new situation it was a wonder that Cody wasn't a manic mess. What he needed was support, maybe some therapy and a doctor to help him work through this. Did Gretchen know that though? As Graham thought he could only surmise that they must so why weren't they doing anything? Gretchen came back into the room sometime later. Cody was still being carries except now his head was on Gretchen's shoulder as his limbs hung down like wet noodles. His eyes were closed a tiny bit of droll pooling out of the side of his mouth, he was completely knocked out. Gretchen laid him in his bed and pulled the covers up over him. She then set about tidying up the mess he had made on the ground. Graham went to Cody's side.

“Cody,” Graham called out.

“Graham hush,” Gretchen said putting a hand on his shoulder. “Cody is going to go to bed early tonight, you can too if you want, but let him be for now,” she said as she lead him out of the room turning off the lights and closing the door as they exited.

“What did you do to him?” Graham asked. Gretchen looked at him for a moment before shaking her head.

“I just gave him something to help him sleep,” she said. “Cody can get a little anxious sometimes and you boys had a stressful night, he needs to sleep now, he'll feel a better in the morning.”

Graham stopped in his tracks. The words a little something to

help him sleep brought up memories of the medicine Gretchen had given him his first night. The stuff that had knocked Graham out in an instant.

“You sedated him!?” Graham screeched. “You can't do that. He is going through drug withdrawal and probably some ptsd. He needs help, real help. You can't just knock him out like that.”

Gretchen's face tightened a little as she gasped.

“Graham what a thing to say, where did you even hear things like that? Cody is a little boy honestly...drugs,” she said with a little scoff as if what Graham was saying was the height of ridiculous.

“What?” Graham said as he did a double take. “Is this a joke? You can't be serious.”

“You have no idea what you are even saying,” Gretchen said.

“I know plenty,” Graham retorted. “I was the one trying to help him before all this. I know everything about his past.” Gretchen's mouth dropped a little as she was silent for a moment.

“You knew each other,” she said taken aback for a moment. Graham's eyes widened. She did look surprised.

“You...didn't know?” Graham questioned. There was no way, they had to have known that. They claimed to have known everything about him. In some way Graham had come to think that it was no mere coincidence that he and Cody had

ended up here together, yet now the truth was out.

“I was helping him get clean, get his life on track,” Graham said with renewed vigor. “He was doing well, that is until you people came along and messed that all up. He needs help, real serious help from professionals.“

“That's enough,” Gretchen said her voice edging into a bark. Graham fell silent.

“I will not hear about what Cody does and does not need from you. You are a child and I am an adult, I know precisely what I am doing. I don't want to hear that you are filling his head with such ideas.

You have no clue what you are talking about. You'll just make Cody think there is something wrong with him.”

“Like he doesn't already know,” Graham growled. Gretchen inhaled through her nose before bending down to Graham's level.

“I'm am only going to say this to you one more time. Whatever happened before no longer matters.” she said her eyes locking onto his own. “Cody is going to be fine, as you are. You are both safe here and me and Daddy are going to make sure you are taken care of.”

Graham could only shiver at her words.

“Now I want you in bed in about an hour,” she said standing up. “Why don't you run along and go play somewhere downstairs so your brother is not disturbed.” Graham had no

reply as he walked off downstairs. He was left in a sort of a daze as he wandered down to the basement. He wanted to help Cody, but there was nothing he could do in his position. Gretchen and Gene were in charge here and they had no intention of convincing either he or Cody to their side. Their was only one way, their way. It didn't matter what either of the boys thought. Graham had seen enough. Gene and Gretchen knew that eventually the boys would be so far gone, fogged out, that they wouldn't question it. Whatever rebellion or resistance was simply a detour. Graham tried to find something to occupy himself with. Thinking about all of this was just going to make him more miserable than he already was.

In the basement he spotted the video game console Cody had mentioned earlier. Graham turned it on and picked up a controller before sitting on the couch. If there night had gone better, if Graham hadn't dragged Cody to the bathroom with him then they might both be sitting there playing it together. The controller fell from Graham's hands as he grabbed a pillow and smushed it up against his face. Graham sniffled a little as his tears were soaked up into the pillow. Then he screamed loud and long.

Chapter 10

Potential Part 10 - Chapter 10

Trust Issues

Graham sat in Ms. Redding's office as it was time for his counseling session. The most curious thing being that Cody was also there. It had been a couple of days since Graham had witnessed Cody's breakdown. While he hadn't had a complete meltdown like that night, Graham couldn't help but notice that Cody was not doing as well as he once thought. He could see the signs now. Sometimes Cody wouldn't want to eat, or he would get irritable. The most maddening was when he would actually tell Gretchen and Gene he wasn't feeling well. They would give him some medicine and then send him off to go sleep it off. Graham had tried to confront Cody about it but was told to mind his own business. Graham had tried to get through to him to tell him that letting them sedate him wasn't all that helpful. Cody had just retorted that he didn't have any other option. If it was between sleeping it off or feeling miserable he would take the sedative.

Graham could see the situation Cody was in. He needed help but Gretchen and Gene would not supply what he needed. Cody could only take what was offered to him. Graham was left feeling more frustrated by the situation. He needed to help Cody yet he didn't know how.

“I bet you're wondering why I have both of you here today,” Ms. Redding said bringing Graham back to the present.

“Does this count as my counseling session for today?” Cody asked.

“No, hon you're just here to help me with Graham. I'll be seeing you again this afternoon.” Ms. Redding said.

“Oh,” Cody said puckering his lips. “Well can we at least play Connect Four again. We haven't done that in a long time.”

“I don't see why not,” Ms. Redding said with a smile. “That is if you're my good little helper now.”

“I will be,” Cody said with a big smile. Graham looked at him with an incredulous look. Just what was Cody thinking? Didn't he understand what was happening here? Of course he did. He was the one that warned Graham in the first place. Now here he was asking to play games with one of the mind-fuckers like it was no big deal. Graham was starting to worry that Cody was starting to lose it. He couldn't let that happen. Maybe at recess it would be time for an intervention with Zen as they had done when Graham had fogged out the first time.

“Lets start then,” Ms. Redding said as she put a note card in front of each boy. “Cody do you trust Graham, do you feel like you can tell him anything?” Cody looked at Graham for a moment before smirking.

“I do,” he said nodding his head.

“Right,” Ms. Redding said. “And Graham you already told me you trust Cody. So today we are going to do a little trust exercise.” Graham furrowed his brow. He was trying to figure

out what the game was here. “In front of you is a note card, I want each of you to write down a secret about yourself. Afterwards you'll exchange cards and read what the other person wrote.”

“I don't get it,” Graham said. “Whats the point of this, I already said I trust Cody, how is this supposed to be a challenge?”

“Who said anything about this being challenging?” Ms. Redding questioned. “Now try to write something you don't think the other person already knows. Try to be serious as well. No writing down something silly. You two are brothers, you should see one another as confidants for each other. Someone who will understand you and relate to you. Also don't worry I won't be reading what you wrote. Its just for the other person.”

The room fell silent as to what he was going to write down. He decided to take this seriously. Cody looked like he was deep in thought, so Graham wanted to be truthful with him. What did he want to say to Cody? Graham began to write and then turned his note card over.

“Are you both ready?” Ms. Redding asked. Both boys nodded. The woman moved her hands to signify that they should swap. Graham took Cody's card and began to read. Sometimes I feel like I'm better off here. Graham felt his heart drop a little. His suspicions about Cody were on the mark. He was losing him. Graham looked up at Cody to see he was reading the card Graham had written. It said that

Graham didn't know if he was going to be able to protect Cody and save him. That sentiment all the more true in the light of what Cody had admitted. Cody didn't even look at Graham. He instead folded the card and stuffed it into his pocket.

“So how do you two feel now knowing this secret about the other person?” Ms. Redding asked.

“Worried,” Graham said looking over at Cody who gave him a side eyed glance before averting his eyes.

“Cody how about you?” Ms. Redding then asked.

“I'm fine...it doesn't change anything,” Cody said. It should have made Graham feel better, yet the way Cody was talking it almost sounded like he was disappointed. Graham felt terrible. Cody had been depending on him and now he had failed him.

“Um Ms. Redding can I go back to class now?” Cody asked. “Mrs. Farmer is going to erupt a volcano today and I don't want to miss it.”

“Sure, you may go, thanks for helping.” Ms. Redding said. Cody got up and left the office. “So Graham want to talk about what Cody wrote to you?” she said setting her sights back on the boy.

“No,” Graham said curtly. “It was a secret. So I can't tell you.” Graham's comment should have been accompanied by a cheeky smile, at the moment though he couldn't really muster any such emotion.

“Okay then,” Ms. Redding said as he sat back in her chair. They stayed sitting in silence as Graham waited for her to do something. He finally could no longer take it.

“So what then?” Graham asked. “That's it.”

“Well yeah,” Ms. Redding said shrugging her shoulders. “You don't want to talk about it and that's fine. Your time is almost up so feel free to go back to class early, wouldn't want you to miss that volcano.” Graham stood up putting his hands on the desk.

“Aren't you supposed to like counsel me or something? Shouldn't you be like tricking me into playing board games or some other activity that will make me feel like a kid or something.”

“I'm not here to trick you into anything,” Ms. Redding said with a chuckle. “I know you don't trust me so I'm not surprised you don't want to talk about it. I understand its going to take some time for you to open up, that's what the exercise was for. You did the exercise and that's all I wanted to do with you today, although if you want to play a game we could.”

Graham was taken aback. These head games these people were playing on him were starting to wear him out.

“No, that's fine,” Graham said taking a step back. “I guess I'll go back to class then.”

“Okay then, see you on Thursday,” Ms. Redding said.

Recess could not come soon enough. Graham really needed to talk to Cody. He made his way to the playhouse. Coming inside he found Zen by himself, a book opened up on the table.

“Cody around?” Graham asked.

“Said he wasn't coming,” Zen replied.

“Oh,” Graham said, sounding disappointed.

“He seemed kind of angry,” Zen said looking up from his book. “You guys have a fight or something?”

“I don't know,” Graham said shaking his head. “I really don't know what happened.”

“Give him some time,” Zen said going back to his book. “He'll cool off.”

“I really need to talk to him,” Graham said leaving the playhouse. He wandered around the play area not seeing Cody anywhere. Graham then went towards the sports field wondering if Cody had decided to join in sports for recess. He didn't see him anywhere on the soccer field. He then spotted him sitting by the equipment shed far off on the other side of the field. Graham walked up to Cody who was sitting on the ground.

“Can we talk?” Graham asked. Cody brought his knees to his chest wrapping his arms around his legs.

“I don't really feel like it,” Cody grumbled.

“We need to,” Graham said putting his hands on his hips. “Are you mad at me?”

“Yeah,” Cody said.

“Why?” Graham said throwing up his arms.

“Because of what you wrote,” Cody said. “Though that was obvious.”

“I'm just worried about you, you need help and I don't know what I can do,” Graham said making his case. Cody let out a groan as he stood up.

“That's what I'm talking about,” Cody said walking up to Graham. “You look at me like I'm some princess in a castle that you need to save. Like I'm helpless. I don't need you to save me. You act like you're better than me. You always have.”

“That's not true,” Graham said shaking his head.

“Please just save it,” Cody said. “Maybe in the past it was true. I was just some junkie on the street, and you were some dude who had his life figured out and maybe you could have done something, I've been in a hole for a long time,” Cody then planted a finger on Graham's chest. “But what you don't understand is that you're in the same hole right next to me now. So stop acting like you got all the answers.” Cody then began to walk off. Graham turned around. He needed to get Cody to understand. He didn't think he was better than him, it had never been like that. He cared about Cody he didn't want him to end up like those other kids.

“Maybe I am, but you actually like it here,” Graham accused. “You said so!”

“So what if I do,” Cody shouted back as he whirled around. “What else do I have? Here I got a roof over my head, food, a warm bed to sleep in where I don't have to worry about someone messing with me. You don't understand. You have no idea what its like.”

Graham's eyes widened. He couldn't believe what he was hearing, it was as if he was seeing it in real time, Cody was accepting this, they were winning.

“You can't possibly think this is okay,” Graham said. “You're not a kid, Gene and Gretchen aren't your parents. They just want to use you.” Cody was silent as he looked down at the ground.

“I know that,” he said before looking up at Graham. “I'm not happy about any of this, I know what they want to do, but still maybe it feels good for someone to look at me and think I'm worth something.” Cody then walked off leaving Graham stunned into silence. Graham sat by himself for awhile thinking about everything Cody had said. How could Cody think those things about him? How could he think that Graham thought he was better, that he had it all together and he saw Cody as nothing more than someone he had to fix. Graham looked up to see Ms. Redding chatting with one of the aides. At that moment he felt an anger well up in his chest. This was all her fault, her and her stupid exercise. He got to his feet and marched across the field to where she was.

“I HOPE YOU”RE HAPPY,” he shouted at her. Both women looked on surprised at the outburst.

“Young man that is no way to talk to an adult,” the aide said.

“It's okay,” Ms. Redding said in a disarming matter. “Graham is one of mine.”

“Still that doesn't excuse his tone,” the aide said looking at Graham with some disapproval. “I think someone is going on the wall for the rest of recess.”

“That's not necessary,” Ms. Redding said smiling at the other woman. “He's just expressing himself right now, this is actually very good for him, I'll take care of it.”

The aide looked like she didn't want to back down. She wanted nothing more than to drag Graham off and make him stand on the wall with the rest of the naughty children.

“If you thinks that best,” she sighed. “You are his counselor.”

“C'mon Graham lets go talk,” Ms. Redding said coming up on Graham's side and putting an arm around him. Graham resisted being moved. “You obviously have a lot to say, come along you can say whatever you want to me.”

Graham frowned before letting Ms. Redding lead him down a way. They came around to the front of the school where there was a bench. They sat down next to one another.

“So whats up,” Ms. Redding said in a pleasant tone. Graham turned his face away. “Don't be like that,” Ms. Redding said. “If you're going to accuse me of something then I at least

have a right to know what I did."

"You made Cody hate me," Graham spat back. "You and your stupid trust activity." Ms. Redding was silent for a moment.

"That certainly wasn't my intention," she said.

"Oh it wasn't?" Graham said making sure she knew that he had her figured out.

"Of course not," she said simply. "It was supposed to be helpful."

"Yeah well you really messed up then," Graham said. "Not that you care."

"And why wouldn't I care?" Ms. Redding said a trace of offense tinging her voice.

"Because that's what everybody here is like," Graham yelled. "This whole messed up town. You all sit there kidnapping people off the streets and then you mess with us until we can't take it anymore and become the perfect little children that you all want. You don't care about us."

"That's not true, not at all," Ms. Redding said. Graham was about to shoot her down but stopped as he looked at her. Her head was bowed as she looked down at the ground. Had that been guilt in her voice? No, she was one of them, this was just some trick. "Look Graham you're a smart boy," she said as she looked at him before wincing. "errr I mean smart person, so I'm going to level with you. All I was trying to do was help you overcome something that's been a hurdle for

you for a long time."

"What are you talking about?" Graham asked furrowing his brow.

"Your trust issues," she replied.

"I don't have trust issues," Graham asserted.

"I've read your file, your history, and there is a clear pattern in your behavior." she said. "I understand, I mean your parents disowned you after –"

"Not another word," Graham growled. Ms. Redding put her hands up as if to stop Graham from hitting her.

"All I'm saying is that I think you have trouble trusting people because in the past it has gone badly." Ms. Redding said putting her hands into her lap.

"Don't psychoanalyze me," Graham huffed. "And don't act like you know me because you read some file that you people put together. You could do that to anyone's life, just put together a file that you could use to justify whatever outcome you wanted. You know nothing about me."

"Okay, okay," Ms. Redding said. "Just know that I had the best of intentions for you. I really was trying to help you. I know this all seems so unfair to you. Its not an ideal situation, I just wanted to try and make things easier so that you could move on from your past and try to make something better for yourself."

"Better," Graham breathed. "This will never be better and

now things are worse than ever.”

“What did your write to Cody that made him upset with you?” Ms. Redding asked.

“I don't have to tell you that,” Graham said defensively.

“Yes...” Ms. Redding said with a pause. “I suppose that was part of it. Then the only question I can really ask is if what you wrote showed Cody that you trusted him. Would it be something that showed you could be vulnerable around him?

“Being vulnerable around someone isn't necessarily trust,” Graham retorted.

“There are degree's to trust,” Ms. Redding mused. “and of course there are things people keep private, but showing someone trust is a vulnerable act, so once again I ask, did you show Cody that you trusted him?”

“I...” Graham went to say before falling silent. Just then the bell rang as Ms. Redding stood up.

“That's not something you need to tell me the answer to. You should think on it. Think about what Cody saw when he read your secret. I think you can take it from there. Now you need to get back to class.”

The rest of the day Graham was in a haze of sorts. Questions swirled around his brain. As school came to the an end Graham found himself on the receiving end of Cody's cold shoulder. He didn't say a word as they walked across town. In Gene's office they sat doing their homework in silence. At

home Graham found that Cody kept himself out of sight no doubt avoiding Graham. At dinner though he had no choice but to sit next to Graham at the table. Yet it wasn't like they could talk there. Graham himself was in no hurry to have a conversation though. As much as he hated to admit it, Ms. Redding was right in many ways. Graham could certainly see where he had went wrong. He thought about what he had wrote and how Cody had taken it, especially after the secret he had divulged to Graham. It was about the worst response Graham could have given. Not too mention he had thrown Cody's own secret back in his face on the soccer field. It was if he had been trying to make things as bad as possible.

“You two seem quite,” Gretchen remarked as the two boys ate silently.

“It was a long day,” Cody said keeping his head down.

“Yeah just tired,” Graham said.

“Hopefully you got your homework done already?” Gretchen inquired. Both boys nodded.

“We still got to go over those spelling words,” Gene said. “Good thing we can do that during baththime, right,” he said reaching over to muss up Graham's hair. The boy gave no reaction.

During the bath and spelling review Graham found himself too distracted to give any though to what was going around him, so much to the point that he actually misspelled one of the words on the tile wall. He would have been embarrassed

about it any other night, it perhaps would have made him worried he was slipping into the fog. He knew what the real reason was. He was too busy rehearsing what he was going to say to Cody. He was playing out every scenario in his head, he wanted it to be perfect. As Graham walked down the hall with only a towel around his waist he still wasn't sure what he was going to say How was he going to show Cody that he trusted him? Ms. Redding's word's echoed in Graham's head. showing people the more honest side of yourself is a form of vulnerability. Graham let out a little groan.

“I can't believe she was right,” He grumbled.

“Who was right?” Gene asked, causing Graham to jump a little having completely forgotten the man was behind him.

“Umm, nothing, just talking to myself,” Graham said.

“All right then, you better go get your jammies on though, you'll catch cold walking around like that,” Gene said as he gave Graham a playful swat to his butt. Graham skittered off to his room. He knew now what he was going to have to do. If being vulnerable in front of Cody was the best way to show Cody trust then Graham was going to be more vulnerable than he had been with anyone else before in his life. Cody was all he had.

Cody was already in the room dressed in his pajamas's decorated with baseball bats and gloves. Graham went to the pile of pajamas on his own bed. It was certainly going to be hard to be taken seriously dressed in the two piece baby blue pajamas with animal faces all over it. Right now Graham

couldn't worry about his fashion sense. He got on the pajamas quickly before he went to the door. He closed the door leaning up against it with his back.

“Can we talk?” Graham asked. Cody looked at him with a frown.

“Can we not,” Cody said. “I'm not really in the mood to talk.

“You don't have to talk,” Graham said as he walked up to Cody he pushed him down by the shoulders so that Cody was now sitting on his bed. “Just listen to me, I got something to say.” Cody rolled his eyes but didn't protest. Graham took in a deep breath.

“I'm not a well adjusted person,” Graham said as Cody raised an eyebrow. “I told my parents I was gay when I was nineteen and they disowned me. I tell people it doesn't bother me, that I'm better off now, but the truth is that it really messed me up. My entire adult life I've been guarded. I have trouble trusting people. I barely have friends, or a social life. I just threw myself into my work, and to tell you the truth I think the only reason I did that was to distract myself from the truth. In some way I guess I felt like if I surrounded myself with people who had it worse than me and I was actually able to help them then it made me feel like someone out there might actually care about me. So you were right, I did think I was better than you, and I was playing out some savior complex just to make myself feel better. I guess I felt like if I was superman then I didn't need to worry that no one was coming to save me, because I didn't need it.” Graham came to an end.

He looked up at Cody who looked like he had a thousand yard stare. “I'm really sorry,” Graham said finishing as he sat back on his own bed keeping his head down. There was a heavy silence in the room. Graham was no longer thinking about if this was going to make Cody trust him, at some point it had stopped being important. He hadn't really thought about half the stuff he had said. It was if when he started it kind of just started falling out of his mouth. After a minute Graham felt weight on the bed next to him as Cody's arm came around him.

“Wow,” Cody said. “That was a lot.”

“I'm so sorry,” Graham repeated. “Its sort of the first time I admitted it to myself.”

“Yeah, well you know you still did help me out, and I'm sure the other people were grateful in the end.”

“But it wasn't right,” Graham said. “I should have been doing it for the right reasons and –.“

“Does it really matter?” Cody asked. “You helped me, and you helped them.”

“I was a terrible friend to you, actually I guess we weren't even really friends. I just used you to stroke my ego.”

“Maybe we can start over,” Cody said. “Y'know be actual friends.”

“I'm not really sure I even know how to do that?”

“You've had friends before right? Like when you were a kid,”

Cody chuckled.

“I guess,” Graham said. “Maybe...”

“So its just like that,” Cody said. “Would you like that?”

“Yeah, I think I would,” Graham said softly as his mouth began to move into a smile that he couldn't seem to control. This feeling was weird. It had felt like a long time since he had felt the sort of happiness he was feeling. He didn't really know what to do with it. “So like, what do we do now?”

“I don't know,” Cody said. A moment later Cody embraced Graham in a hug.

“W-what are you doing?” Graham asked.

“I dunno,” Cody laughed. “Just felt like the right thing to do.”

“Oh sure,” Graham said as he brought his arms up to hug Cody back. The door opened as both boys separated hastily looking to see Gretchen standing in the room.

“Oh goodness,” she said with an adoring look on her face as she brought her hand over her heart.

“Were you two hugging?”

Graham's face went beet red.

“Uh no,” Cody said sounding just a bit frazzled himself as if they had been caught doing something strange.

“You don't have to lie,” Gretchen said as she knelt down placing a hand on each of their shoulders.

“Its nice to see you boys being affectionate with one another. You're brothers after all that's how family is with one another. There is nothing to be ashamed of. So why don't you two give each other a hug good night and then get nice and cozy for your bedtime story.”

Graham and Cody looked at one another before looking away at the same time not even able to look at one another without feeling embarrassed.

“I suppose I'll just have to hug you both,” Gretchen cooed grabbing them both up into a hug and delivering a kiss to each of their cheeks. “Now into bed.”

Graham got into his bed pulling the covers over his head as Gretchen turned out the lights and turning on the lamp so she could pick up the book where they had left off last night. Graham curled up facing towards the walls. He didn't want anyone to see the small smile that just wouldn't seem to leave his lips. He was glad that he had been able to clear the air with Cody. Yet what really made him happy was that something had changed between the two of them. Things hadn't just been reset back to how they were. Tomorrow was going to be different. He and Cody would start their friendship, the one they should have had from the start.

Chapter 11

Potential: Part 11 - Chapter 11

Graham sat in the playhouse at the table across from Zen and Cody. He had a restless sort of energy in him. He had woken up in a weird mood. Clearing the air with Cody seemed to have sparked something in him. Maybe it was his admission to the many things about himself that he had ignored for so long. Somehow it seemed he had felt lighter that day. He was ready to do something he just didn't know what, and part of him felt like he had some momentum that he didn't want to lose. He was in a good spot, so many things that would have bothered him before didn't seem to effect him as much. For one the clothes that Gretchen had set out for him that morning hadn't got on his nerves. Before it had kind of felt like a test. The red shorts with the red and white striped polo would have gotten him all huffy days before. That morning though he had put them on without much thought. Graham may have worried before that he was becoming too accepting. That wasn't true though. He just felt like things were more in perspective. He had better things to do than worry about clothes or how he was being perceived by the people around him. Not that there wasn't some embarrassment still to be had. Like that morning when Gene had ambushed him with a tickle attack upon walking down in the kitchen. Graham had squealed and laughed, had even let a 'daddy' slip out in his cries to stop. There was no use dwelling though, now was the time for action.

“Right enough of this,” Graham said slapping his hands on the table as he stood up catching the attention of the the other two boys. “Its time to actually do something.”

“What do you have in mind?” Zen asked.

“Something other than just sitting here,” Graham said.

“Want to go and play tag again?” Cody asked.

“Not that,” Graham said. “I mean start getting a plan, an attack of some sort.”

“What, want to make a stink bomb or something?” Zen asked smiling a little delighting in the thought.

“No I mean information gathering.” Graham sighed a little. “We need to figure out what we need.”

Zen sat back in his seat bringing a finger to his chin. Graham looked to Cody who sat looking a little clueless.

“All I'm saying is it would be good to figure out what our options actually are, so we can be more on the lookout. Like info on how they make that serum stuff or whatever, and if there is a way to reverse this.”

“There is,” Zen said.

“How do you know?” Graham asked.

“I have it on good authority,” Zen said as his eyes narrowed. Graham crossed his arms.

“Would you like to let the rest of the class know?” Graham

said.

“Know what?” Zen questioned. “There is a way, I don't know why you're even asking us all this, we know about as much as you do. Like I said if anyone is going to be able to get information its you and Cody. My parents are nobodies in this organization. Your parents are the ones that would have info on the inner workings.”

Graham leaned up against the wall. That was certainly true. If there were people with info that they needed and who they had access to then it would be Gene and Gretchen.

“Well Cody it looks like we're going to have to act like kids,” Graham said.

“What do you mean?” Cody asked.

“Mommy and Daddy aren't going to tell us what we want, so we're going to have to do what kids do best,” Graham said with a smirk. “Its time to snoop.”

The rest of the school day plodded on. Graham spent his time thinking about where to look. Computers were good, though it would be hard as Gene and Gretchen used laptops around the house that were no doubt password protected. If Graham and Cody were going to get to those they were going to have to create opportunities. Graham's mind was aflutter as he tried to run scenario's in his head. Nothing was really coming to him as a sure thing. Most of his plans seemed rather outlandish. The only way they would work is if all the pieces fell into place perfectly.

The school let out for the day and soon enough Graham found himself at the coffee table in Gene's office across from Cody as they worked on their homework while Gene worked at his computer. Graham felt like this was an opportunity. He just needed a plan.

“Daddy can I go get a snack?” Cody called out. Gene looked up from his computer.

“Well sure,” he smiled pulling some money out of his wallet.

“I'll go too,” Graham yelped getting to his feet.

“Don't they feed you two at school,” Gene chuckled as he added another dollar to Cody's hand. The boys made their way to the vending machine down the hall.

“Hey think you can get Gene out of the room?” Graham asked as Cody made his selection.

“What for?” Cody asked.

“Think about it,” Graham said cocking his eyebrow. “If he has to leave then I might be able to get on his computer and look around. I need you to distract him.”

“I dunno,” Cody said. “How would I do that?”

“It doesn't really matter,” Graham said. “Just get him out of the room and keep him occupied as long as you can.”

“Well if I think of something,” Cody said. The boys walked back to the room taking their seats on the floor. Graham waited to see what Cody would do. Graham nudged Cody

with his foot underneath the table giving him an urgent look as he motioned with his head in Gene's direction. Cody gave him a furrowed look before he stood up walking over to Gene at his desk.

“Um Daddy can you come with me for a minute?” Cody asked tugging on the man's shirt sleeve.

“What for bud, I'm a little busy,” Gene said.

“Uhh well,” Cody said hemming and hawing for a moment. Graham had to resist smacking his face.

“I gotta go potty,” Cody blurted out.

“You know where the bathroom is go ahead,” Gene said chuckling. Cody backed away giving a look to Graham before he looked back at Gene.

“C-cant you come with?” Cody said with a little whimper.

“You're old enough to go potty by yourself,” Gene said putting his attention back on his computer. Cody looked at Graham again, he bit his lower lip before looking away. Cody stood still for a moment. That's when Graham noticed the dark spot growing on the front of Cody's shorts. Graham's eyes widened. He definitely hadn't told Cody to do anything like that. Gene seemed to notice the same thing as well.

“C-cody what are you,” Gene exclaimed as he stood up.

“I'm sorry,” Cody mewled. “I couldn't hold it.” As Graham watched the scene unfold he saw that Cody was bringing tears to his eyes. He hoped that they weren't real and that

Cody was faking it. Gene rubbed the bridge of his nose with sigh.

“Come on then,” he said. Thankfully he didn't sound mad. He put an arm around Cody leading him out of the office. “Lets get you cleaned up.”

As soon as they had left the room Graham raced to the computer. Success! It was still open and hadn't been locked. Graham went first to Gene's email to see what he could find. Most of the messages seemed innocuous. Something about budgets and sanitation. One message caught Graham's eyes Placement Notice Graham clicked on it. It had been sent to five recipients.

Congratulations,

The following families have been approved for placement in the next quarter

Tom and Gina Miller

Raymond and Elsa Wong

Bertram and Heidi Norris

Graham shook his head. There was nothing to gleam from this. He clicked on another message.

To all Golden Horizon members on the acquisitions team we are providing an update on prospective subjects. Please send any nominations for families awaiting placement.

Frank Harris-Approved

Leslie Klarn- Approved

Angela Johnson- Approved

Edward Hudson- Pending

Otis Scranton -Pending

Graham's face scrunched up. Had he just found a list of potential victims? Part of him thought of trying to get word to these people perhaps to warn them. Although with just a name there wasn't much he could do. He scrolled a little to see that Gene had sent a message in response.

I would like to request a girl if possible. Graham felt his stomach drop a little. Were they actually trying to get another kid? There was a response sent from the sender. Sorry Mayor Callaway. The council already gave special permission for the other two placements. At this time we cannot honor another placement in such a short amount of time. It would be unfair to the other families who have been waiting. Gene responded.

Understood. I do not want to give the impression that we feel that we are deserving of special treatment. We can wait.

Graham could only breath out a sigh of relief knowing that they were not going to be getting a new sibling anytime soon. He didn't quite know what he would do being faced with another person being thrown into this situation. Graham scrolled through trying to find something he could actually use. Although he didn't quite know what he was even looking for. That's when he saw another curious message. It had been sent to someone named Alex. Graham clicked on it bringing

up a message chain.

Gene: Checking in, how is everything going?

Alex: Same as always, very busy at the moment.

Gene: Think you can find sometime for us to get together?

Alex: Not sure, Boss is keeping me busy. Lots of new accounts.

Gene: Lol, perhaps you could find some time for a visit? Your Mother misses you. It would be nice to introduce you to the new family members as well.

Alex: I'll see what I can do, no promises.

Graham then heard footsteps coming down the hall he closed out the emails and ran back to the table sitting on the ground just as Cody walked in followed by Gene. Graham's heart was pounding in his chest as he watched Gene take a seat at his computer. Graham waited for the man to realize that something was off, to notice that someone had been messing on his computer. That never came as the man continued to work until it was time to go home.

Getting into the house, Cody immediately went upstairs. Graham followed. As he came into their bedroom he saw that Cody was pulling on a new pair of red stripey underwear.

“That was certainly a distraction,” Graham said closing the door behind him. Cody turned his head to look at Graham before shaking his head.

“I didn't know what else to do,” Cody said. “It just kind of happened.”

“It worked,” Graham said with a shrug.

“So you found something?” Cody asked with a hint of eagerness in his eyes.

“Not really, just some names of people they're going to kidnap soon I guess. Nothing that helps us.” Graham said with a displeased look on his face. “If I had more time to dig.”

“I'm not pissing myself again,” Cody said with a frown.

“I know, I know,” Graham said. “That was a one time thing.”

“But hey I was wondering?” Graham then inquired. “Do you know an Alex?”

“Oh yeah, that's Gene and Gretchen's son,” Cody said as he pulled on a pair of sweatpants.

“They have another kid?” Graham said. He had kind of gotten that was who Alex was but to be met with confirmation was in a way shocking. These people had a kid, probably could have more if they wanted instead they were kidnapping people of the street.

“Yeah, I met him once or whatever. Just over the phone.” Cody said.

“So what was he like?” Graham asked. Cody shrugged.

“Seemed normal enough I guess, like I said we didn't really talk all that much, just asked if I liked the room, said it used

to be his."

"Do you think he is like us?" Graham asked.

"No," Cody said. He's how do you say, homegrown. There are pictures you know."

"Really," Graham asked. Cody nodded as he motioned for Graham to follow him. Down in the living room Cody showed Graham some photos that were framed on a table. They were all of Gretchen and Gene and some other kid. None of the photos seemed to show the boy any older than a teenager.

"These are old," Graham said. "What does he look like now."

"Like a normal dude I guess." Cody said. "It was a face time call he looked like a mix between Gene and Gretchen, just a normal guy."

"I see," Graham said. He put down one of the photos. Given the way the message he had read played out, Graham seemed to have an idea what this guy was like. Just another young guy who was off living his own life the only strange thing being that he seemed okay with his parents suddenly deciding to add new siblings to the family. Graham seemed more curious about how this Alex person was okay with all of this. Surely he knew the truth, that is unless Gene and Gretchen even kept it a secret from him. Unlikely as it seemed since Gene wanted them to meet soon not having any worry that Graham and Cody would be able to tell him the truth.

"Hey," Cody said breaking Graham out of his thoughts. "Do

you maybe want to go check out the video games?" Graham looked at Cody with a curious look.

"Video games?" Graham questioned.

"Well you know uh they just seemed like fun," Cody said looking a little frazzled. "If you don't want to though..."

"Nah lets do it," Graham smiled. "Sounds fun."

Chapter 12

Potential: Part 12 - Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Blowing off Steam.

Graham was sat in the bathtub across from Cody. It was Friday night, which meant they were not going to be ushered into bed after this. Graham pushed a boat across the water with the tip of his finger. He was certainly not playing with it. Just passing the time. Gene had already washed them and had now left them to have a little playtime. Not that the boys ever did that.

“So wanna do something after this?” Cody asked across from Graham.

“Like?” Graham questioned.

“I don't know,” Cody said with a shrug. “Maybe check out those gifts,” Cody suggested referring to the large bins that were filled with things that Gretchen had presented to both Cody and Graham that afternoon. Neither Cody nor Graham had looked at them. As far as Graham was concerned it was nothing more than an insult. Gretchen had framed it as a reward for both of the boys behaving so well. Graham however saw it as something different. It was confirmation that both of his “parents” thought they were winning. That gifting them toys meant for a child would make the boys happy, that they were accepting their new roles. Graham was

in no mood to entertain such an idea. Cody didn't seem to want to either, that is until now.

“I don't want any toys,” Graham said putting his head against the back of the tub stretching out. Cody scrunched up his legs a little making himself smaller but not seeming to mind that Grahams feet were now on his side.

“Yeah,” Cody said. “Me neither.”

“You were the one who suggested it,” Graham chuckled.

“Just thought it would be a good distraction or whatever. Its not like I actually want to play with them.”

“Yeah, a distraction,” Graham said softly. Honestly that's exactly what he needed. Graham had done nothing except ruminate on his situation for the past couple of days. Each moment seeming to grow his frustrations. He had gotten a minor victory in getting into Gene's computer but they were still no closer to having any idea of how to get out of here. It was becoming clear to Graham that Gretchen's computer was the real prize. Yet getting into that one was going to be magnitudes harder. For one they were rarely ever in Gretchen's office at school. The endless scheming was taking its toll on Graham. He felt high strung these days and it was starting to show. Just that afternoon he had snapped at Gene when the man had asked him how school was. That had gotten him a firm reprimand and talking too. Graham had felt rather foolish that he had done it. Doing things that got him on the Callaway's bad side was a dumb move. It was becoming harder not to do though with his current mood.

“Man, I really need to blow off some steam,” Graham said.

“Yeah, I get that,” Cody said tapping the top of the water lightly with his fingers making little

plopping sounds. “Video games?”

Graham shook his head. The games were fun enough, but they did it a lot. It seemed to be the one activity Gene and Gretchen seemed to leave them alone for. Except when they would come and shut them off to enforce some arbitrary screen time limit. Which annoyed Graham to no end. In fact that's why Graham though they had even bought the toys in the first place. Perhaps they realized that there was nothing else for Graham and Cody to do in the house that would be age appropriate.

“So like what did you do for fun, like before?” Cody asked.

“I dunno,” Graham said with a shrug. “Surf the internet, clean my apartment.”

“Doubt they'll let us on a computer,” Cody laughed. “You want to clean?”

“Hell no,” Graham said. “That would be like doing chores.”

“We should do something though,” Cody said. “I'm like so bored.”

“What did you do for fun?” Graham then asked.

“You know,” Cody said looking off to the side.

“Yeeaahh,” Graham said rubbing the back of his head. They

weren't going to do anything like that. Gene soon returned to get the boys out of the tub. Graham sighed as Gene dried his hair with a towel.

“Whats got you sounding so frumpy,” Gene asked.

“I'm not frumpy,” Graham said as his eyes narrowed. Gene stopped drying Graham's hair and went and tied the towel around his waist. Graham hadn't been paying much attention until that moment when he realized how he had just let Gene towel him off without a hint of resistance. A week ago he would have been mortified to be standing naked in front of the man, but just then it had never even crossed his mind. Graham went to walk away but was stopped as Gene grabbed his arm.

“Graham I want to talk to you about something for a moment,” Gene said as he pulled Graham gently back before placing his other hand on Graham's thigh as if he was holding him in place.

“About what?” Graham said his lip curling up a little.

“That right there,” Gene said. “Me and Mommy have noticed that you've been having a little attitude lately.” Graham's brow raised a little. Lately? In his mind he had definitely had an attitude since arriving. “It seemed like you were doing well for awhile, but lately you've been getting a little mouthy and rude.” Graham continued to find himself surprised to hear this. The more he thought about it though the more he could kind of see where they were coming from. Not that he felt he was not justified in having an attitude, more so that maybe he

was becoming a little more free in expressing it. “We're giving you time to adjust,” Gene said. “But that doesn't mean you are allowed to be disrespectful, do you understand?” Graham stood not sure what to say. There was so much he could say. None of it would do him any good in the current situation, though it would feel good to say.

“Yeah I guess,” Graham said quietly. “Sorry Daddy.”

“Atta boy,” Gene said giving Graham a hug and kiss to the cheek which Graham no longer recoiled at. “Now go get dressed,” Gene said with a motion of his head. Graham walked out into the hallway. He was angry, so angry that he just wanted to find something to crush and batter with his hands.

He walked into the bedroom to feel something hit his chest. Graham covered the spot where he had been struck. It hadn't hurt, just surprised him. Graham looked at the ground to see a small foam dart on the floor. Graham looked up to see Cody standing across from him still only wearing a towel with a gun in his hands.

“What are you –“ Graham stammered.

“Shooting you,” Cody said. “You got one too,” Cody then said pointing with his gun at Grahams own blaster on his bed.

“Cody, not now,” Graham said with a sigh, yet another dart struck him in the arm. “Stop,”

“Make me,” Cody laughed. Graham grabbed his blaster shooting a couple shots towards Cody who dodged them.

“Missed me,” Cody sang as he returned fire.

“Stay still,” Graham yelled as he continued to fire.

“Yeah, right,” Cody laughed as he ran out the room. Graham gave chase. He heard Cody's feet stomping down the stairs. Graham gave chase. As he hit the landing his towel fell to the ground. For a second he considered grabbing it. Yet he could hear Cody's feet plodding down the hallway across from the kitchen and that seemed to be enough to make him forget about it completely. Graham came down into the kitchen he saw another towel on the ground. The kitchen was darkened except for the light over the island counter. He moved slowly keeping his ears focused on hearing any sound. As he walked past the kitchen counter Cody shot up from the other side. Both boys let out screams as they shot at one another. Cody raced off down the hallway disappearing. Graham hesitated a moment. He needed to get the drop on Cody, rushing in was a bad idea. Graham slid along the wall. He could hear some shuffling. He waited a moment before jumping out with his gun raised.

He had expected to see Cody instead it was Gene who looked down at him with a somewhat shocked looked that turned to amusement.

“What is this?” Gene asked. Graham stood slack jawed as he was overtaken by the feeling of embarrassment.

“I...uhh...we were just...” Graham stammered. Just then Gretchen's voice rang out further down the hall.

“Cody what on earth,” she shouted. Cody came running down the hall coming to a halt as he saw Gene and Graham. Gretchen came stomping up from behind. “What is going on in this house?” she asked exasperated as she saw Graham was just as naked as Cody.

“They're just playing it looks like,” Gene said chuckling.

“Thats all well and good,” Gretchen said with a sigh. “But I don't want you boys using those guns in the house.” For some reason Graham felt himself become indignant.

“Why not?” he said with some ire.

“You could break something,” Gretchen said.

“Then why did you give them to us?” Graham questioned.

“You can play with them outside, not in the house, there are plenty of other toys you can use inside.” Gretchen said. “And you both need to put on some clothes.” Graham furrowed his brow he shifted his gun to cover himself before he smirked. He found that he didn't actually care. He wasn't embarrassed.

“Mommy we're not going to break anything, the darts are soft,” he lifted his gun and pointed it at Gretchen.

“Don't you dare,” she warned raising an eyebrow.

“We're just playing,” Graham smiled as he unloaded on both Gretchen and Gene. Cody followed suit laughing as he unloaded his clip. Gretchen shielded herself. It was Gene who finally snatched the gun out of the boys grasps.

“Thats it,” Gretchen said sounding ticked off as she grabbed each boy by the wrist. “You are both going on a timeout,” she said as she lead them to corners on the opposite sides of the living room, making them put their noses in the corner. She came back a little later with underwear for both of them saying she wasn't going to have naked little boys in her house. She didn't even let them turn around as she pulled the underwear up their legs herself before once again leaving them to stand in silence.

“Okay boys you can come here,” Gretchen said after some time. Gene and Gretchen were standing

next one another. Graham and Cody went to stand in front of them.

“We are very disappointed boys,” Gene started off.

“You guys are blowing this out of proportion,” Graham said crossing his arms. Graham felt a little confused. Sure they had shot at them but its not like they were hurt. He and Cody had been acting like total kids. Isn't that what they wanted?

“Graham we've talked about this,” Gene said with a sigh. Graham gave them a look as his lip curled up a little.

“That disrespect will not be tolerated,” Gretchen said. “You two are going to go to your room and get on your pajamas and then go to bed.”

“What!,” Cody exclaimed. “Its not even nine, and its Friday.”

“That's right,” Gene said. “And if this is how you are going to

act staying up later than usual then perhaps we should institute bedtimes even on the weekend. Is that what you want?”

“No,” Cody said as he slumped a little. The boys went up to their room. As they were changing into their pajamas Graham heard Cody sigh.

“Sorry I got you in trouble,” Cody said. Graham turned around and smiled.

“Don't be,” Graham laughed. “Honestly, that was the most fun I've had in a long time wished it had lasted longer.”

“Really,” Cody said cocking his head. “I mean I thought you would be mad at me for acting like a kid.”

“Well maybe...” Graham began before hesitating. “Maybe it was actually good for me.”

“Careful, you're starting to sound foggy,” Cody said. Graham shook his head. He had certainly been into their game, yet it had felt different than the first time he had fogged out. It had almost felt like a relief.

“I don't think it was bad,” Graham said. “In fact I feel great, like for a moment I didn't have to focus on all this stuff. In fact I think we should do things like this more often.”

“Are you sure you're okay?” Cody asked putting a hand on Graham's shoulder.

“I'm fine really,” Graham said. “I'm not saying we should start acting like kids all the time or nothing.

Just we should find ways to kind of blow off some steam."

"You're starting to sound like a druggie," Cody said letting out a soft awkward laugh. "That's what they all say, you know at the beginning. Just a little hit to ease the pressure, then before you know it we'll be begging for new toys and candy."

Graham sat on his bed looking at Cody who had a bothered look on his face. Graham could see his comment and their situation was hitting close for Cody.

"Sorry, I guess I didn't think of it like that," Graham said softly. Cody sighed as he fell back on his own bed.

"Maybe it doesn't even really matter. Why fight what we can't stop?" Cody said looking up at the ceiling. Graham walked to Cody's bed falling onto the bed next to him.

"We're going to get out of this," Graham said with some certainty.

"You think?" Cody asked looking at him.

"Sure, me and you, we can't be stopped," Graham said with a smile.

Chapter 13

Potential: Part 13 - Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Turning Point

Graham took in a breath of fresh air. Something about the morning air was having a calming effect on him. It probably had a little something to do with the fact that it had stormed all night and now the morning air had that rainy smell to it. Graham had always enjoyed rainy days for some reason. Something about it always filled him with a deep sense of calm.

“You seem happy this morning,” Cody said noticing Graham's demeanor which was the opposite of his.

“Yeah I guess,” Graham said gripping the straps of his backpack. “I think today is going to be a good day.” Cody gave him a sort of look that showed he was a little surprised.

“Who are you and what have you done with Graham,” Cody said. Graham laughed.

“I'm just trying to be positive,” Graham said.

That morning Graham went along with the day. He followed along during reading time, did his spelling words review with his table and even spent some time doing a drawing of a rocket ship during the lesson on the Apollo eleven space launch. Graham perhaps should have been worried that he

was fogging out, but he wasn't. He had an understanding. None of this mattered. He was going to get out of this. None of it mattered because this was not going to be his life. His good mood didn't even damper when the teacher told him it was time for his counseling appointment.

“Someone looks chipper today,” Ms. Redding said sitting across from him as they played a game of connect four. “You like this game?”

“Its alright,” Graham shrugged as he dropped one of his pieces into the holder.

“So whats got you in such a good mood?” Ms. Redding asked.

“I'm not feeling happy about being a kid if that is what you're going for,” Graham said. “Anyone can enjoy playing a game.”

“I didn't say anything like that,” Ms. Redding said shaking her head. “You just seemed happier and I was wondering if there was a particular reason.”

Graham thought for a moment, perhaps he could tell her. Tell her that she and the rest of them weren't going to win. That he was going to get out of this, that they would fail and then they would all have to deal with the fact that they weren't as perfect as they all seemed that even they could fail.

“I'm just looking at things from a different perspective,” Graham said dropping his piece into the plastic holder.

“Mind if I ask what this new perspective is?” Ms. Redding asked dropping her own piece into the board.

“I just know I'll be getting out of this,” Graham said. Saying it out loud made him almost feel invisible paired with the smug smile crossing his lips that he did nothing to try and hide. Ms. Redding face seemed to turn somber for a moment before her small smile returned.

“I see,” she said. Graham scrunched up his face. He couldn't tell if her expression was one sadness or perhaps pity, it did piss him off just a little though.

“I know that probably upsets you,” Graham said snidely. “I also know I'm probably not the first person to say that. You can tell my Mommy if you want. In fact I hope you do.”

“Graham I don't talk to anybody about what we talk about,” Ms. Redding asserted.

“Like I believe that,” Graham snorted.

“Its true,” Ms. Redding said. “Anyways I'd like to hear more about this.”

“Why? So you can ruin my plans?” Graham asked. He knew he was bluffing at this point, he didn't have a plan. Not too mention he knew it would be stupid to utter a word of it to anyone even if he did.

“Not about that,” Ms. Redding said. “I more want to know about after. When you've escaped or whatever then what?” Graham rolled his eyes. He knew she was trying to pull him into the same line of questioning Gretchen had upon his first morning at the house. To show him it was a hopeless idea to escape. Graham wasn't going to repeat that.

“When I get out, I'll be back to being an adult,” Graham said cutting off the biggest problem right from the start.

“Okay,” Ms. Redding said, surprisingly accepting Grahams scenario without any doubt. “You'll be back to your old self, then what? Call the press, get the national guard sent here to bring all of us evil people to justice?”

“Something like that,” Graham said. He waited a second waiting for her to bring up that no one would believe him, that the organization had people everywhere. “Not the first thing I would do though,” Graham then blurted out deciding he didn't want to hear her say all that stuff.

“So then tell me,” Ms. Redding said with a smile. “C'mon first thing you would do when your feet hit the mainland.”

Graham thought for a moment. What would he do at that moment? Find a bar, have a drink? No, probably not. An idea then hit him.

“First thing I would do is find that asshole who drugged me and did this to me and punch him in his face.” Graham said swinging his fist through the air actually imagining Sebastian's stupid smug face getting punched.

“The one who did this,” Ms. Redding asked with an airy breath.

“Yeah,” Graham continued not noticing the color draining from the counselor's face. “I put one right smack in the middle of his dumb face Kapow.”

“The supplier...you saw his face?” Ms. Redding questioned.

“Is that what they call him?” Graham laughed. “Well yeah, actually went on a date with the guy.” Ms. Redding was up and out of her desk, she stood over Graham grasping him by the shoulders tightly as she knelt down to his eye level.

“Tell me everything you know about him. What does he look like, whats his name, everything.” she demanded. Graham winced as she was holding his shoulders rather tightly. He could see desperation on her face. Had he said something he wasn't supposed too? Was this some unspoken rule he had broken.

“Ms. Redding you're hurting me,” Graham squeaked. Ms. Redding's eyes went wide as she withdrew her hands.

“Sorry,” she said quickly.

“Um its okay,” Graham said rolling his shoulders.

“Can you tell me though,” Ms. Redding said. “Everything you know.”

“Why should I,” Graham said as his eyes narrowed. There was something strange going on here.

“Its just important,” Ms. Redding said as she went and took a seat next to Graham.

“No,” Graham said crossing his arms.

“Why not?” Ms. Redding asked lifting her head a little.

“Because I don't trust you,” Graham said. “How do I know

this isn't some sort of trick?”

“And how would I be tricking you,” Ms. Redding said throwing up her hands.

“I don't know,” Graham said. Ms. Redding looked at him for a moment before her shoulders slumped.

“I guess I can understand that,” she said sounding almost sad as she got up and returning to her chair behind the desk.

“Tell me why you want to know first,” Graham said.

“I can't,” Ms. Redding said.

“Then I guess we're at a stalemate,” Graham said. Ms. Redding looked at the door for a moment before she looked back at Graham.

“I'm looking for someone, and this supplier person might know something,” she said as if she were choosing her words carefully.

“So, you're telling me you don't know who this person...this supplier is?” Graham asked. “Seems weird I mean aren't you one of them.”

“That person's identity is on a need to know basis,” Ms. Redding said.

“I'm gonna need something more than that,” Graham said. He didn't know why she wanted to know about Sebastian only that she wanted it. That gave Graham leverage, something that was in short supply around here for him. Ms. Redding bit

her lower lip before letting out a sigh.

“I guess, you're my only lead so...you promise not to say anything to anyone?”

“We'll see,” Graham said.

“I've only been here for about six months,” Ms. Redding said. “I came here because I'm looking for my brother, Chris. He went missing, the police searched but haven't found anything. He is now considered a cold case, most likely dead. But I couldn't believe that. You see he was an avid hiker and he had told me he was meeting up with someone he had been chatting with on a message board to hike a trail. He disappeared soon after, and I think he's here, somewhere.”

“I don't believe you,” Graham said shaking his head. “You mean to tell me in all this time and given your position you haven't been able to find him?”

“If he is here he's not at this school.” Ms. Redding said. “If he was then he most likely has already been transferred. I only have access to the current roster. They don't let me look through past student files.”

“Its not that big of an island,” Graham dismissed. “The other school is right down the street you know.”

“I sit there in my car every morning,” Ms. Redding said with her head bowed. “I've never seen him. He might not even be there. For all I know he's been turned into a toddler maybe younger.”

Graham stood up. This couldn't be real. She was messing with him again, she just had to be. She had concocted this sob story just to get in his head, something that he would be sympathetic too.

“You really think I would believe this,” Graham spat. Just what did she take him for. At this point Graham wasn't even mad she was messing with him. That was to be expected. What angered him was he was not able to figure out the objective here. Why did she want to him to tell her about Sebastian? Could it be that Graham wasn't supposed to know about him? Were they making sure that Graham didn't know something that Sebastian had let slip, but what?

“Its the truth,” Ms. Redding said. “I'm trusting you here.” Graham's eyes widened. Was that what this was. Another trust exercise?

“If what you say is true, then what if I told my Mommy about this?” Graham said smirking a little. He had here here. She was going to have to give it away now. After all if this was real then she would be in big trouble. Graham waited watching her expression. He was surprised to see her face lilt to the side with a sad look.

“If you do that, I guess they'll get rid of me. Probably do to me what they did to you, actually I would most likely end up even younger.”

“Then why tell me this if you knew how dangerous it was?” Graham exclaimed before calming himself. “Although I guess you could just run, right.”

“I could,” Ms. Redding said. “But what would be the point? I know some of their secrets. Not that anyone would believe me. They would probably hunt me down anyways though, just to make sure. “ Mrs Redding let out a sigh. “I don't have anything else though. Even if you tell me what I want, it might not even get me closer to what I want. I'm at a dead end.” The alarm sounded signifying that their time was done. “You can go back to class now,” Ms. Redding said silencing the beeping. “You do what you want Graham, its your choice.” Graham went to the door. He put his hand on the knob and turned back to see Ms. Redding was staring off into space not even looking at him.

“I won't tell,” Graham said turning to face away from her. “What we talk about here is just between us, right.”

“Thanks Graham,” Ms. Redding said.

Graham could not concentrate on anything for the rest of the day. His head was swirling. He couldn't make sense of anything. Why would she tell him this? Could it be that she was being truthful? Lunch came and Graham found himself soon enough on the playground with Zen and Cody as they walked along a quiet part of the playground.

“Can I ask you guys a question? Graham said. “How did you guys get taken, I mean who did it?” He first looked towards Cody.

“Honestly I never saw the guy,” Cody said with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Really,” Graham asked. “What do you remember?”

“Why do you want to know?” Cody asked.

“I'm just thinking about something,” Graham deflected. He couldn't tell them about Ms. Redding, not yet. “It might help though.”

“Weeell,” Cody said. “I was going to get some stuff you know,” he said looking a little sheepish. “For some reason my regular guy wasn't able to come but said he was sending someone else and to meet at this other spot. I should have heard the alarm bells ringing but I was desperate so I went and there I was standing in some dark alleyway waiting. I actually started to get nervous and I was about to bail. As I was about to go I heard footsteps coming up behind me. Before I could even turn someone had grabbed me and then I felt a sharp pain in my neck. I kind of lost consciousness after that and the next thing I knew I was waking up in my bed.”

Graham nodded. So Cody had never seen the person. That didn't help.

“What about you Zen?” Graham asked looking at the other boy.

Zen was listening with some interest.

“That's kind of similar to me,” Zen said. “I was in some small town on tour. I went to the back lot of the club to have a smoke by myself in the middle of the set. I was the only one there. I went back to go inside but before I opened the door someone got me from behind. Never saw who it was.”

“So no one ever saw,” Graham said with frustration.

“Its the same for everyone,” Zen said. “Of all the people I talked to no one ever saw who did it.” Graham furrowed his brows his questions no closer to being answered. If that was true for everyone then why did Sebastian, if he was indeed the person who had kidnapped all of them, chosen to show himself to Graham? If Graham was the only one to see him then that certainly lead credence to the idea that Graham had knowledge he wasn't supposed too.

“Did something different happen to you?” Zen then asked.

“Huh no,” Graham flustered. “I was the same as you guys you know, I never saw the dude.” The other boys seemed to accept the answer without fuss. Graham remained quiet for the rest of recess. He wanted to believe Ms. Redding. That someone like her, that a person who had spoken honestly to him that had seemed to actually care in a little way, wasn't as so far detestable as the others around her. Yet there was a point that stuck out to Graham that he couldn't get over. How could she doom others to the same fate that she was trying to rescue her brother from?

Getting back to the classroom Mrs. Farmer was getting the kids started on a diorama project. They had been learning about the arctic. Graham sat stacking his sugar cubes in an attempt to build an igloo. He let the sugar cube drop from his hand before getting up and walking to the front of the classroom where the teacher sat at her desk.

“Mrs. Farmer I can't do my project,” he said. The teacher

looked over at him with a small smile.

“What seems to be the problem dear? I can help you.”

“I don't feel very well,” Graham offered.

“You feel sick?” Mrs. Farmer asked placing her hand on his forehead. “You don't feel warm but if you think you want to go see the nurse –“

“Its not that kind of feeling,” Graham said pulling his head back. “Its a different kind of feeling,” Graham said. Mrs. Farmer nodded as if she understood what Graham was saying.

“With that kind of thing it might be best just to go back to your seat and do your best, try to distract yourself a little.” the teacher said.

“That's not possible,” Graham replied.

“Graham,” Mrs. Farmer then intoned as her expression turned a little more serious as if to show she wasn't going to play along with whatever game Graham was concocting. “You can't just not do the assignment because you don't feel like it.”

“I want to do the assignment,” Graham countered. “Its just...I can't. My head feels all funny.”

“Funny how?” Mrs. Farmer inquired as she cocked her head. It seemed Graham had uttered the magic words that would make her take him more seriously.

“Hmmm, do you think I could go and talk to Ms. Redding about it?” Graham requested. Mrs. Farmer smiled.

“Go back to your seat, I'll give her a call to see if she has time for you,” Mrs. Farmer said as she nodded her head. Graham went back to his seat and sat down.

“What was that all about?” Cody asked.

“Nothing,” Graham said as he fidgeted with a sugar cube.

“You're not up to something are you?” Cody then asked. Graham shook his head.

“No its fine,” Graham said giving Cody a reassuring smirk.

“Oookaay,” Cody said as he went back to his own project. A minute later Mrs. Farmer told Graham to head to the counselor's office. As he was leaving he spotted Cody giving him a look. Graham just nodded at him.

Graham walked into Ms. Redding's office. She stopped typing on her computer to look at him standing across from her.

“This is unexpected,” she said in a neutral tone, a far cry from her usual bright and cheery greetings.

“Yeah, I suppose,” Graham said taking a seat. “I think we need to talk.”

Chapter 14

Potential: Part 14 - Chapter 14

Chapter 14

Mercy

The room was quiet as the two of them looked at one another across from the desk.

“What is it you would like to talk about?” Ms. Redding said.

“I want to know why,” Graham said.

“I already told you,” Ms. Redding said. “I need to find my brother and finding the supplier is my only real lead.”

“Not that,” Graham said. “I want to know how you could do this?”

“He's my brother, he's family.” Ms. Redding said quietly.

“You aren't getting it,” Graham groaned.

“Then ask me whatever it is you are getting at,” Ms. Redding said rolling her eyes a little.

“If you think your brother is here and that he has been regressed then how can you possibly sit here and do the same thing to other people, how in the world can you help the same people who took your brother from you?” Graham asked. It didn't make sense to Graham, it was the same as joining the enemy. Ms. Redding sat back in her chair. Her face painted with guilt.

“Thats not what I'm doing,” Ms. Redding said.

“Then what are you doing?” Graham yelped back. “How many people have you brainwashed into believing they are kids and that they are happier here? And don't say you aren't you've been trying to do it to me this whole time.”

“I'm giving you mercy,” Ms. Redding said.

“What?” Graham practically spit out. Ms. Redding got up from her desk and went and looked out the window behind the couch.

“I came here because someone had said they had seen someone that matched my brother's description getting on the ferry. I don't know if that's true or not, but I figured I would come and look around. That and a friend of mine in law enforcement had done me a big favor and traced his cellphone. The last placed it pinged was on this island. So I figured I would just set up a base of operation here for awhile. Hopefully after I had been around awhile, got to know people maybe someone would come forward with some info. Maybe remember seeing someone like him.”

“You're not answering the question,” Graham said.

“I'm getting there,” Ms. Redding said placing a finger to her lips as she turned to face Graham. “I got a job working with a hospice company. My background is in counseling, specifically end of life counseling and grief counseling. I did it for awhile and then one day I was approached by Gretchen. She invited me for some coffee, said she may have an

opportunity for me. At first she sold it to me as a normal school counselor job. I don't even know why I took it. They way she talked about it, about me and how I could do something really great got to me. I guess all this talk about embracing our potentials."

"I'm familiar with the pitch," Graham said furrowing his brow.

"It wasn't until I signed on that I was told the truth," Ms. Redding continued. "Gretchen seemed to think that she had sold me completely on it by the end. That I understood what a change I could make, that what I did would change the world for the better. I thought of running first chance I got. I figured if my brother had come here this is what had happened to him. I Just had to get through the first day and then I would be out of here and come back with the authorities. I mean these people were crazy, who would stay? Then I had my first patients."

"What, then you realized that they were right? That they knew how best to use your potential or something?" Graham uttered.

"No, I began to understand why I had been approached in the first place." Ms. Redding said as she took a seat at the couch. "Not everyone is like you Graham, in fact I would say you are a rare case. Most people when they first get here. They are broken people. They're worlds have been completely torn apart. Most of them are panicked, spiraling, despondent even. I understood why Gretchen thought I would be a good fit here. I understood what she wanted me to do. She wanted me

to help them come to terms with the fact that their old lives were over, that there was no going back. That their old selves were dead and gone. Its what I had been doing for so long. Helping people accept the end."

Graham sat nodding. He didn't need Ms. Redding to spell it out for him. He could see the connection. Who better to counsel people who had in way just been killed then someone who counseled people through death and grief.

"You're still helping them," Graham uttered. "Even if you didn't know what you were signing up for. Why did you go along with it? Why not just... not do what they wanted? Why still willingly help them turn us into kids."

"You think I'm still here willingly?" Ms. Redding said tutting. "Graham, there is just no way. If I don't then I'm of no use to them, if I try to escape knowing what I know they won't allow that either. The minute I become a problem for them I end up like you. Any chance of saving my brother is then gone forever, maybe it already is," she said her voice inflecting with sadness at the last part. Graham sat back. It all made sense in the worst way possible. The truth was that Ms. Redding was like him, they were both trapped.

"Its truly awful what they do," Ms. Redding said. "To all of you. This place is a nightmare. So I decided that I had to do something. That's why I do it. I'm no hero. I can't rescue anyone. All I can do is try to help the victims move on. To realize that they are still living in this new life and to help them grow into stronger people. Maybe if I can help enough

of them they'll grow up and then one day be able to do something about it and bring down this whole system."

"So you're playing a long game too?" Graham said shaking his head.

"Yeah, except I'm losing," Ms. Redding said. Graham looked up at her with a quizzical look. "Its always the same. Not one of them has been able to push back against it all. They somehow come to the conclusion that its just easier to give in. When that happens, they just turn into the kids the organization wants them to be."

"If its not working then why keep doing it," Graham yelled as he stood up from his chair. His anger and frustration had come on fast. The thing is he didn't disagree. He understood Ms. Redding's situation perfectly, too perfectly in fact. He understood all too well what it was like to be stuck in a system where you tried your hardest to make changes and yet all that effort didn't tick the needle in the right direction, it was a constant battle against the tide. A Sisyphean task with no reprieve. Ms. Redding went to Graham she took his hands into hers.

"Mercy," she said again. "If they can go off and be happy in a world of childlike innocence then maybe that's all I can do. If that is the smallest kindness I can offer in this awful place then maybe that has to be the way it is. If they can move on and live again with some hope then that certainly has to be better than living hopelessly."

Graham was silent. He looked up at Ms. Redding. His face

scrunched up as hot tears came to his eyes.

“Why...” Graham squeaked before a moment later he was bawling his eyes out with loud cries. Ms. Redding got to her knees as she pulled Graham in close. “Why,why why, why does it have to be this way,” Graham blubbered as he cried into Ms. Redding's shoulder. It was crashing down on Graham. The hopelessness of it all. The inevitability and the only kindness that was on offer was blissful ignorance. Was that going to be him? Would one day he just come to know that there wasn't anything else? That it would just be easier to accept that this new life that had been forced on him was the only option. Graham felt Ms. Redding rubbing his back. He kept his face hidden taking in deep breaths to get his breathing back under control. After a minute Graham stepped away wiping the last few tears from his face. Ms. Redding stood up before offering him tissue to clean his face. Graham sat back in his chair after cleaning the moisture and snot from his face.

“Sorry about that,” Graham said feeling embarrassed at the display.

“No need to apologize,” Ms. Redding said. Silence fell over the room. It was Graham who finally spoke up.

“I'll tell you what I know,” Graham then said.

“You're sure you want to do that?” Ms. Redding questioned.

“If it helps you rescue your brother than that's good,” Graham said. “At least somebody gets out of this.”

“I would appreciate that,” Ms. Redding said.

“But I have some conditions first. First don't try and counsel me any more, I'm not ready to give up just yet.”

“Its not about giving up,” Ms. Redding said.

“Do you want me to tell you or not?” Graham said with a side eyed glance.

“Okay, okay, fine.” she said. “From now on when you come here we can just hang out.”

“Second you gotta do the same for Cody,” Graham said.

“Are you going to tell him about this?” she asked.

“I don't know,” Graham replied.

“He might find it a little strange if I suddenly stop,” Ms. Redding said as her expression turned to worry. “I'm really hoping to keep this between us.”

“Cody is the one I trust, I'll most likely end up telling him. He is my confidant,” Graham said using Ms. Redding's words against her. “Why are you so worried about him knowing? Do you think he is, I mean is he going to change soon?”

“Hard to say,” Ms. Redding said. “You two are very similar in a way, so I guess if you're still okay he probably is too.”

Graham took a dark comfort in that idea. If what Ms. Redding was saying maybe that meant they would fog out at the same time, meaning that Graham wouldn't have to watch Cody turn into a kid.

“Also,” Graham continued. “I want you to start seeing another friend.”

“Another friend?” Ms. Redding raised an eyebrow.

“Zen, or well you probably know him as Mikey, he's in my class. You can do that right?” Graham asked.

“Well its a bit out of the norm,” Ms. Redding said going to her computer and typing. “Its happened before so its not unheard of,” She said as she clicked away. A moment later she clicked her tongue.

“That's not happening.”

“What, why not?” Graham said with a huff.

“He's one of Dr. Grosse's there is no way I can make a case for getting a student transferred from that asshole. Not to mention that guy already has it out for me. If I tried he could make my life more difficult than it already is.”

“Oh,” Graham said smirking a little.

“What?” Ms. Redding asked looking a little confused.

“Its just nice to know you hate him too,” Graham said nodding.

“You have no idea,” Ms. Redding said with a huff. “This place is a battlefield and the two generals are Dr. Grosse and you mother. The doctor doesn't like my methods says their too indirect, but your Mom seems to think its more in line with what they want.”

“She's not my Mom,” Graham said sullenly. Ms. Redding gave a him a somewhat startled look before nodding.

“Right...Sorry,” she said. Graham could only nod. Somehow it was funny in a way that even this cult wasn't above normal normal workplace politics.

“Anyways,” Graham said. “Suppose I can tell you what I know.” Graham proceeded to tell her everything he knew about Sebastian, including about their date.

“You went on a date with him?” Ms. Redding exclaimed once he got to that part.

“Yeah,” Graham said feeling a little defensive. “You got a problem with that or something?”

“No, not at all,” Ms. Redding said holding up her hands. “Guess it was kind of the date from hell, though.”

Graham nodded in agreement before proceeding with the rest of the tale. Once he had finished Ms. Redding sat ruminating.

“Sebastian,” she said wistfully. “Don't think I know anyone like that.”

“That's all I got,” Graham said standing up. “I expect you to hold up your end of the deal.”

“Of course,” Ms. Redding said. “I will not counsel you in any way shape or form. You are no longer a patient.”

“Good,” Graham said nodding. “Guess I gotta go back to class.” Graham went for the door.

“Just a moment,” Ms. Redding said walking up to him. “Its just since things have kind of changed I think that...well I would like us to be more amicable towards one another so when its just us feel free to just call me Claire.”

“Um why?” Graham asked not sure what the point was.

“Well I guess I just want you to know that I trust you,” she said.

“This sounds like its counseling,” Graham said furrowing his brow.

“Nope,” Claire said shaking her head. “We're in this together.” Graham looked at the outstretched

hand. He then took it smiling a little as he did.

“Yeah in this together Claire.”

Saturday morning came as Graham walked down the stairs to the table after getting himself dressed in the clothes Gretchen had laid out for him, a lime green pair of shorts with some chunky white strings and a white shirt with some construction vehicles on it. As he spotted Cody he saw that the boy had a similar pair of red shorts and a blue shirt with a rocket ship shooting out rainbows on it. Suddenly Graham's shirt didn't seem so bad.

“I was about to come wake you up myself,” Gene said as he caught Graham in a hug before lifting him up into his arms. “But now that you're up we can get going.”

Graham looked around, Gretchen was nowhere to be found

which was strange. He then noticed that Cody already had his shoes on.

“We're going somewhere?” Graham asked.

“We sure are,” Gene enthused carrying Graham over to the front door before setting him down.

“You boys are in for a wild crazy guy's day.”

“Guy's day,” Graham said as if the very words made his tongue taste bad.

“That's right just you two and Daddy.” Gene said. “Get your shoes on so we can get this show on the road.

Soon enough Graham was in the backseat of the car with Cody. Gene was blasting some music on the radio. He seemed in a better mood than usual. Graham leaned over towards Cody.

“You know what's happening?” Graham asked keeping his voice low.

“I know just as much as you,” Cody said.

“Has he ever done anything like this with you before?” Graham then asked wondering if perhaps Gene just got in the mood sometimes. Cody shook his head.

“Hey Dad,” Graham shouted over the music he tried a few more times not getting a response. “Daddddy,” Graham finally shrieked which seemed to grab Gene's attention enough for him to turn down the radio.

“No need to scream Graham,” Gene said. Graham could only give a huff. “What's up?”

“Where are we going?” Graham asked.

“C'mon now, just sit back and let it happen,” Gene said. Graham furrowed his brows, that seemed to be the only thing they all wanted him to do. “But if you really must know our first stop is breakfast.” Gene pulled the car into the parking lot of a diner. They went in and Graham and Cody were lead to a booth where they sat across from Gene. A waitress came over setting down two paper kids menu's with activities in front of Graham and Cody along with a cup of crayons.

“I'll take an adult menu, please,” Graham said.

“Sorry sugar,” the waitress said with a smile. “Kids under ten gotta order off the kids menu, but don't worry we got big portions here, you'll get enough food.”

“He'll be fine,” Gene added.

“Drinks?” the waitress then asked.

“I'll take a coffee and the boys will have some orange juice,” Gene said ordering for them. Graham could only frown. Gene gave him a curious look. Graham huffed as he lifted up the paper menu in front of his face.

“Something on you mind Graham?” Gene asked.

“No,” Graham snarled back. Gene let out a little sigh.

“What do you boys want, need help reading the menu?” Gene

then asked moving on.

“I want the bacon and the eggs,” Cody said never one to turn down a meal.

“Sounds good,” Gene said. “Graham have you decided?”

“Maybe I wont get anything,” Graham said. “Since I can't order what I want.”

“There are plenty of options on the kids menu, and you heard the waitress they have big portions. Besides you don't even finish your dinner at home. No sense in wasting all the food you would get with an adult portion.”

“I'm not a kid,” Graham mumbled still not putting the paper menu down. Gene gave a tut as he lifted the menu out of Graham's hands to look the boy straight on.

“Graham we have a really fun day ahead of us. That attitude isn't going to fly so either turn it around or you will ruin it for everybody. I'm doing something nice and I would appreciate a little gratitude.”

Graham looked at Gene's critical look. He instantly felt a little panic.

“S-sorry, Daddy,” he said weakly as he averted his gaze.

“That's better,” Gene said. Graham shook his head a little. He felt a tingle go down his back at how small he had just felt then. The apology had just come out of his mouth automatically as a response to sensing that his “Dad” was in some way mad at him, that Graham was in trouble. It seemed

that the fog didn't take hold only when he was having some childlike fun. It could hit him when he was being reprimanded like a bratty seven year old as well. The waitress came back and Gene ordered for everyone, choosing the breakfast platter for Graham since he was so worried about not getting enough to eat. As they waited for the food to come Gene and Cody played tic tac toe on Cody's menu, which Graham did not participate. Graham figured Cody was once again being the smarter of the two of them but as he watched on he began to worry a little. Cody had made mention that he usually played games with Claire. As Graham thought about it more he began to realize that Cody did seem to enjoy playing games. Was that one of the ways they were subtly regressing him?

When the food came Graham had to fight back his scowl as he looked at the pancake on his plate that had whip cream eyes and a piece of bacon forming a smile on it.

“Wow would you look at that, pretty cool huh kiddo,” Gene enthused looking at Graham's plate. Graham looked up putting a fake smile on his face.

“Super cool,” he said. Graham figured it was better just to go along for the time being. After they finished eating they were back in the car as Gene drove on. Graham just continued to look out the window letting his thoughts wander.

“Hope you boys are ready for a boat ride,” Gene announced breaking Graham from his thoughts. Graham looked out the front window to see they were in a car line that was boarding

onto the ferry.

“What are we doing here?” Graham asked in a state of shock. Were they actually going off island?

“How else do you think we are going to get to the mainland?” Gene said. “Wait here though I gotta pay first.” Gene got out of the car and walked up to a ticket booth.

“We're going to the main land?” Cody questioned seemingly just as surprised as Graham.

“Guess so,” Graham said staring straight ahead. The boys sat in silence for a moment before Cody looked at Graham.

“Do you think we should run, I mean once we're on the other side.”

“Absolutely not,” Graham said shaking his head.

“Why not?” Cody practically guffawed. “It would be easy to slip away and then...”

“Think about it,” Graham said. “The only reason Gene would do this is if he was confident that we wouldn't run.”

“So we should just go along with that?” Cody questioned.

“He knows that we know running as we are now would be a bad idea. It doesn't help us one bit. We don't want to just get away. We need to find a way to get our selves back to normal. Staying on the island is still our best bet. But this is really good for us.”

“Good how,” Cody said frowning. “It almost feels like their

teasing us."

"No not teasing, testing," Graham said. "They want to see if we do try something. So that's why we aren't. In fact I think we are going to have the best day two seven year olds possibly could."

"I don't get it," Cody said.

"Cody, T H I N K," Graham enunciated slowly. "If we don't try to run or anything, if we act like two kids today then they'll think that they are winning that what they are doing to us is working. That's when they'll start to relax and drop their guard which..."

"Will make it easier for us to sneak around if they aren't watching us as closely," Cody exclaimed finishing Graham's though.

"Bingo," Graham smiled. "So that means no matter what we are going to act like we are having blast. Even if what we are doing is lame."

Gene got back into the car and soon enough they were parked on the ferry as it made its way across the lake. It was a somewhat depressing feeling for Graham. He had thought that when he would find himself leaving the island things would have been a lot different. All he had thought about in the beginning was leaving but the island had dug its claws into him. Simply leaving was no longer enough.

Getting to the mainland Graham watched the passing scenery with some interest. The area just outside of Merryweather

was touristy, full of all the tourist traps one would think of. Gene pulled the car into a parking lot. Graham saw where they were. It was a large building “Funplex” was written on the top. Graham could see a large mini- golf course to the side. Walking into the front entrance they were assaulted by the noise of loud arcade games and kids and families. Graham spotted more than a few people wearing Merryweather shirts. The island was a tourist draw yet the citizens of the island would never allow something as gauche as this on their idyllic getaway. Gene lead them up to a front desk after a couple of minutes he turned around giving both boys a plastic card.

“Alright you two we each have a hundred points to use.” Gene said.

“Really,” Cody said looking at the card with some interest. “Cool,” he smiled. Graham couldn't help but grimace again. This had to be a weak spot for Cody, he couldn't help himself but get excited. Did they know that? Was this truly a way that they were breaking him down?

Wandering around the place Gene saw the prize shop.

“You should see what you could win,” he said leading the boys in. As Graham looked around he wasn't impressed. It was pretty run of the mill stuff. From small little plastic knick knacks to giant stuffed animals that costed so many points it would required a small fortune to be able to get that many points. “Anything looking good?” Gene asked putting a hand on Graham's shoulder as he stood in front of a display of toy

cars.

“No,” Graham said with some surlyness. He noticed Gene give a slightly perplexed look. “I just.. mean there is no way I'll get enough points to get any of this.” Graham said quickly. He needed to remember that he couldn't be his old grouchy self. He was supposed to be having fun. “Maybe you and Cody could decide on something to work towards together, you know set a goal.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” Graham said sounding enthused. He walked off to find Cody who was looking around near some basketballs. “Anything you want?” Graham asked.

“Not really,” Cody said with a snicker.

“Well we gotta pick something, Daddy wants us to work together for a prize,” Graham said rolling his eyes.

“If we gotta pick something how about one of these,” Cody said pointing to the wall of basketballs.

“As long as it gets him off our backs,” Graham said. The boys told Gene of their plan and then were released onto the floor. They started off with some skee-ball which both of them sucked at. They then moved onto a basketball shooting game. Graham only managed to get one in. Cody fared a little better getting three baskets.

“We're never going to get enough points,” Cody mewled as he saw their paltry count displayed on the screen.

“You sound like you actually care,” Graham said.

“I do,” Cody said shrugging his shoulders. “I just want to do it and like I don't know prove that we can actually accomplish something.”

Graham licked his lips a little as he looked at Cody's disappointed look. He figured it was a good enough motivation. It had felt like they had been spinning their wheels forever. He hadn't told Cody or Zen anything about Claire yet. Graham wanted to wait and see how it played out. He didn't trust her yet, things could still go sideways on that front.

“If we're going to do this then I guess we need to not rely on our athletic abilities.” Graham said. They found a coin pusher game and it gave out points like candy. With the two of them going at it pretty soon they had racked up a sizable amount of points, that is until the machine seemed to stop.

“Piece of junk,” Graham exclaimed giving a hit to the side.

“Aww man we were so close,” Cody grumbled.

“Did you guys break it?” Gene asked standing behind them.

“We didn't break it,” Graham said defensively.

“Looks like we need assistance,” Gene said hitting the button to call for help. A few moments later a large man with a scraggly red bead and a balding head with and ill fitting blue polo with the arcades logo sidled up to the machine.

“There a problem here?” he asked.

“The game my boys were playing seems to have broke,” Gene said.

“These things break down all the time.” the man sighed taking a ring of keys off his waist and opening the up the machine to begin fiddling with it. “Usually just have to reset it,” he said before a minute later the machine sprang back to life. “There good as new,” the man said.

“There you go,” Gene said. “You got that fixed up right away.”

“Really wasn't much,” the man said closing the door at the front of the machine. “Once you fix one of these you've fixed them all. I am the manager here so I ought to know how to do it,” the man laughed.

“You work here long?” Gene then asked taking an interest in striking up a conversation.

“About a year,” the man said.

“This is a big place,” Gene said looking around. “Must be hard work to be in charge around here.”

“I'm a glorified repairman,” the man said laughing weakly. “I'm really putting my engineering degree to use here.”

“You helped us out,” Gene said. “Gene Callaway, and I can't thank you enough for helping out my boys.”

The man shook Gene's hand tentatively. “Otis Scranton, and like I said it wasn't a big deal.” the man then looked at Graham and Cody smiling a little. “You guys have fun now, let me know if it breaks again.” The man then walked away.

Graham and Cody were back at it again. Yet something was bothering Graham. Otis Scranton, the name had sounded so familiar. Graham had never met a guy like that before. It then hit him like a truck. That had been a name in one of Gene's emails. The one about prospective targets to be precise. Graham's hand fell away from the button that dropped the tokens into the machine. His heart was beating fast. Is that what they were really here for, was Gene scoping the guy out? He looked back. Gene was reading through a tourist book that showed all the attractions in the area. Graham shook his head a little. There was no way Gene had come all the way out here just to meet that guy. Graham wondered if he even knew. The more Graham thought about it the more it seemed to look more like a terrible coincidence than anything. Gene could not have predicted the machine would break and that the guy who would come fix it would just happen to be a person of interest for the cult. Lots of names probably passed through Gene's emails. There was no way he remembered every single one. Not too mention its not like Gene was the one that actually went and grabbed people. They had people like the supplier to do the actual dirty work.

Graham turned away from the machine he had to do something, but what? That was the real question. He couldn't stand there and act like nothing was wrong though. Graham began to walk as he went past Gene the man looked at him.

“Going somewhere?” the man asked.

“I gotta go potty,” Graham said.

“Bathrooms are back there want me to come with?” the man said with a nod.

“I can do it myself,” Graham said. Gene only nodded in response. As Graham walked he didn't know what he was going to do. He found Otis sitting behind a desk lazily padding away at a tablet.

“Excuse me,” Graham said getting the mans attentions. “I uh really need to talk to you.” Otis let out a grunt as he came out from the desk.

“You break that game again?” Otis said sounding more tired than annoyed.

“No,” Graham said shaking his head already seeing that this might be fruitless. “I need to tell you something really important, but you have to keep quiet about it.” Graham said waving the man closer. Otis looked at him with a interested look as he leaned down closer putting his hands on his knees.

“Whats up?” the man said.

“You're in danger,” Graham said. “There are people after you.”

“After me?” Otis asked as his eyebrows raised yet Graham could tell the man didn't take him seriously one bit.

“Yes, and they want to do something terrible to you,” Graham said lacing his voice with as much seriousness as he could.

“Like what?” Otis asked.

“They are going to turn you into a kid,” Graham hissed. Otis

was silent for a moment. He then let out a big belly laugh.

“Is that all,” the man continued to laugh. “Tell them they are welcome to.”

“You have to listen,” Graham said. “Its not what you think.”

“Listen kid,” Otis said standing up. “I know you think you have it so bad having to follow rules and go to school, but there are worse things.”

“But –“

“Go and have some fun you won't always be a kid so enjoy it,” Otis began to walk away.

“Just be careful,” Graham called out. Otis turned back looking at him with a small smile.

“Sure kid,” Otis said before walking off. Graham knew the guy hadn't took him seriously. But maybe he had put just enough caution in the man to make him be a tad bit more aware. There wasn't much more Graham could do. He could only offer a small mercy, and that would have to be enough.

Chapter 15

Potential: Part 15 - Chapter 15

A New Arrival

Graham stood watching Cody shoot a basket at the park back on Merryweather. They had ended up getting enough points to get a ball that Graham had let Cody pick out. He had opted for the one with flames on it. The sun was beginning to set. It was getting late, they had been out all day. After the arcade they had gone mini-golfing and had eaten some pizza and then Gene had elected to go and see a movie. Graham looked to the side seeing Gene sitting on a bench talking on the phone. Graham walked towards the man catching the end of his conversation.

“...We can't stay out much longer its getting dark...I understand...it would probably be best just to deal with it together...Alright bye see you soon,” Gene said before putting his phone away.

“Are we going home yet?” Graham asked. Gene just smiled as he grabbed Graham and sat him on his lap.

“Getting tired,” Gene asked as he had Graham's head against his shoulder petting his hair.

“A little,” Graham said not resisting. He had learned that fighting Gene's and especially Gretchen's incessant cuddling would only make them double down and hug him tightly until he calmed down. Its like they were smothering him with

affection. In fact that was probably exactly what they were doing.

“We did a lot today didn't we, so I'm not surprised,” Gene said standing up while still holding Graham. “Cody c'mon time to go,”

Cody came running up to walk next to the pair.

“Why are you carrying Graham?” he asked.

“Oh well Graham said he was so tired that he couldn't even walk anymore.” Gene said with a joking tone.

“I did not,” Graham said as his face went red. Gene set Graham down letting him walk the rest of the way to the car.

As soon as Graham walked into the front door of the house he could sense something was different. The kitchen was darkened as the only light on was the one above the dining room table. It was eerily silent in a way that unnerved him as if he could sense the tension in the air. Gretchen appeared walking out. She gave the boys a smile upon seeing them as she wrapped them both up in a hug.

“Did you boys have a good day?” she asked.

“Check it out we won a basketball,” Cody said holding the prize up.

“That's so great,” Gretchen said. “Why don't you two come with me, I think you need a bath after wild and crazy guy day.”

Graham followed along silently. Soon enough Graham and Cody were in the bathtub. Gretchen had already gone through the routine of washing their hair and had left them alone. Graham couldn't help but notice she had rushed through it. Usually Gene and Gretchen liked to make little games out it. Playing a Simon says version of which part to wash next. “Mommy says wash your arms next,” or making them countdown for water to dump over their heads to wash out shampoo. Yet that night there had been none of that. Graham should have been happy for a reprieve, maybe even take it as a sign that their plan was working, that Gene and Gretchen were letting up a little because they thought they didn't need to try so hard. Yet he could still only feel uneasy.

“Somethings going on,” Graham said quietly to Cody who was getting water to go from one hand to another.

“Yeah, I kind of figured,” Cody said.

“What do you think it is?” Graham asked.

“Who knows,” Cody said with a shrug trying to act cool yet his face was twisted up a little. Graham nodded. He had been getting a little worried about Cody lately, especially today as he seemed to take to acting like a kid a little too naturally. It was somewhat of a relief to see him look so serious for once. Before they could discuss more Gene came walking into the bathroom with two sets of clothes.

“Alright boys jammie time,” he said placing the clothes on the counter. The boys dried off and got dressed. They both had matching red and white striped pants while their shirts

had similar yet different looking colorful cuddly monsters on the front. The boys brushed their teeth as Gene supervised. After Graham had rinsed he couldn't hold back.

“Is there something going on?” he asked looking up at the man. Gene gave him a smile with a chuckle.

“Guess you noticed,” Gene said mussing up Graham's hair. “We'll talk about it in the living room.

The boys were sat on the couch in the living room as Gene and Gretchen stood in front of them. Gretchen was on the phone.

“I hate to ask this,” Gretchen said on the phone, who she was talking to Graham didn't know. “But given the situation I think waiting until Monday is out of the question.” Gretchen nodded along to what was being said on the phone before smiling with a nod. “We'll see you then.” Gretchen then hung up placing the phone back in her pocket. “I think we have some explaining to do,” Gretchen said as she looked at Gene before looking at the boys.

“Boys something wonderful has happened,” Gene said clapping his hands. “It was a little unexpected but today we are welcoming a new member of the family.”

Graham felt his stomach drop. His mind was sent racing. His first thought went to Otis Scranton, had that been what today was about? Was that guy now fully regressed into a child somewhere in the house?

“There are going to be some changes,” Gene now continued.

“For one you two are now big brothers to a little sister, so I expect you to look out for her.”

Graham's mouth fell open a little. It was a girl? So that meant Otis was safe for now, however a darker thought then entered his mind. Claire, had they found out? Had they done to her what she said they would if discovered? Graham's mind was going over anything wondering if there was anyway he could have possibly given away her secret? No, he hadn't uttered a word, if they had found out it was by some other means.

“Her name is Angela,” Gretchen said smiling as the words left her mouth causing Graham to let out another sigh of relief.

“Can we meet her?” Cody then asked. Graham shot him a look but saw Cody's question was not borne out of childlike curiosity as his face was one of concern. Gene and Gretchen gave each other look

“I don't think right now is a good time,” Gretchen said shaking her head. “She is still a little overwhelmed, you know with being in a new place.”

Graham bit his tongue. He knew it had nothing to do with location.

“But maybe we should,” Graham said. “You know maybe seeing some other kids would help.” Gene looked at Graham for a moment before turning to Gretchen.

“He might be right,” Gene said. “You know children feel more comfortable with others.” Gretchen looked unconvinced.

“Please Mommy,” Graham pleaded.

“Yeah, please Mommy, we'll be really nice promise,” Cody said. Gretchen got a flustered smile on her face. Cody and Graham were obviously playing into her desires for her perfect little family it was an effective way to wheedle things out from her when the situation called for it.

“Okay,” she relented. “Just remember she may not want to talk or play right away,” Gretchen said motioning for the boys to follow. Surprisingly they came to the door in the hall, the one that was always locked. Gretchen opened it.

“Angela,” Gretchen called into the darkened room. “There are some people here who would like to say hi.” Cody forged ahead not waiting for permission. Graham followed quickly turning around.

“No grown ups allowed,” he said cheekily before closing the door. He waited a moment expecting the door to open back up. Yet all he heard was some chuckling. He was pleased that his childish display had worked. Graham turned around letting his eyes adjust to to the darkness. Some light from a streetlight was the only thing lighting up the room. He could see the room was decorated. It was done up like any little girl's room. A pinkish hue on the walls. Molded butterflys on the walls. A bed in the center of the room with a see through canopy hanging from the ceiling. In the far corner of the room was a lump underneath a purple comforter. Graham saw a face peek out. A little girl around five or six popped her head out. Her black hair was disheveled, tear stains streaking

down her cheeks.

“Angela right,” Graham said approaching. “We're here to help. We're like you.”

“No get away,” the girl screeched pulling the cover up.

“Hey didn't you hear me?” Graham asked. Cody placed a hand on Grahams shoulder he pulled Graham back a little giving him a little smirk. Cody walked forward kneeling down.

“Its okay, no one here will hurt you, everyone is really nice,” Cody said calmly. Angela poked her head out again looking at Cody. For a moment it looked like she was about to pull the cover down before a moment later she swiftly pulled the blanket back up.

“Just go away, I know you aren't real,” she shouted. “This is all a dream, a bad trip,” she said as her words slurred into mumbles laced with panic. “That asshole Aronn,” she said sounding as if she were talking to herself. “He gave me too much, just breathe you'll wake up soon...just breathe.”

“This isn't fake,” Graham said. To him this girl needed to get a grip. If she didn't who knew what Gretchen would do? “You have to try and calm down.”

“I'm not listening, I'm not listening,” Angela said. Graham watched as the lump began to rock back and forth on the ground. “I'm going to be fine, I'm going to be fine,” she kept repeating. “This will all be over soon.”

“Listen lady,” Graham said becoming frustrated.

“Graham stop,” Cody said standing up. He turned to Graham as he walked towards the door stopping by Graham's side. “We should leave,” he said patting Graham on the shoulder before walking towards the door.

“But we gotta talks some sense into her,” Graham said. Cody was stopped at the door, his hand on the handle.

“There is nothing you can do,” Cody said not even turning to look at Graham. “There is just nothing.” Cody then looked back. “Hey Angela don't worry, me and Graham will watch out for you,” he said before opening the door and leaving. Graham looked back at the mound in the corner before sighing and leaving himself.

Back in their room Graham was pacing around the room. Angela, she was in a bad way. She was so thoroughly convinced of her delusion that it would make it hard to reason with her.

“Graham relax,” Cody said looking up a little annoyed from the book he was looking at.

“How could you just give up like that,” Graham said accusingly looking at Cody. “She needs help and you just walked out.” Cody closed his book and gave a sympathetic look towards Graham.

“Sometimes you have to cut your losses.” Cody said.

“What are you even saying?” Graham yelped.

“Look, sometimes there are just things out of your hands. That girl, she is too far gone,” Cody said his voice sounding neutral as if he were talking about the weather of all things.

“So that's it then,” Graham said. “Is that what you thought about me at first then, that first morning when you thought I was already gone?”

“No,” Cody said. “But I thought you were already well on your way.”

“But I wasn't, and you and Zen helped me fight back. So why doesn't she deserve the same? Graham asked. He couldn't let this lie. He thought they should at least try.

“She's not interested in trying,” Cody said. “Not everyone is like you. Some people can't deal with the reality of the situation. They're lost. You can't bring them back from the brink if they've already fallen in.”

Graham went to say something yet nothing came out of his mouth. He sat back on his bed. For some reason he began to remember Claire's story about how things changed when she had gotten her first patients. Had they been like Angela? Completely shattered and lost. If that was true he now understood even more why Claire did what she did. If that was the only thing she could do to help then maybe she was justified in it.

“I'm sorry,” Cody said. “Its just –“

“No,” Graham said getting to his feet. “I get it, but it doesn't mean I have to be happy about it.”

“Yeah,” Cody replied softly.

Just then both boys heard the doorbell ring. They gave each other a curious look. Who could that be coming around at night? Both boys made their way to the stairs crouching down on the steps with their faces in between the railings, like two little kids trying to spy Santa on Christmas eve. Gretchen was talking to someone at the door in mid- conversation.

“This all happened so fast, the original placement couldn't be done. We're all kind of on our back foot with this one.” The footsteps came into the dining area where Graham was surprised to see Claire walking into the house.

“Ms. Redding what are you doing here?” Cody shouted as he jumped to his feet. The woman looked towards the stairs.

“Hey Cody, Graham,” Claire said giving a wave as Gretchen gave a small smile as if the boys had been caught doing something mischievous yet all together harmless. Cody bounded down the stairs to run up to the counselor. Graham followed albeit much slower.

“You never come over,” Cody said sounding very excited for some reason. “You want to come see our video games we could play.”

“I don't think I can,” Claire said giving Cody a sad smile.

“Ms. Redding is here to see your sister,” Gretchen then said. Graham now had all the confirmation he needed. Claire was here to do her job. To make that girl Angela give up her old life and become what the cult wanted her to be.

“Then maybe after,” Cody said.

“There won't be time,” Gretchen said. “Its already late enough as it is and I believe its time for two certain boys to go to bed.”

“Awww,” Cody whined. “Not fair.”

“Its okay Cody,” Claire said as she knelt down and petted Cody's head a little. “I'll see you on Monday at school and we'll play lots then.”

“Okay,” Cody said with a huff. As Graham watched the scene play out it dawned on him that Cody certainly did act much differently around Claire than anyone else. It was different than the good boy act he put on in front of Gretchen and Gene. Graham had only see little tidbits of this type of behavior before, especially when they did their fitness conditioning on the playground which resembled more just playing on the equipment than something serious. Yet as Graham watched he somehow got the sense the Cody really liked Claire. The more he thought on it, the more it seemed to be true. For all the warnings Cody had given him about school he had actually never said anything bad about Claire specifically.

“Okay you two, bedtime.” Gretchen said. “Let Ms. Redding do her job.”

“Wait,” Cody yelped. “I want to say good night first.

Gretchen gave a little smirk before nodding. Cody gave Claire a hug as she wrapped her arms around him shaking

him a little from side to side. Graham couldn't help but notice the warm smile on Cody's face.

“I love your jammies,” Claire said as she released Cody. “Super cool.”

“Oh thanks,” Cody said a little shyly as he stepped back.

“Go on Graham,” Gretchen said. “Say goodnight and then I'll come and tuck you two in.”

Graham approached feeling a little awkward. He could see Claire smiling at him yet he could tell it was a mask. They both knew what she was here to do. Graham could tell she didn't want to be here. As he hugged her he could feel the guilt in her embrace as if she were apologizing to him. Graham leaned in close to her ear.

“Please help her, she needs you,” he whispered. Claire had nothing to apologize for, Graham knew the situation. As they separated Claire had wide eyes as if she couldn't believe what she had just heard. She gave Graham a small smile and a nod.

Once the boys were up and back in their room after having been tucked in by Gretchen and the lights turned off Graham sat up.

“What the heck was all that?” Graham asked looking over at Cody.

“What?” Cody asked turning his head to look at Graham.

“All that stuff with Cla...I mean Ms. Redding?” Graham said.

“I was just playing along,” Cody said although he didn't exactly sound confident.

“Dude, you were like all over her,” Graham said. Just then a little smirk came to his face. “Cody, do you maybe have a little crush on her?”

“What! No way,” Cody yelped. Graham could not see the color of Cody's face in the dark but if he could he knew it was probably bright red. Graham snickered as he laid back on his pillow. “She's just a nice person okay. I like her but not like that.” Cody grumbled laying back on his own pillow.

“Yeah,” Graham said quietly. “She is a nice person isn't she?” Cody didn't say anything in response lest Graham continue to tease him. Still it was nice to hear that Graham agreed about Ms. Redding.

“She's down there helping out Angela right now,” Graham said. Cody could tell something was different. He could hear the quivering in Graham's voice. “She's going to help her accept her new life.”

“Graham,” Cody said sitting up.

“I know,” Graham said turning to his side so his back was towards Cody. “I get it, I know its all anybody can do. But still, it hurts to see.”

“Yeah I know,” Cody said softly. “I haven't been here long but I've seen it a couple of times before. Its not easy to look at. To see what we could have been.”

“What if I become like that?” Graham then asked, yet his question didn't seem to be aimed at Cody much more at himself.

“You won't,” Cody said.

“But what if I do,” Graham cried surprising Cody for a moment. “I just keep thinking back to that time I did fog out. How fast it had happened. I didn't even know, what if I can't keep this up, what if I...” Graham stopped as he felt two arms wrap around him from behind. Cody had gotten out of his bed and was now laying next to Graham.

“You don't have to worry,” Cody said as Graham put his hands on top of Cody's as if to hold them to his chest. “I'll bring you back every time, and you'll do the same for me. We're partners and we're going to see this through together.”

“Yeah,” Graham whispered shutting his eyes tightly to cut off his tears.

The boys soon feel asleep in the bed. Knowing that they were safe as long as they had each other.

Chapter 16

Potential: Part 16 - Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Betrayal?

Graham walked along with his little sisters Angie's hand in his own. Cody on the other side holding on to her other hand. The girl was prattling on and on about something. Graham had learned as long as he gave some small affirmation every once in awhile that she had no problem going on forever. As he looked down at her he sighed a little. She had been here for only a week. That hopeless strung out wreck they had met that first night was well and truly gone. It was a wonder why she didn't go to the normal school. She was certainly ready for it. She had changed quickly. The first morning she had been quiet but by that afternoon no one would ever believe she had been anything but a six year old girl a week before. On one hand it was sort of a relief. Graham could see that he and Cody were nowhere near that point, so it only seemed to confirm they were resisting. On the other hand Graham still had worries about how much longer they had. The idea that this was all inevitable kept playing on his mind, probably because of Angela. It was the first time he had witnessed what a complete and total take over of the fog looked like. To actually witness it instead of hearing about it was a totally different experience.

“There's my friend,” Angela shouted pulling her hand out of

Graham's as she pointed further ahead to another girl walking with a woman. “Can I go walk with her?”

“Do what you want, you don't need to ask,” Graham said with a frown. Angela smiled as she ran ahead to join her friend.

“Geez big brother,” Cody said taking note of Graham's tone.

“She's an adult, she can make her own choices,” Graham said.

“Don't let Mommy hear you say that,” Cody said. “Or else you'll be getting a big lecture on watching out for your little sister.”

Graham could only grunt in response. He couldn't bring himself to treat Angela like a little kid, in some ways he felt guilty. He wished he had never said what he did to Claire that night. Not that it would have made a difference. Yet in some ways it felt like he had actually been the one to pull the trigger as if he had given permission for it. He wondered if Claire ever felt this kind of guilt.

Graham then realized today was one of his counseling days. He had started to look forward to them. Claire had made good on her word. No longer did she try and counsel him or get him to do activities with her. Most of the time she would bring a newspaper for Graham to peruse while she got work done on her computer. Sometime they would even talk about current events. Graham was starting to find that Claire was good company. They seemed to have a lot of the same attitudes on things. Graham had really come to see her as an ally. Someone he could trust in this messed up place. Not that

it got him anything. He had already gotten a chance to look through her files and stuff. She had warned him he wasn't going to find anything and it seemed she had been truthful on that front. Graham could see that she was low down whatever totem pole existed here. Information that could help him was not something Claire had access to.

The other thing was that she was keeping her promise not to counsel Cody either. Something that had not gone unnoticed by the boy. He had brought it up to Graham a couple of days ago asking him if he noticed something weird with Ms. Redding. Graham had played dumb of course, he still hadn't told Cody or Zen about her. That info was best kept secret until he actually felt there was a reason for them to know. Graham had pried a little into what his brothers sessions now consisted of. Cody had mainly found it strange that now it seemed that Ms. Redding would just usually play a board game with him during counseling and only if he requested it. What had really tipped him off though was that she no longer played any of the strange games with him anymore. The ones that had ulterior motives and were more like exercises, such as the word association game or the ones that needed the computer. Graham had just played it off that they were doing a good job fooling the adults into thinking that the boys were adapting just fine.

“She looks happy doesn't she?” Cody then asked bringing Graham back to the present. Graham looked up to see Cody watching Angela walk with her friend with a wistful look.

“She'd be happier if she was still an adult,” Graham said.

“Maybe,” Cody said with a sigh. “Although I think she and I were similar. Our adult lives weren't exactly easy.”

“Cody you're worrying me,” Graham said.

“Don't get the wrong idea,” Cody said putting his hands up defensively. “I'm not saying I want to fog out...but I am a little jealous I guess.”

“About what?” Graham questioned.

“I don't know, getting to leave the bad stuff behind I guess.” Cody said as he looked down at the sidewalk. “It would be kind of nice.”

“Cody, you cant” Graham hissed. He certainly didn't like this line of reasoning.

“Stop,” Cody groaned. “This is why I can't talk about this stuff with you. You just jump to the worst conclusions. All I'm saying is that for me I think I could see some good things about getting a fresh start. You know if the whole cult thing wasn't part of the equation. But that's not the situation. Something like that isn't even an option.”

Graham gripped the straps of his backpack giving Cody a hard stare.

“Don't look at me like that,” Cody said. “Its just wishful thinking alright. Same way people say man if I could just win the lottery, okay? Its not serious. Nothing to get yourself all up in arms about.”

“Yeah okay,” Graham said letting out a breath. He could

certainly see where Cody was coming from. The idea just to wipe the slate clean was not an altogether uncommon wish for people, Graham had similar thoughts as well. Sometimes he did wonder what his life would have been like if his parents had been supportive or if he had majored in something else in college or taken a different job.

The boys made it to their classroom and Graham went and made his lunch selection for that day opting for the corndog meal instead of the enchilada which was the smart choice. As the day went on he found himself next to Zen during the morning rotation of activities. Both of them had ended up in the free reading corner together.

“Hey we should have a planning meeting,” Graham said from his beanbag chair.

“You got an idea?” Zen asked plopping on the beanbag chair next to Graham with some books in his lap.

“Not really,” Graham said. “I think we should brainstorm though. See if we can come up with something to do.”

“Might be a good idea, we haven't really done anything in awhile.” Zen said.

“I'll let Cody know,” Graham then said.

“Mikey, Graham,” Mrs. Farmer called out as both boys looked up. “The free reading corner is for reading not chatting,” she said.

“Sorry Mrs. Farmer,” Graham said grabbing one of the

picture books off of Zen's lap and opening it up. The teacher gave a curt nod before walking off to help some kids at a different activity station.

During one of the transition periods Graham walked up to Cody telling him about the plan for a meeting at recess.

“Oh, well maybe not morning recess,” he said giving an apologetic smile.

“You're busy?” Graham questioned.

“Sort of,” Cody said as he shuffled his feet. “I signed up to play kickball.”

“Why?” Graham said shaking his head.

“Seemed like fun,” Cody mumbled looking away. “But we can do the meeting at afternoon recess after lunch. We'll probably think better after eating anyways,” he chuckled a little.

“Cody we have more important things to be doing,” Graham countered feeling like it was ridiculous that he even had to explain this to Cody.

“Well I already signed up, you should have told me earlier,” Cody said.

“Dude its recess kickball I'm sure its not that big of deal if you don't show up,” Graham said tutting a little.

“I want to play,” Cody blurted out before his face went a little red. His shoulders slouched as he looked up at Graham with a

shameful look.

“You are not playing,” Graham said furrowing his brow.

“You don't get to tell me what to do,” Cody said pushing past Graham. “I decided to sign up and I'm not going to skip out.”

“Hey,” Graham said turning around and grabbing Cody by the shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I'm fine,” Cody said shirking off Grahams hand. “I just need to blow off a little steam okay. Thats all. I'll be at the meeting this afternoon,” Cody said before walking off. Graham stood a little confused. Blow off steam, is that all it was? Was this the same as the nerf gun fight? Graham didn't know. He didn't feel good about it at all though.

Later on Graham was sat in Claire's office. He was reading a magazine yet none of the words were registering. Finally he crumpled the magazine a little before slamming it on the desk.

“Something the matter?” Claire asked raising an eyebrow.

“I don't need help,” Graham said more than a little defensively. “I can handle my own problems.”

“I was asking as a friend,” Claire said. “You know that totally normal things friends do.” Graham sighed. He may have deserved that bit of sarcasm.

“Fine, its Cody,” Graham replied. Maybe it would do some good to vent.

“You guys having a fight?” Claire then asked.

“No, not a fight.” Graham said. At least not yet. “He's just worrying me is all. He hasn't been acting weird during your session's has he.”

“No,” Claire said shaking her head. “Although I think he's picking up on the fact that I'm not counseling him anymore, but other than that he seems the same as he has ever been.”

“Whats his trigger?” Graham then asked having a hypothesis of sorts, he just needed Claire to confirm it first. Claire gave a confused look back.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Oh c'mon don't play dumb.” Graham said. “You would always play games with him, that's it isn't it. That's the way you get him thinking more like a kid, right?”

“I play games with all the kids,” Claire said shaking her head to dismiss the accusation.

“Yeah, but he responds to it more,” Graham countered. “I'm not trying to guilt you or nothing, you were just doing what you had to. But I think its affected him really badly.”

“Graham, Cody is fine,” Claire said.

“I don't think he is,” Graham said. “He's just good at hiding it, but I can see it.” It was plain as day to Graham what Cody was doing. “You know he used to do drugs right?” Claire frowned before shaking her head.

“You know I can't talk about stuff like that with you,” Claire said still adhering to her patient confidentially rules.

“Well I can,” Graham said. “He was working on recovery, then all this happened. Now he can't get the help he needs. Its hard for him to deal with, and I think that he's just replaced the drugs with something else.” Claire looked at Graham motioning for him to continue on. She couldn't say anything but Graham could talk about it as much as he liked. “Cody is fighting with himself. He wants to return to normal but sometimes he feels like he is better off here. I worry that one day he is going to wake up and think that's the truth. Everyday he feels what it would be like to not have to deal with what his life had been. He's letting the fog get to him.”

“You think he is going to run away from it?” Claire asked.

“Yeah, who wouldn't,” Graham guffawed. Honestly he might not even blame Cody for doing it.

“That doesn't sound like Cody,” Claire mused.

“What if it doesn't matter? I know Cody okay, I know he would have made it to the other side. But what if he can't now. Maybe there isn't a single person that could. Cody needs to be able to move past the things that were holding him back, But he can't because no one here is interested in helping him do that. They just want him to forget about all of it and just let his past be erased.”

“That's not true,” Claire said quietly. “He has you.”

“Tch,” Graham clicked his tongue as he sat back in his chair. “Believe me if there was anything I could do I would. I'm not a therapist and he won't even listen to me anyways.”

“You don't need to be a therapist,” Claire said. “You just need to keep trusting him, show him a little patience and make sure he knows you've got his back.”

“If only it was that simple,” Graham grumbled.

“Cody is a lot stronger than you give him credit for,” Claire said. “All he needs is his friends support that's whats important.” Graham nodded. He wasn't about to disagree with that.

The day proceeded on. During recess Graham had stood at the top of the hill watching Cody play kickball. He seemed to be having fun at least. As the recess ended Graham gave Cody a smile as he walked past him.

“You had some pretty good kicks,” Graham said.

“Huh,” Cody said seemingly flabbergasted that Graham was complimenting him.

“You did pretty good out there,” Graham said.

“Uhh sure thanks,” Cody said as he began to walk off, no doubt wondering if Graham was being sarcastic or not. Around the time the kids were doing math Cody got called to go to his own counseling session. Graham was no longer worried about it. Claire was keeping to the agreement, of that he was sure. Time passed as Graham worked through the math worksheet slowly. If he went too fast Mrs. Farmer would just ask him if he was sure he did it right and perhaps he should double check his answers. They were always right of course Graham was still capable of the simple arithmetic

before him. Though it was beyond tedious to show his work. Cody came back as Graham was finishing up and Graham did not like what he saw.

Cody walked in quietly sitting in his seat without a peep. As Graham looked at him he saw Cody's puffy eyes, he had clearly been crying. Ms. Farmer saw it as well going to the boy and kneeling down next to him. Graham was close enough to hear their voices.

“Everything okay?” the teacher asked kindly.

“Yeah,” Cody said. “Counseling was hard today, that's all.”

“Why don't you go spend some time in the reading corner you can come back to lessons after lunch, okay,” Mrs. Farmer offered. Cody nodded getting up from his seat and heading to a bean bag chair. Graham sat as he felt sweat form on the back of his neck. What the hell had happened?

Cody had made himself scarce during lunch, yet at recess he came up to Graham and Zen who were waiting outside the house.

“Hey,” he said sounding glum.

“Hey,” Zen said.

“So look, I don't think I can do the meeting,” Cody said.

“Why not?” Graham said sounding more demanding than he meant. The truth was he was just worried.

“I'm just not feeling up to it,” Cody said.

“Sure,” Zen said agreeing. “Not like we had anything to go on.”

Graham shot Zen a look. He was surprised that Zen was so non-nonchalant about it. He was the one always insisting they needed to come up with plans.

“What happened at counseling?” Graham asked. Cody looked at Graham a little shocked.

“Nothing,” Cody said.

“Don't give me that,” Graham said. Cody took a step back.

“Why are you always like this?” Cody said defensively.

“Like what?” Graham countered.

“Geez,” Cody said clicking his tongue. “I'm just having a weird day and you always got to make a big deal out of it,”

“I'm just worried about you,” Graham said.

“Don't be, I'm fine, everything is fine,” Cody said before walking off leaving Graham a little stunned.

“You two having a fight or something?” Zen asked breaking the silence.

“I didn't think we were,” Graham said sounding unsure himself. Then again maybe they were now.

As the week went on Cody seemed to do his best to avoid Graham. The only thing he had said was that he was dealing with some things on his own. Graham had to concede to leave

Cody be. Its what he wanted after all.

Friday came and Cody was called in for counseling again which was strange, he usually only went twice a week like everybody else but this was now his third session. Just like the last time Cody came back looking disheveled. Mrs. Farmer didn't even ask this time, letting him go straight to the reading corner without a word. Graham could no longer keep his silence and confronted Cody at recess.

“Its nothing okay,” Cody had said standing by his earlier statement.

“You're supposed to tell me,” Graham said becoming angered. “Or was all that stuff about being in this together just talk?”

“It doesn't mean I have to tell you about every single little thought or conversation I have,” Cody said back. Graham took in some air through his nostrils before stopping and taking another big breath. He didn't want another fight. Maybe it was time to come clean?

“Look Ms. Redding isn't who you think she is,” as Graham spoke he saw Cody's face screw up.

“Stop it,” he yelped. “I don't want to hear it. She's not like everybody else, she's different.”

“Yeah she is,” Graham said trying to get his words out yet was cut off again by Cody.

“She's helping me a lot,” Cody said.

“Helping you?” Graham questioned. It seemed weird if she was doing what she did with Graham then he had a hard time seeing how that was something one could describe as helpful.

“The counseling is helping and I'm starting to feel better about things,” Cody then said. Alarm sirens were blaring in Graham's head. Counseling? There was only one conclusion Graham could come too. Claire had gone behind his back. How could Cody even say he was feeling better about things? What things? The fact that he was trapped in the body of a seven year old? That he was going to be used by some cult for some greater purpose? All the pieces began to fall into place for Graham and he felt downright sick. Is this why Cody was avoiding him, why he was spending time running around the playground at recess instead of coming up with a plan to escape? Was Claire actually convincing Cody he was better off now than ever before?

“What has she said to you?” Graham said grabbing Cody by the shoulders.

“Its not your business,” Cody said shirking off Graham's hands. “Its between us.”

“Cody,” Graham breathed. It almost felt like he was the side of a cliff and losing grip of the rope.

“I want to keep doing it too,” Cody said the fury having left his voice. “Its the best I can hope for I think.”

Graham was silent, rapidly trying to form some response to knock Cody out of whatever fog was clearly infesting his

mind. Graham heard some calls from behind. He turned to see some kids waving.

“Game's starting,” a boy Graham recognized as Dean, a former collaborator of Zen and Cody, waving a ball in the air. “You coming?”

“Be right there,” Cody shouted. He then looked at Graham. “Look I know how you are and everything but maybe you should ask her about it, for you” Graham looked at Cody with a far off look. “It might help.” Cody then ran off leaving Graham speechless.

As Graham sat in his seat in the classroom he heard his name called by the teacher informing him it was time for his own counseling appointment. Graham nodded as he walked out of the classroom. He walked feeling some adrenaline. If Cody thought he should talk to Claire, then that's exactly what he would do. He certainly had some things to say.

Chapter 17

Potential: Chapter 17 - Chapter 17

Counseling

Graham walked into Claire's office with no fanfare. He was focused and ready for a fight. Claire seemed to not sense the tension that Graham felt was infecting the air around them.

“Hey dude got that magazine you requested,” Claire said sliding it across the desk towards Graham. He gave it a glance. He had requested it last time. Graham gave a smirk. She had really played him, and like an idiot he had let himself believe the ruse. How could he have been so stupid? Maybe he was really starting to become a kid, he certainly was becoming naive like one.

“No thanks,” Graham said sliding the magazine back towards her. Claire looked a little confused for a second.

“Okay then,” she said shrugging her shoulders.

“I was thinking we could do something a little different,” Graham said. “Maybe play a game?”

Claire looked surprised.

“Well sure,” she said. “I guess that would be a good way to pass the time,” she said sounding excited as if Graham had finally accepted some sort of invitation she had been offering him for months. “What are you feeling? Monopoly, Uno, or maybe Connect four, Cody likes that one.”

“Actually can we do that word association one, you know with the pictures and the cards?” Graham asked. Claire furrowed her brows a little.

“You want to do one of those?” she questioned looking slightly uncomfortable.

“Yeah,” Graham said. “And I want to be the one with the cards, you can give the answers.” Claire studied Graham for a moment. He could tell that she could sense something was up, but she didn't know what yet.

“I guess,” she said retrieving the stack of cards out of her desk and placing them in front of Graham. Picking up the cards Graham began to flip through them. He found a couple and put them on the top before holding up the first one.

“This game is a little different,” Graham then explained. “When I hold up a card I want you to say the name of someone that it reminds you of. I don't need to know them either, just the first person that pops into your mind. Understand?”

“Seems easy enough,” Claire said sitting back in her chair. Graham held up the first card it was an octopus. Claire thought for a moment.

“Mrs. Leslie, my fifth grade teacher,” Claire said.

“Reasoning?” Graham asked emulating Dr. Grosse from when Graham had done his diagnostic test.

“She was also going a mile minute and it seemed like she was

always juggling four or five things at a time. When I was a kid I thought she was so crazy for how she jumped from one thing to the next. As an adult I'm impressed at how she was able to do it all."

"Good," Graham said before he held up the next card which was of a golden retriever.

"Cody, definitely," Claire laughed. "He's loyal and is always optimistic. He just seems to want to make everyone happy."

"That's true," Graham said placing the card down. "He's not always happy though."

"Of course not, I'm just talking about the things that remind me of a golden retriever." Claire said.

"Even golden retrievers can be sad once in awhile."

Graham wanted to jump on the comment, but held back. It was too early to end his ruse. He wanted this to hurt. He wanted her to know exactly what he thought of her. He had chosen the dog card purposefully though just to get Cody into the conversation. He knew she would say his name, Graham would have done the same. As Graham thought on Claire's assessment though he bristled a little at calling Cody loyal. Was he really? Hadn't he gone behind Graham's back when he not only accepted Claire's brand of counseling and then wanting to continue it? Hadn't he promised Graham they were in this together? Graham found himself shaking his head. He couldn't blame Cody, not all the way. Graham then held up the next card. It was a wolf. Claire looked at the card

for a moment.

“Chris, my brother,” she said.

“Reasoning?” Graham asked.

“He was always pretty independent but he was also pretty protective of me growing up. Like I was part of his pack or something.”

Graham nodded putting the card down. He felt a little sorry for Chris at the moment. It was too bad that his sister was someone like Claire. Poor Chris, the one person who was looking for him and she might have gotten pulled into the cult and might actually start to believe her own brother was better off in this new messed up life, that is if she didn't already believe that. Graham then held up the next card it was of a cat.

“Oh that's you for sure,” Claire said instantly with a little smirk.

“Reasoning!” Graham said a little flustered.

“Cats are slow to trust but when you get past that they start to show their true colors.”

“I'm not slow to trust,” Graham grumbled as he put the card down.

“You think?” Claire asked. Graham twisted his mouth up a little. “Maybe its just hard to recognize the animal we are most like ourselves.”

“Moving on,” he said. The next card was the one he wanted.

Now was the moment. He held it up. On the card was a green snake. Claire sat looking at the card for awhile.

“That could honestly be a lot of people,” Claire said. She gave Graham a little smile as if to say “I'm sure you agree” yet Graham didn't return the sentiment.

“Wrong,” Graham said. “Just like you said maybe its hard to recognize the animal that best describes ourselves.”

“You think I'm like a snake?” Claire said with a puzzled expression.

“You aren't like a snake,” Graham snarled. “You are a snake.”

Claire sat expressionless. She then closed her eyes and placed her hands on her desk.

“Reasoning?” she asked.

“You know why,” Graham growled.

“That's not how the game works,” she said.

“You went behind my back,” Graham exploded jumping up from his seat. “You lied to me!”

Claire opened her eyes appearing stoic.

“I've done nothing of the sort,” she said calmly.

“You're counseling Cody again,” Graham said finally bringing his accusation straight out.

“Is that what he said?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Graham said sitting back into his seat. “Guess he let it slip.”

“So he actually told you I'm trying to get him to act more like a child?” Claire then asked.

“Not directly,” Graham said with a grumble. “Not like he has to though. Every time he comes back from your little sessions he's been crying. He's also been avoiding me and Zen, just to go and play kickball at recess.”

“I think you're jumping to conclusions here,” Claire replied.

“He said it,” Graham said through gritted teeth. “He said you were counseling him.”

“We've just been talking,” Claire said.

“About what?” Graham snapped. Claire let out a sigh.

“Graham you know I can't –“

“Yeah whatever you have ethics right?” Graham said with a click. “Give me a break. You're leading him along. Making him think that things aren't so bad, that things are better now and he's lapping it up to the point that he's now suggesting I try it too. Which is real low. Are you using him to get to me? Is that part of the plan?”

“He said you should try it?” Claire asked raising an eyebrow. Graham merely gave her an eye roll as he flicked his gaze to the side. “Then lets do it.”

“Huh,” Graham said letting his mouth drop a little.

“I'll do a counseling session right now just like I do with Cody and then you can judge whether or not I'm really doing what you accused me of.”

Graham was silent for a moment as he thought about the idea. Maybe he was walking into a trap, but would it work if he knew what it was? Perhaps it was a good idea. See her method, see how she manipulated Cody. That might give him some knowledge. A way to come up with ideas to convince Cody that this was all a ruse. Find a way to deprogram him.

“Alright, I'll play,” Graham said.

“Okay then so then we'll start,” Claire said taking out a notepad and pencil. “Whenever you're ready.”

Graham sat waiting yet Claire said nothing as she just sat looking at him.

“So what?” Graham said after a minute “We just sit here and...talk?”

“That's the idea,” Claire said. “We can talk about whatever you want too, and we don't have to sit here. Cody likes to lay on the couch, once he sat on the ground for awhile. You're in charge here.”

Graham got up going over to the couch. If that's what Cody usually did then it felt right for him to do it as well, just to make sure he was getting the full experience. As Graham laid on the couch Claire moved the chair so that she was sitting nearby.

“So now what?” Graham asked.

“Like I said we talk about what you want too,” Claire said.

“I already said what I wanted too,” Graham said with a huff.

“Then lets start with a prompt,” Claire said tapping her notepad with the end of her pencil. “Why don't you tell me about a time in your life you were really proud of yourself, it can be anything. Maybe from your childhood or when you were in college or even from you professional life.” Graham squinted his eyes without looking away from the ceiling.

“Nothing comes to mind,” he said.

“Nothing?”

“Not of the top of my head,” Graham said. Claire wrote something on her notepad. “What are you writing?” Graham then asked.

“Just some notes for me,” Claire said. “Nothing you need to concern yourself with.”

“That's not fair,” Graham said crossing his arms. “Its about me isn't it.”

“Fine,” Claire said. “I just thought it was interesting that you couldn't recall a single time anyone has payed you a compliment.”

“Why would I remember something like that,” Graham said.

“Most people like to hear compliments about themselves.” Claire then said. “You mean to tell me your parents never said

they were proud of you or complimented you?”

“Those...weren't real,” Graham then said.

“Tell me about your parents,” Claire then said.

“That's not important,” Graham said quickly. Claire let out a sigh as she continued to write.

“You already know everything anyways, it was probably in my file or whatever.” Graham then said snidely.

“Not really,” Claire said. “All it said was that you did not have contact with them.” Graham found that interesting. Is that all it said, despite all the times Gretchen had told them they knew all about him. Once again he was seeing that this cult didn't have as much info as they claimed. It was probably one of their tactics. “Why don't you tell me more about your past?”

“Why would you want to know?” Graham then asked.

“We're talking about you,” Claire said. “There is no need to be so defensive.”

“I'm not being defensive,” Graham said. He found himself getting frustrated. There was nothing there to talk about. She was just trying to dig up old news. Weren't they supposed to be talking about his problems or something? His parents were not a problem in his life and hadn't been for a long time. “If you really want to know here it is,” Graham said definitively. “I told my parents I was gay when I was nineteen. They didn't accept that. We had our disagreements before about stuff but

they waved it off as me being in college and going through a phase and that I would grow out of it. But when I told them about this they lost their minds. They wanted me to go to some religious group to like I don't know pray the gay away or something, I of course refused and that's when they made it clear that this was an ultimatum. Either do that or they could no longer support me."

"And after that," Claire asked.

"They took back their money, thankfully I had a job at the time that would help me cover educational cost. The last time I spoke to them they just said when I was ready to come to my senses they would be there to help and that they loved me."

"How did that make you feel?" Claire then asked. Graham sat up from the chair looking at Claire with a look almost as if he had been expecting the question, it was the typical thing therapist said after all.

"I knew it was a lie," Graham said. "They didn't love me, they never did." As Graham spoke his voice cracked. He had never talked about it like this, not too anyone or himself really. "They always said they loved me unconditionally but that wasn't true...I didn't meet their conditions." Graham began to sniffle. It hurt to say it out loud. It was almost as if by saying it out loud he was realizing it for the first time himself. Claire passed him a tissue as he continued to cry. "I don't understand how they could just toss me out like that. I was their son. They didn't even seem that sad about it when I told them I

wasn't going to do what they wanted. I didn't do anything wrong." Graham croaked. His words seemed to crack something in him, something he had avoided for a long time.

"That must have been very hard for you." Claire said softly. "You keep trying to say that it didn't affect you that much, that you've made your peace with it, but I don't think that true." Graham looked at Claire as he listened seeing there to be nothing to object too. "You've closed yourself off because you feel like if you let someone in they are just going to betray you again. Its not very healthy. You can't go through life like that."

"You think I don't now that," Graham yelped. "I did try. I decided to go on that stupid date and open up to someone and look where that got me. And now..." Graham became at a loss for words. Everything was beginning to fall into place. It was if Graham could see this conspiracy against him come into full view "I made myself the perfect target," Graham said. Claire looked at him with some interest. "These people knew that no one would come looking for me."

"I think that has very little to do with it," Claire said as if she and Graham were commiserating about a bad business deal and that Graham's mistake hadn't been the thing to cost them the client.

"This is just great," Graham mumbled as he hid his face in his hands.

"Graham I know its tough to talk about this, but you know this isn't the end for you."

“What? Is this where you tell me I can try to build a new life for myself. That Graham Callaway doesn't have to be as much of a loser as Graham Hayes?”

“No,” Claire said slowly. “Its just that you've identified a problem that you can now take steps to address.”

“So what? I know now that I do have trust issues, maybe that's a good thing. I shouldn't trust anyone here anyways. How is this supposed to help me get out of here.”

“This isn't about getting out of here,” Claire said apprehensively as if she was thinking that her words would send Graham into a fit of rage. “This is about you working through things that are holding you back and becoming a more confident individual. This is about helping your inner self not about anything thing else.”

Graham didn't explode or react with any anger at all. He just sat feeling the weight of everything that had just come out of him. It felt to him as if he had just fallen into a pit and the sides were insurmountable to him.

“Like I said whats the point? No one is looking for me, I don't matter anymore. The only person that matters is Graham Callaway.” He couldn't believe what he was saying. But it felt true enough. Maybe this was it. Perhaps Claire had done it. She had got him to accept the truth of it. He couldn't be mad about it. She had played a good game and she had won.

“That's not true at all,” Claire said. Graham looked up a little

surprised. “There are people who do care about you.”

“Like who? Gretchen, Gene?” Graham asked figuring he should let her have her victory lap.

“No, Cody does though,” Claire said. Graham shook his head.

“I'm nothing but a problem for him. A reminder of something he'd rather leave behind.”

“He talks about you a lot you know,” Claire said. “You guys may be having some disagreements right now, but I think you should know that Cody cares a great deal about you. You've been helping him in ways that you don't even know. He wouldn't still be here today if it hadn't been for you.”

“I thought you weren't supposed to say stuff like that?” Graham questioned as he felt a fresh round of tears bubble into his eyes.

“I think I can bend the rules just this once,” Claire said with a smile. “And he not the only person. You got me too. I care about you. I had lost hope before I met you. Seeing you fight everyday against the world gives me the strength to keep going myself. You're my friend and I don't want to lose you.”

Graham let out another shuddering breath as he wiped his eyes with the tissue. It felt good to hear that people did care about him. He had this all wrong and he felt bad about that. Claire was a friend and Cody needed him just like Graham needed him.

“I'm so sorry,” Graham whelped.

“What for?” Claire asked chuckling a little.

“I accused you of something terrible and I was the one with the problem the whole time,” Graham cried. “I just keep messing everything up.”

“Oh sweetheart,” Claire cooed as she got up and took a seat next to him to put her arm around her. “You didn't do anything wrong.” Graham accepted her affection as he put his head against her continuing to cry as he hugged her. “You did everything right, and now that you have identified a problem you can work on it. It can't hold you back anymore now that you know its there. You're a fighter, I know you can do it.”

Graham didn't respond as he was in no condition to do so. For a minute Claire sat stroking his hair as he settled down. A timer went off as Graham had stopped his crying.

“Our time is up,” Claire said.

“Yeah okay,” Graham said as he sat up taking in one last breath.

“Want me to call ahead and let your teacher know to give you a rest?” Claire asked.

“No, I'll be fine,” Graham said standing. He thanked Claire giving her another hug. It was strange the way he felt. She felt warm and the hug felt different too. As if it made him feel better, it reminded him of when he would hug his Mom when he was a kid.

Graham walked out of the office feeling lighter. For so long

he felt like he was walking against the wind with no clue where he was going. Now it felt like he had something to go towards. He had a plan forward, now was the time to act on it.

Chapter 18

Potential: Part 18

As Graham sat at the table in the playhouse at recess he was feeling lost in his thoughts. It had become rather normal for him these days. He had been doing more “therapy” sessions with Claire and it seemed to be doing some good things for him. He had really been thinking about his life. Being able to admit that what his parents had done to him and how that really effected him really did help in thinking about the ways that unbeknownst to him it had shaped his behavior.

He could see that he hadn't been dealing with it well at all. It also showed him that he did posses some resiliency after all. Though it had also done some things that weren't so good it was a sore spot and he had been scratching at it. Perhaps thats why he found he was getting a short fuse. Gene and Gretchen had certainly noticed.

Just last night at dinner Graham had gotten himself in trouble after snapping more than a little at Gretchen. He had a particularly taxing session that day leaving him feeling a little raw, and having an even smaller tolerance for his childlike treatment than usual. Gretchen had opted to review spelling words at the table with the boys that night. Graham had put up with two words before he couldn't take it anymore.

“Graham your word is house,” Gretchen had said.

“Will you just shut up,” he had said. Yeah it had been so stupid, even he knew that. Gretchen had looked more than a

little surprised. Cody looked at Graham with a worried expression silently telling him to cool it. Gene put down his fork appearing calm but Graham could tell the guy was beyond offended.

“Graham that was very disrespectful apologize to your mother at once.” Gene said. Graham sat grinding his teeth. He looked at Cody who was silently pleading with him to just do it. But Graham could not be swayed.

“No,” Graham said coldly. Gene for his part did at least try.

“Graham,” he said slowly. “There was no reason for you to be rude.

“We're eating,” Graham said. “I shouldn't have to do homework when I'm just trying to enjoy my dinner.” he said more than a little snidely.

“If you won't apologize then you can go to your room until you decide to do the right thing.”

“Fine,” Graham said curtly getting up from the table and going to his room. Gene followed him and gave him a very terse dressing down. Apparently they were trying to make a point. Graham was grounded. He sat on his bed for the rest of the evening. Gretchen came in later to set out the boy's pajamas.

“Ready to apologize?” she asked. Graham shook his head. He could outlast them. If they wanted to play prison wardens then that was fine by him. In fact it seemed better this way rather than going along with the charade that they were a

family. He was their prisoner.

That is how things had been going for two days. The only time Graham was allowed out of his room was to eat and use the bathroom and to go to school. Cody had already told Graham just to say sorry, yet Graham refused. Even Claire had tried to talk to him about it after Cody went to her about it. Graham was not going to give in though. This was a cold war and he was going to win. The time alone was not so bad either. It gave him a lot of time to think. He had come up with lots of schemes in the time and now he had one that just might give them something. He knew there best bet was Gretchen's computer but they had no way to access it, that was until now.

Back in the present Graham stood from his seat grabbing the attention of the other two boys who looked at him as if they already knew he had something up his sleeve.

“So listen, I got a plan but I'm going to need you guys to help.” he announced.

“Lets hear it then,” Zen said with some interest.

“I'm going to get on Gretchen's computer,” Graham said with an assured look as if just saying it was all he needed to do.

“And how are you going to do that?” Zen asked.

“Simple, me and you are going to fight,” Graham said looking at Zen.

“How is that going to help?” Cody asked already looking a

little worried.

“I'm going to get myself sent to the principal's office, that will hopefully give me access to her computer.” Cody went to say something yet Graham held up his hand already knowing what Cody was going to say, that just because he was in her office didn't mean he could get on her computer with Gretchen there. “Thats where you come in,” Graham then said pointing at Cody.

“Me?” Cody asked pointing at himself. “What am I supposed to do?”

“You are going to fake sick,” Graham said. “Get yourself do the nurse's office. Then you are going to ask for Gretchen to come see you.” The playhouse was silent as the other two boys appraised the plan in their heads. To Graham the plan was foolproof. Getting Cody to play on Gretchen's desire for them to be her little children was particular ingenious to him. There was no way Mommy dearest would be able to ignore the cries of one of her little boy. She would surely go running giving Graham his opportunity.

“Yeah this could work, its high time we actually do something,” Zen said sounding eager.

“Maybe we shouldn't,” Cody said. “Something could go wrong.”

“What are you complaining about,” Zen said. “We got the easy part, Graham's the one taking all the heat.”

“Thats what I don't like,” Cody said gruffly giving Graham a

muddled look. Zen and Graham spent the rest of recess going over what was going to happen. Zen was a little bothered by the fact that he wasn't going to be able to fight back and becoming a little cold on his enthusiasm for his role in the plan as Graham explained that it would be no good for Zen to get into trouble as well. As recess ended the boys began their walk back. Cody pulled Graham aside.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Cody asked. “You're already in trouble this will only make it worse.”

“They can't do anything worse to me than what they've already done.” Graham smirked. Cody went to say something else yet Graham shook his head. “Cody look, I've had a lot of time to think these past couple of days. I gotta thank you.”

“Thank me?” Cody questioned.

“Yeah,” Graham nodded. “It was because of you I started talking with Claire and I understand now why you thought I should. I really was stuck in a rut. Now though, I can see what I need to do to move forward in my life. But I can't do that here, not like this. I finally have something worth fighting for and that's what I want to do.” Cody looked at Graham for a moment almost as if he had been hit by some epiphany.

“Okay,” Cody said laughing slightly. “I'm in.”

“We're getting out of this together,” Graham said, his promise to Cody feeling renewed. “And I guess we'll bring Zen along too.” The boys laughed as they headed inside.

Graham sat in his seat as Mrs. Farmer was at the front of the classroom going through a lesson. Zen kept giving him looks which Graham would respond with a curt head nod. They couldn't get into a fight in the middle of a lesson it had to be more convincing than that.

“Now I want you all to get with a partner and then come up and get your supplies,” Mrs. Farmer said pointing to the front table which had crafting supplies all laid out. Graham smiled getting up from his seat and walking to the table with Zen right behind him. Graham picked up a few things.

“Fill up your arms,” Graham whispered to Zen. “I'll take care of the rest.” Zen grabbed a lot of supplies before beginning to walk back to his seat. Teats when Graham went behind him and gave him a hard shove. Zen fell forward the supplies of pipe cleaners glue sticks and googly eyes splattering across the floor. The classroom came to a stop. Zen looked back at Graham with a bewildered look not expecting to have been ambushed.

“Graham,” Mrs. Farmer shouted with shock as she came up to the scene. “Why did you push Mikey like that?”

“He took the things I wanted,” Graham said putting on his best angry expression.

“You help him up right now and say you're sorry,” she demanded. Graham looked at the teacher with outrage. This was turning into a miscalculation. It seemed Graham had not gone far enough, perhaps Mrs. Farmer was hoping to deal with this herself. Graham knew he would need to force her

hand.

“No, no, no,” Graham screeched grabbing up some of the pipe cleaners off the ground before throwing them at Mrs. Farmer. “I wanted them.”

Mrs. Farmer stood slack jawed for a moment before she grabbed Graham by the arm pulling him over to the door.

“That is enough, you are going to the principal's office.” Mrs. Farmer took him out into the hallway giving him a pointed finger towards the front office. Graham had to fight back a smile, his plan was going swimmingly. He jammed his hands in his pocket before walking off. He looked back to see the teacher was still watching before returning to the classroom.

As Graham walked into the office he was met by Ms. Bruno the office lady who told him to take a seat. It didn't take long for Gretchen to appear and Graham saw her face was etched with anger although she was hiding it. Graham suddenly felt a little unnerved. He had never seen Gretchen actually look angry like this, not even when he had shot her with the nerf gun. She didn't say a word and pointed to her door. Graham got up ready to face this unpleasant situation.

Graham sat in a chair across the desk as Gretchen sat with her hands folded just looking at him. She then cleared her throat.

“Anything you have to say for yourself,” she asked her voice calm but Graham could tell she was straining. He knew she probably wanted to yell at him. This was probably tantamount to stabbing her in the back with a knife. What

would people say if they found out that the principals' own son not to mention the mayor as well was a troublemaker? The two of them holding such places of authority yet not able to control their own child – it was a perfectly primed scandal. Graham really wanted to twist that knife, make them regret the day they had decided to target him for their little scheme.

“No, nothing,” Graham said. Gretchen got up from her desk and came around the side taking the seat next to Graham.

“You're already in trouble at home, I really thought you at least would behave at school, is that it?” Gretchen asked looking at Graham with an almost questioning look. “Do you want to be in trouble everywhere?” Graham looked at her with an icy stare. How could she possibly think that he was the problem here?

“I've been very patient with you,” Gretchen continued. “I've tried to give you space and time to work through this attitude problem of yours. You have continued to push against the boundaries and now its time to put you back across that line.” Gretchen's words sounded as if she were declaring some sort of edict and as she finished she pulled Graham from his seat so that he was now laying face down across her lap. Graham's mind went into overdrive, there was now way she was actually about to do this.

“What are you – “ Graham exclaimed as he felt Gretchen grab at the waistband of his pants. Pulling them down so that his pants were now down at his knees.

“I may be the principal of this school but I am also your

mother. You are held to a higher standard and when you misbehave your punishment will be worse." Gretchen said. Graham looked back seeing her slide a ruler off of her desk. The sound of the wood sliding against the desk sounding eerily like a blade being removed from its sheath.

Gretchen pulled the back of Graham's underwear down laying the ruler against his bare skin. A shiver went up Graham's spine. This scheme of his was now off the rails and there was nothing he could do to stop it. The only thought in his mind was what was Cody doing?

"You can't do this to me," Graham shouted struggling, yet Gretchen was able to keep him in place. The first strike came down with a sharp crack. Graham let out a yelp silencing his protest. Gretchen did not stop as she continued. Her strikes were precise and targeted. Each swat alternating as they landed on the same two spots one after another. Graham could not help but yelp with each hit. He was taken aback but just how much it hurt.

He was an adult, this should'nt hurt that much or at least he should be able to grit his teeth and bare it. Graham knew he had felt pain worse than this in his life yet at that moment he couldn't remember–not too mention the shame.

Graham actually felt bad. He was wholly regretting his decision now. Why had he pushed Zen like that? Weren't they friends? Why was Graham being so difficult at home as well. All his parents asked was for him to apologize, was it really that hard?

Graham was crying hard letting out pitiful whelps with every strike to his backside. Finally he heard the ruler be set down on the desk. Gretchen hoisted him up so that he was standing in front of her. Graham continued to cry as Gretchen got his clothes back in order.

“Did you enjoy that?” Gretchen asked. Graham shook his head. “I didn't think you would. Mommy didn't like doing that either. Now sit and calm down. We will have a proper talk once you're ready to listen.” Graham sat in the chair wiping the tears from his eyes. Just then the door opened and Ms. Bruno the school receptionist appeared.

“Mrs. Callway I have a message about your son,” she said.

“I'm dealing with him right now,” Gretchen said.

“Oh sorry, I meant the other one, Cody.” the receptionist said. Gretchen turned in her seat.

“What did he do?” she asked with a sigh.

“Seems he's sick. Threw up in class. They have him in the nurse's office.”

“I'll go check on him in a moment.” Gretchen said as she turned back to Graham expecting Ms. Bruno to leave yet the other woman lingered.

“Umm well he's seems pretty upset and he is crying asking for you,” Ms. Bruno said. Graham saw Gretchen's face shift. There seemed to be two emotions playing on her face. One of concern and the other almost looked as if she were pleased.

“Alright I'm coming,” Gretchen said getting up from her seat. She looked at Graham. “You sit and think about an apology while I'm gone,” she said before leaving the room and closing the door behind herself.

Graham sat thinking on her words. He was really going to have to come up with a good apology. He had really messed up. He didn't like that Mommy was mad at him. He just wanted her to be happy with him...Graham's head snapped up. What was he thinking? He shook his head wearily. He had nearly just fogged out, or rather at some point he had. Something in the universe must have been looking out for him. Somehow he knew this could have been it for him. He got up quickly from his seat. He had work to do.

He got on Gretchen's computer. It was logged in and he had access. Graham began to start digging. It would take hours for him to try and find things. He had one option, smash and grab. Graham looked behind him noticing a printer he hit the icon and hoped beyond hope that this would work. Thankfully the printer began to whir. Graham began to print as much stuff as he could, if it even looked somewhat interesting he printed it. He grabbed documents, email, even contact lists.

Graham looked at the clock he had been alone for fifteen minutes. He should probably stop. There was no telling how much time Cody would actually be able to buy him. He would have to remember to find someway to show Cody his appreciation. He had once again really gone above and beyond for Graham. Throwing up? In the middle of class no

less. Cody really was becoming an expert at being a distraction. Graham looked around to see the stack of papers. There was no way he was going to be able to get all of them out of the office. He grabbed the stack looking around the office. He decided to stash them behind a cabinet in the far side of the room. He would have to find some way to get them later. As he stood up after hiding his papers he heard the doorknob begin to turn. Graham raced back to his chair sitting just as the door opened and Gretchen came back in.

“Have you been busy?” Gretchen asked. Graham looked up with a shocked expression, had he been found out? “I certainly hope you've thought about what you want to say to me.”

Graham felt the tension leave his body. He was in the clear for the moment it seemed. Graham muddled up his face a little to make himself look sad and regretful. It must have worked a little because he saw Gretchen's hard stare falter a little, her crossed arms loosening slightly.

“I-I'm sorry,” Graham said making his voice sound small, like a church mouse.

“For what?” Gretchen asked.

“Everything,” Graham said surprising himself a little. Gretchen took a seat on the chair next to him.

“Go on, I'm listening,” she said placing a hand on his shoulder. Graham felt a weird surge go through his body. He was probably still a little foggy but Gretchen's small form of

affection seemed to effect him in way it never had before. It sort of felt nice in a reassuring way.

“I feel bad what I did to my friend,” Graham said.

“That other boy was your friend?” Gretchen asked. Graham nodded. Guess she hadn't known that.

“I'm also sorry for how I've been acting. I don't know why I did all that stuff.” Graham said referring to how he had been acting recently.

“Finally,” Gretchen said with a sigh as she pulled Graham close to her chest. “You finally did it.” Graham was a little taken aback. She sounded like she was the one who had been being punished. “Now I want you to understand that I shouldn't have to go as far as I did today just to get you to behave,” Gretchen said. She went on talking to him about the importance of controlling his emotions and whatnot Graham wasn't listening much. Gretchen was still holding him petting his hair and it felt nice. “Graham do you understand?” she asked. Graham sat up and nodded.

“Yes Mommy I know.”

“Good,” Gretchen said. “Now I think its time to go back to class don't you?”

“Yes,” Graham replied getting up from his seat. Part of him wanted to get out of there. He was starting to feel weird, part of him wanted to stay and let Gretchen keep hugging him.

Later that day as Graham sat at his table working on a

coloring sheet it did start to dawn on him that he had really been playing this all wrong. For all his resistance he hadn't gotten much, shifting in his seat still feeling his sore bottom was seemingly a reminder of that. What had gotten him something though was working with what he had. He didn't know what he had contained in those papers, it could turn out to be nothing but there was hope, and he had gotten that by working with people. He had worked with Claire and gotten himself an ally. With Cody and Zen he had made himself an opportunity that possibly put him in the right direction. The old adage you get more with honey was ringing true for himself. Maybe it was time for him to stop fighting the battles he couldn't win.

At the end of the day Graham was told to go to Gretchen's office instead of walking to Gene's office. Walking in he found his Mom packing up.

“Hey sweetie give me one second and then you're coming home with me,” she said.

“What, why?” Graham questioned although he kind of figured he was still in trouble.

“Because Daddy had to leave the office early today to come and pick up Cody, so he needs to get back and will be working late tonight,” she said. Graham nodded. He felt bad for Cody having to keep up the act. Hopefully this hadn't all been for naught. Gretchen left her office for a minute. Graham scrambled to gather up his prize and stuff it into his backpack before Gretchen came back.

Graham was walking hand in hand with Gretchen as they walked out the front door. The rush of kids going home was still in effect and Graham did feel a little embarrassed the way all kids do when they're parents are around. A woman then approached.

“Mrs. Callaway,” she said announcing her presence. Graham looked at the woman. She was tall and had her hair tied up into a pony tail and a big pair of sunglasses on. “I'm Mrs. Nestor,” the woman said extending out her hand.

“Yes,” Gretchen said shaking the woman's hand yet not knowing who the woman was.

“I'm Micheal's mother,” she said. Graham saw the recognition light up on Gretchen's face yet it was not one that showed that this was someone Gretchen wanted to talk to. That's when Graham noticed Zen standing a little ways back his face burning with embarrassment.

“Of course,” Gretchen said. “I do want to be the first to apologize for my son's actions today. Rest assured I have already addressed this with him and we will continue to make sure he sets things right, Graham apologize to Mrs. Nestor,” she said pulling Graham forward.

“I'm sorry,” Graham began, he was about to say more. He was after all supposed to be the regretful child at the moment. He was stopped though with a hand wave by Mrs. Nestor.

“Oh that's alright,” the woman said. “Micheal seems fine, it sounded just like a little tiff. We both know how kids are at

this age, especially boys.” she said addressing Gretchen and not seeming to take much interest in Graham. “Although I was a little surprised at first. Especially when I heard it was between him and Graham. The way Micheal talks at home Your boys and mine seem to be really good friends.” Zen's face seemed to go all the more red with the comment and it surprised Graham as well. He couldn't imagine Zen telling his would be parents anything about his days at school. He supposed that even Zen had to play the part of the good child sometimes too.

“Yes, well it was a surprise for everybody I'm sure,” Gretchen said her voice tinged with relief that she was not dealing with an upset parent. “I suppose even friends sometimes have disagreements.”

“I've been meaning to contact you actually, seeing as the boys are such good friends that maybe we should set up a play date. Given the circumstances it also might be a good day to do one.”

“A play date?” Gretchen said with some surprised. Graham looked towards Zen who mouthed “sorry' towards him.

“Sure,” Mrs. Nestor continued on. “I think it would be just the things the boys need. Nothing like some fun to help them get over whatever is between them. Does that sound like fun Graham?” she asked looking at Graham with a big smile.

“S-sure,” Graham said. What other way was he supposed to respond?

“Of course your other boy is invited as well, what was his name?” Mrs. Nestor asked to Zen. “Cody that was it.” she said not even waiting for a reply.

“I don't know if today is the best day,” Gretchen then said. “Cody is actually sick and can't come and well Graham is...”

“I understand,” Mrs. Nestor said with a sigh. “You're busy and I kind of sprung this on you. If I'm being honest I was too eager. Micheal doesn't have many friends so I think I may have just been shoving my nose too far in trying to smooth things over. Friends are so important.”

Graham felt Gretchen place a hand on his head he looked up to see her smiling down at him.

“You're right friends are important,” she said running her hand through his hair. “I think its a great idea. With a sick child at home I think this one could use something to keep him busy. Let me run to the car and get his booster seat and then he is all yours.”

Graham was shocked. He thought he was still in trouble. Had saying sorry really put him back in her good graces just like that?

“Looks like you're mine,” Mrs. Nestor said as she took Grahams hand before taking Zen's in her other hand. “You boys ready to have some fun?”

“Yeah,” Graham said with a smile. Things were really working out.

Chapter 19

Potential: Part 19

Playdate

Graham was sat in his booster seat in the back of Mrs. Nestor's car. Graham looked over at Zen. Their eyes met before Zen quickly looked away. It had been like that for the whole ride. Zen hadn't said a word to him. Graham could tell he was embarrassed for some reason. Graham didn't know why. Its not like it was a great secret how Zen was treated. Graham was in the same boat as him.

The car pulled into a driveway and Graham saw they had arrived. Zen's house looked normal enough. It was a two story house with a front path with some flowers on either side. As they got out and walked up the front Mrs. Nestor seemed bubbly as they entered into the house.

“So lets give you the grand tour,” she said as if Graham was one of her friends she was showing off for. “Here's the living room,” Mrs. Nestor said bringing them into a room that seemed normal enough. It was furnished like something out of Better Homes and Gardens. Throw blankets draped a couch and a rather large tv was mounted on the wall. Their was nothing seemingly out of place about the house to Graham. It was nice enough, not quite the large house that Graham lived in but still nothing to sneeze at.

As they walked down a hallway leading to the kitchen Graham noticed all the photo's on the wall. Zen was featured

heavily. Many photos of the boy with the two people who were his parents. The thing that seemed out of place was Zen. In every picture he was smiling. Something about it unnerved Graham. It wasn't the normal smile Graham was used too. This one was wide and big. Zen didn't seem like the type. Graham paused for a moment seeing a picture of Zen on the shoulders of another man. Zen's mouth was wide open as if he were making a sort of yell, his arms splayed out to keep his balance. The thing that bothered Graham about it was it didn't seem fake. It was too realistic, Something that Zen could only do if he was a good actor which to Graham's knowledge wasn't exactly his strength.

“Oh that was a fun day,” Mrs. Nestor said noticing the picture Graham was eying. “Remember that day Micheal? You had so much fun at that theme park.”

“It was alright,” Zen mumbled.

“Here is one from that same day,” Mrs. Nestor pointed out. It was a picture of Zen asleep slumped up against the same man except this time Zen's face was painted like a tiger. “That's one of my favorites,” Mrs. Nestor said running her finger across the frame. The boys stood in silence as Zen's face went red again. “But I suppose you two don't want to stand around looking at photo's,” Mrs. Nestor said perhaps seeing she was embarrassing her son. “Who wants a snack?

The boys followed Mrs. Nestor into the kitchen as she pulled out some packages from underneath the island counter.

“Okay Graham since you're the guest you can pick,” she said

presenting two packages of cookies that resembled Oreo's to the boys. “Vanilla or chocolate?”

“Chocolate sounds good,” Graham said with a nod. He wondered if this was normal or if she was just doing this because they had company.

“Great choice, that's what Micheal usually picks,” she said as she opened the package and began to put some of the cookies on the plate. “Okay Micheal I need my little helper,” Mrs. Nestor said turning towards him.

“Mommy nu –“ Zen began to say apparently knowing what came next. Before he could get the words out Mrs. Nestor had him in her arms and walked over to some cabinets opening up one of the doors.

“Reach high and remember to get two,” she said in a sing song voice. Graham watched as Zen reached bringing down two plastic cups. His Mom brought him over the counter before Zen set them down and was released. “Thank you for being my good helper,” she said. Mrs. Nestor then poured some juice in both of them before putting caps on them and finishing both of with twisty crazy straws. “Okay you two lets get you set up in the living room and you guys can watch Robo Heroes.”

“Robo Heroes?” Graham questioned as they made their way back to the living room.

“You don't know it,” Mrs. Nestor questioned. “Its Micheal's favorite show, he watches it every afternoon. He gets really

cross if we miss it."

"I do not," Zen said with a yelp. His Mom merely smiled at him perhaps realizing she was saying too much. Graham sat with Zen on the floor as his Mom flipped on the tv before leaving. Graham saw that the Robo Heroes was some animated cartoon aimed at kids. Graham had never seen it before as he usually let Cody control the tv back home. Graham munched on some cookies as he watched. He looked over at Zen for a moment finding the others eyes glued to the screen as he drank. He couldn't tell if Zen was watching because he was interested or if he was just trying not to look at Graham. At one point one of the robots was revealed to be a villain.

"I knew it," Zen said slapping his knee. He then looked at Graham with a shocked look as if he just realized Graham was sitting next to him. "I mean you know, it was kind of predictable," he said with a muddled voice.

"So you watch this every afternoon?" Graham asked although not in an accusatory tone.

"Yeah," Zen admitted. "It's not too bad, not like I have anything better to do." Graham nodded he understood the sentiment. Given the situation they were in you had to find something that brought some joy. It was survival and nothing more.

The show ended after thirty minutes as the boys finished their snack. As the next show began to play Graham spoke up.

“You were right that was kind of good,” Graham said.

“Wasn't it, I think Golivus is my favorite,” Zen said sounding like he was about to start gushing yet pulled back. “You know for a stupid kids show or whatever.” there was a silent pause before Zen then gave Graham a more serious look. “So how did things go with the plan?”

Graham let out a sigh of relief. This was the Zen he knew. Given what he had seen of how ingrained this after school ritual had seemed Graham was questioning whether or not this was really Zen just putting on a happy face or if he really was a willing and happy participant in it all. This was Zen though. He was the one who had shown Graham it was possible to resist the fog, to think he was just as far gone as any other person would have been a blow to Graham's continued hope for a future beyond Merryweather.

“I got a bunch of stuff,” Graham said patting his bag. “I need to go through it first though.”

“Lets see,” Zen said grabbing for the bag.

“Not here,” Graham hissed pulling his backpack onto his lap. “What if your Mom see's.”

“Oh yeah,” Zen said casting a glance towards the kitchen. “C'mon we can do it up in my room.”

Walking into Zen's room Graham looked around. It was a normal enough room, at least for a seven year old. The first thing Graham noticed was a case that looked like it contained a violin. That did make some sense as Graham remembered

Zen had been a roadie before he had been taken.

“You play?” Graham asked more or less to make some conversation.

“No,” Zen said looking at the case with a hint of distaste. Graham nodded his head clearly showing that he had been mistaken.

“Oh well I just thought you know because –“ Graham began.

“What that because I'm asian I play violin?” Zen asked.

“N-no,” Graham stammered holding his hands ups in front of himself.

“Relax,” Zen said laughing. “I'm just messing with you. Apparently my parents think I'm musically inclined or something.”

“They probably know about your past,” Graham said.

“Probably,” Zen said. “And they are right, I was a drum tech for the band I was touring with, but apparently drums are too noisy. You know how these people are. They just want turn us into preppy little lap dogs they can gloat about.”

Graham nodded. He remembered Gretchen mentioning piano lessons for him. He hoped she had forgotten about it. Graham then saw in the corner of the room that there were a bunch of toy robot figures on the floor. He recognized some of them from the show he had just watched with Zen.

“Quite the collection,” Graham said with a smirk. The way

the toys were laid out it did actually look like they had been played with, especially since some of them were halfway transformed into their robotic forms.

“I never even asked for this stuff, they just take it upon themselves to buy it,” Zen said sounding as if he were trying to brush off an accusation. “I keep them out because it annoys my parents when I don't keep this room tidy.”

Graham nodded. He was no stranger to doing things only to annoy his own parents. Graham put his backpack onto the bed. He was about to open it before he heard a knock at the door which caused him quickly to pull the bag down to the ground as if it were a bottle of booze he was hiding from parental eyes. Mrs. Nestor came walking in with a laundry basket full of clothes.

“Micheal I have some clothes for you,” she said setting the basket down and she began to put some folded up clothes onto the bed. “Can you come put these away please.”

Zen hurriedly went and grab the clothes and went to the dresser and shoved them in the drawer quickly. “And look who is back from their bath, Bearthomolew,” Mrs. Nestor said holding up a white teddy bear.

“Mommy,” Zen yelped as his face went red. Mrs. Nestor let her head litlt a little.

“I thought you would be happy,” she said. “You seemed so sad last night when you didn't have him for bedtime.” Zen made some audible sound as if his tongue were caught in a

clamp. Mrs. Nestor looked on confused as she looked at Zen and then too Graham before smiling as if she had understood something. “Oh don't tell me you're embarrassed, I'm sure Graham has a stuffie too,” she said looking at Graham. For his part Graham just nodded. Of course it wasn't true but he wasn't going to rub it in Zen's face. For all he knew Zen just did that to keep up appearances.

“See no reason to be embarrassed,” Mrs. Nestor said as she walked past Zen and ruffling his hair up a bit before she came to stand in front of the smattering of toys. “What you do need to do is clean these toys up though,” she said with a click of her tongue. “If you're going to beg me and your father to get these things for you then you need to take care of them.”

“Sorry,” Graham suddenly said. “I was playing with them.” he didn't know why he was admitting to something like that.

“I see,” Mrs. Nestor said. “Well make sure you boys clean up when you're done,” she said before she left the room. Graham was a little befuddled by the whole exchange. It honestly seemed like she was trying to embarrass Zen.

The gears in Graham's head began to spin. It had been something Claire had mentioned to him. Part of her job was to identify what seemed to trigger as she called a regressed state of mind which seemed to be the official term for fogging out. Graham had asked what his was to which Claire admitted that she had never gotten far enough with him to figure that out, but it was something he should try and figure out so he could avoid it as much as possible. Graham

wondered if being embarrassed was something that triggered Zen. It did make some sense. Zen after all seemed to hold himself in a high regard, never wanting to appear childish. Graham looked at Zen who was staring a hole into the ground.

“Geez Zen,” Graham said as if he were about to tease him. “You really have them fooled huh.” Zen looked at Graham for a moment.

“Yeah, they think they got me,” Zen smirked. “Its so annoying though. I think I got the most embarrassing parents.”

Graham nodded. Parents always embarrassed their kids sometimes. That's what they did. It was natural and it was better to think that than to believe anything more sinister was going on. Although Graham couldn't help but have another worse though pop up. He pushed it out though. There was no way that was true. Not Zen, never Zen.

Soon enough both boys were sat on the ground the pile of papers between them as they went through them. Graham wasn't finding anything to get excited about. Most of what he had read through had been normal stuff related to running a school. Budgets and other administrative things had been much of what he had seen. Graham was starting to fear that this had all been for nothing and he hadn't gotten anything that would help them.

“Check this out,” Zen said giving Graham some papers. On it was a message to Gretchen asking for authorization on numbers. As Graham looked further on, he saw some numbers under a heading that said “production order” it had

to be the number of serums they were making.

“Looks like they produce whatever that stuff is only when they need it,” Zen said. Graham nodded. That seemed to make some sense. They didn't have a huge stockpile of the stuff, probably didn't want a lot of it floating around. He looked to see the last order was for four of them. Graham felt a chill go down his spine. Given the dates Graham knew where those four doses were. One had been for him another for Cody, leaving another for Angie. That meant they still had one ready to go. Graham just hoped he wouldn't be meeting a new classmate any time soon.

Graham scanned the paper looking for any other clues. He saw that the initial message had been sent from someone named Irene. There was also another message at the end. There will be a freeze on new production for three months. Let everyone on the acquisitions board know. Any new request must be made to Developmental Center staff for review. Production will then proceed at Developmental Center starting in June.

“Do you know a place called the developmental center?” Graham then asked Zen.

“Never heard of it,” Zen said with a shrug. “Why?”

“I think that's where they make the stuff.” Graham said.

“You might be right,” Zen said. “Maybe that's where we would find an antidote as well.”

Graham pursed his lips. Zen was still convinced there was

such a thing. Graham was feeling doubtful about it. Then again its not like he had proof there was no such thing. Graham grabbed another paper and began reading. His eyes then widened before he laughed.

“Whats so funny? Zen asked raising an eyebrow.

“It doesn't help us,” Graham said holding up the paper. “But its some juicy gossip at least.”

“Let me see,” Zen said snatching the paper from Graham's hand. Graham had read enough to get the jist. Gretchen was venting to some one else mostly about Dr. Grosse. The rest of the messages had been talking about if there was a good way to force him out. They wanted him to lose his standing so that the rest of the higher ups felt they didn't need his input anymore. Gretchen didn't like his methods and wanted to be in full control of how the school ran. To Graham it was ironic in a way that for all the posturing that Golden Horizons did as their members thought of themselves as the great all knowing paragons that would shape humanity into perfection that they still fell prey to petty office politics.

“I'm going to keep this,” Zen said as he finished reading.

“Why would you want that?” Graham asked scrunching up his face.

“I just want it,” Zen said unconvincingly as he looked as if he had just been caught in a lie. Graham's mind began to whir. Suddenly the excuses he had been making in his head all afternoon seemed to hold less water than before. The only

reason Zen could have for wanting that paper was to use it as blackmail and he wasn't going to be the one to actually use it. He could've, no one would take him seriously. Zen would get nothing from Gretchen. That meant there was only one possibility. Graham suddenly snatched the paper back.

“You were going to show this to Dr. Grosse weren't you,” Graham accused holding the paper away. The shocked look on Zen's face showed Graham he was right on the money. Graham still hadn't figured out why Zen would do that, its not like he liked Dr. Grosse. Which only meant one thing. Zen had something to gain from showing this to Dr. Grosse.

“I need that,” Zen said lowering his voice.

“Not until I hear the truth,” Graham said. Zen looked to the side before staring back at Graham.

“I have a chance with that,” Zen said.

“You're fogging out aren't you?” Graham then questioned.

“I am not, I'm thinking very clearly right now,” Zen retorted.

“I don't mean right now, I meant in general. I mean the evidence is all around us.” Graham said. It was all starting to turn into the worst case scenario. Everything about this afternoon had proven to be true in the worst way possible. Zen, for all his talk of being able to resist was not as well off as he claimed. He could be worse off than any of them. Zen's face screwed up a little before his shoulders slumped.

“I have an understanding with him. I told you that but there

was something else. He told me that if I could get some kind of dirt of Mrs. Callaway he would reward me," Zen said speaking slowly.

"What did he promise you?" Graham growled.

"An antidote," Zen said. Graham's mouth dropped. A second later he was ripping up the paper.

"What are you doing?" Zen screeched. "Don't tell me you're trying to protect your Mommy."

"There is no antidote," Graham yelled back. "Even if there was its not like he would give it to you."

"You don't know that," Zen shouted back as he began to try and grab at the piece that had fallen and trying to piece them back together. "You idiot, that was my shot. I have to do what I need to do. I have something to get back to."

"Whats that supposed mean? Like me and Cody don't?"

"My fiance is waiting for me," Zen said shoving Graham back. "What do you have huh? A job you hate? In all this time you've never mentioned a single other thing about your own life. Sounds to me like you had no one. And Cody was homeless. If you ask me he's better off here anyways."

Graham was stunned for a moment. Its not as if Zen was wrong about him. He had never given a single thought to his job. In fact it was the furthest thing from his mind when he thought about becoming an adult again. It was the comment about Cody that enraged Graham. He was now seeing red.

“You two faced rat,” Graham barked as he barreled into Zen the two of them ending up on the ground in a tussle. Moments later the door swung open and both Graham and Zen found themselves yanked apart and were now being held from the back by their collars.

“What is going on in here?” Mrs. Nestor asked her voice a register below yelling. The boys stood staring at one another. “Anybody want to speak up?”

“Mikey is a liar,” Graham said as his face hardened.

“Is that true Micheal did you lie about something?” Mrs. Nestor sighed.

“Yeah,” Zen said quietly. Mrs. Nestor took a seat on the bed.

“Are you two friends?” she asked. Both Graham and Zen looked at one another before they both nodded. Graham didn't know if it was true anymore though. Mrs. Nestor then took each of their hands.

“Then you need to treat one another better, that means we don't lie,” she said looking at Zen. “And when we do disagree we use our words not our hands to solve it,” she said turning to Graham. “Friends need to treat each other with respect. Do you both understand?”

“Yes ma'am,” Graham said. He wanted this to be over as the way she was talking to him was infuriating. He hated being talked to like a child. This woman had no idea what they're fight was really about. She was dealing with schoolchildren whose problems were so beneath adult consideration. She

didn't know the true depth of betrayal that had just played out.

“Micheal, do you get it?” Mrs. Nestor said squeezing Zen's hand a little.

“Yes Mommy,” he said with a little voice.

“Good,” Mrs. Nestor said standing up. “Now its a nice day out so why don't you two go play in the backyard.”

Graham and Zen were ushered outside. There was a play set with two swings. Both boys sat letting the swings go back and forth slowly neither of them saying a word to one another.

“You gonna tell Cody?” Zen finally asked.

“No,” Graham said. “ He was always vouching for you. If I told him the only reason you became friends with him was to use him to get dirt on Gretchen it would kill him. Going forward stay away from us.”

“Yeah, that's fair,” Zen said sullenly. “I'll have to get new friends anyways.”

“Good luck pumping them for information,” Graham said snidely.

“That's not what I meant,” Zen said pausing a moment before continuing. “You were right you know.”

“What about being Dr. Grosse's little lackey, Graham said cocking his head.

“Not that,” Zen said shaking his head. “The stuff about me being fogged out. Its all true. Everything you saw...it stopped

being an act awhile ago. I'm at the end of the road. I'm going to tell Grosse that I'm not friends with you and Cody anymore. Once he see's that I'm useless to him he'll probably just send me packing. I'll be at the other school by next month probably."

"You aren't that far gone," Graham said.

"Yeah I am," Zen retorted. "I can't lie anymore. Zen'll be gone and there will only be Micheal Nestor," Zen said sounding as if he were about to start crying, yet Graham saw no tears.

Graham could only groan. Maybe he was a sucker, but what Zen was talking about was a terrible fate and Graham could not even wish something like that on even Zen. It would make him no better than the others.

"Maybe there is something we can do about that," Graham said. "You can't just give up like this."

"There is nothing you or I can do," Zen said. "This is just how it is. For what its worth I am sorry. But hey maybe when we both are fogged out we could try being friends again. You guys were good company. Maybe in another life we could actually be friends."

Graham and Zen both gave small laughs. The kind of response one gives to some dark humor.

"Maybe," Graham said. "In the mean time though I'll get you transferred away from Dr. Grosse and you can start seeing Claire."

“Whose Claire?” Zen then asked.

“Ms. Redding, she is me and Cody's counselor.”

“How would that help?” Zen asked.

“She is a friend,” Graham said. He proceeded to tell Zen the truth about Claire. He told him how she was looking for her brother who might have been taken and also how she was faking sessions with him and Cody. “So yeah, it won't stop you from fogging out but not having to deal with Dr. Grosse messing with you it might buy you some more time.”

“That sounds great,” Zen said though not in the happy tone Graham expected seeing Zen still looking down at the ground. “But I don't see how that's going to work. Its not like you can do anything to get that to happen.”

“Did you forget who my Mom is?” Graham said smiling. “I mean we both saw that e-mail. She hates Dr. Grosse and she loves Claire. Taking one of his subjects from him would be just the thing she would jump at.”

Zen looked up at Graham.

“Geez dude,” Zen said shaking his head. “Do you do this kind of stuff for all your enemies?” Graham got up from his swing and stood in front of Zen.

“Nope,” Graham said extending his fist. “Just for my friends.”

“Guess I'm lucky,” Zen smiled as he bumped Graham's fist.

Chapter 20

Potential: Part 20

Chapter 20

Unconditional

Graham was sat in Claire's office despite the fact that school was off for today. Gretchen had told him though that he still needed to attend his Friday afternoon counseling session and had brought him to the school while Gene had taken Cody and Angie to the park so that Cody could still do his after school rec league basketball that he had let Gene sign him up for. Graham had refused. It didn't bother Graham that Cody was doing it either. It seemed like Cody enjoyed it, and it was just basketball after all.

“Anything you want to talk about?” Claire asked sat behind her computer. Graham wasn't feeling up to having a counseling session that day instead turning his attention to something else.

“How's Zen doing?” he asked.

“Who?” Claire asked.

“I mean Micheal,” Graham corrected. “His real name is Zen though so you should call him that.”

“Oh well he never told me that,” Claire said. “We only had one session.”

“Is that his file?” Graham asked seeing the folder on the desk

with Zen's fake name on it as he reached for it.

“You can't look in there,” Claire said snatching the folder away.

“Oh c'mon,” Graham said rolling his eyes. “He wouldn't care.”

“He's still my patient and I give all my patients their confidentiality.”

“I'm the one who recommended him,” Graham said crossing his arms.

“Yep but you don't have one of those,” Claire said pointing at her counseling degree on the wall. “You did your job so let me do mine”

Graham smiled a little. He kind of felt like his old self. He found someone who needed help and had gotten them where they needed to be and it had been easy to boot. He just had to tell Gretchen that Zen was having trouble with Dr. Grosse and that he thought Zen would like Claire better and Gretchen had taken the bait hook line and sinker. The fact that Dr. Grosse had kept Zen around for so long had probably bit him and Gretchen had been able to make the case that perhaps Zen needed a different approach. According to Zen his own Mom had been more than happy to sign papers requesting the change.

Claire and Graham spent the rest of the time playing some checkers as they shot the breeze.

“Any plans this weekend?” Claire asked.

“I don't get to make my own plans,” Graham grumbled. “But I guess I'm going to the regatta tomorrow.” That morning at breakfast the kids had been told about the plans. It was a big community event in Merryweather. Boats would fill the bay and there would be stalls set up all along the boardwalk, it was a big tourist attraction. Gene and Gretchen had made sure to tell the kids that since Gene was the mayor they would have to be mindful that they would be seen as representatives not only for the the family but the town as well – in simpler terms they needed to be on their best behavior. However something struck Graham as strange about the whole thing.

“That might be fun,” Claire said as she moved one of her checkers.

“I'm suspicious,” Graham said. “This is the first time we are going out as a family. Its like they are showing off for the town or something. Gene's the mayor so they want us to look like the perfect little family.”

“Maybe that's a good thing,” Claire said. Graham raised an eyebrow. “If they are putting you out in public not just in front of Golden Horizon members it must mean that they are confident. They must think you are further along than you are. Sounds to me like you've got them fooled.”

“Maybe,” Graham said with a smirk.

There was then a knock at the door as Claire told whoever it was to come in. Gretchen poked her head in the door.

“Are we almost done in here?” she asked.

“Just finished up,” Claire said with a smile. Gretchen came walking in and stood behind Graham putting her hands on his shoulders.

“And how did we do today?” she asked.

“Just wonderful as always,” Claire said.

“Lovely to hear,” Gretchen said as she hugged Graham from behind. “Since somebody has been doing so well, perhaps they deserve to get some ice cream.”

“Ice cream?” Graham said looking up at Gretchen.

“A special treat for my special guy,” Gretchen smiled before kissing Graham on the forehead. “Care to join us?” Gretchen then asked Claire.

“I got some work to do, so I'll have to pass,” Claire said.

“Maybe next time, “ Gretchen said as Graham got up so they could leave.

Graham sat on a bench next to Gretchen, a small cup of ice cream with a spire of whip cream and finished with a cherry on top was in his hands. Graham took some bites all the while feeling a little uneasy. This was different and he could tell they weren't just here for ice cream. Gretchen was being more than a little quiet as if she wanted to say something.

“What is it?” Graham finally asked setting his ice cream down. Gretchen looked at him for a moment before chuckling.

“Am I that easy to read?” She asked.

“Can you just tell me,” Graham said.

“I just wanted to come and have some ice cream,” Gretchen said. “And maybe I thought we could talk, you know spend some time together.”

“Did I do something?” Graham asked. He had been doing well in his own estimation. He had been keeping his attitude in check, minding his please and thank yous and keeping himself out of trouble. Neither of his parents could object to how he had been acting.

“You're not in trouble,” Gretchen said. “You've been very well behaved lately.”

“Then why do you want to talk to me?” Graham questioned.

“You don't need to be in trouble for us to spend time together. I just thought it might be good for us to have an honest talk with one another.”

“Honest talk?” Graham said now feeling a little nervous. Somehow this didn't seem like a good thing.

“Yes I want us to have an honest talk. I want you to be able to tell me anything,” she said. Graham's eyes narrowed, this was a trick of that he was sure. “You see honesty is important and I know that you have not been being honest.” Graham puckered his lips. So he was in trouble.

“That's not true,” Graham yelped. “I haven't lied about anything.” which was about as true as could be.

“Not like that,” Gretchen said. “Its just that these last few

days I can tell you haven't been acting like yourself, a mother knows these things.”

Graham shook his head. He didn't know what to do or what Gretchen really wanted. He had been acting like the perfect child, he had thought that is what they wanted. Had he not been convincing enough?

“I've been good,” Graham muttered. “I don't want to get in trouble.”

“You have been acting very good,” Gretchen conceded. “But I don't want you acting a certain way just because you think that's what will make me happy. That's why I want us to be honest with one another. You can say anything you want. You won't get into any trouble I promise. Just to prove it why don't you tell me what you think about me?”

“Huh,” Graham said more to himself than confusion over the question.

“What do you really think of me?” Gretchen repeated her question. “Truly.”

Graham was at a loss. He didn't know how to play this one. He looked into her face. She had a smile on her face. It seemed inviting. If she wanted honesty maybe he would give it to her. Its not as if this good boy act hadn't been wearing on him. It was getting exhausting having to keep up the ruse, constantly trying to live up to some expectation that had been foisted upon him.

“I'm really mad at you,” Graham said. His hand shot up over

his mouth as he looked at Gretchen with big eyes, surprised that he had even said that. Gretchen put up her hands and shook her head.

“See, not in trouble,” Gretchen said. “Keep going. Why are you mad at me?”

“Because you kidnapped me, turned me into a kid because you're crazy,” Graham continued. He was unable to hold back. It actually felt kind of good to say after all this time. Gretchen's small smile never faulted as she nodded along.

“I understand why you would feel like that.” Gretchen said.

“You're trying to change me into a different person,” Graham said.

“Thank you for your honesty,” Gretchen said as she took Graham's hand into her own. “I know what I did might seem extreme, but I do want you to know why I did it.” Graham was silent as he looked at Gretchen. “I'm not trying to change you into someone different, that is simply not true. We love you just the way you are. The real you, that's who we chose, that's the person we want to love, that's the person with such great potential. Changing you is the exact opposite of what we want. We want you to grow up happy and healthy. That's it, that's all this is about.”

“You're just trying to use me,” Graham retorted his voice however was small and subdued. “You made me a kid to control me.”

“No not at all,” Gretchen said gently. “This was all for you.

You see there is only one way to make a person become the great individual they are capable of being, do you know how?”

Graham shook his head.

“Let me put it to you this way. You see when we found you, so much had happened that you weren't able to grow properly. You were a plant that hadn't been allowed to bloom. Now even if you take that plant and give it everything it may get better but it would never be like it would if it had been nursed from a seedling. That's why we had to take such a drastic measure. We want you to bloom as beautifully as you can with nothing holding you back. Your father and I want to see the true Graham as strong and beautiful as he can be.”

Graham sighed. He had heard a version of all this before. Maybe Gretchen thought he had been beaten down enough to accept it as truth now. Maybe it did make sense on some sort of level yet she was still deeply mistaken about one thing. Call it some sort of dissonance or perhaps she was just doing mental gymnastics to justify her actions. But she was still wrong about one thing, the whole lynch pin to her theory. She didn't really love him.

“You keep saying you love me,” Graham said pulling his hand away. “But you don't even know the real me.” Gretchen was silent for a moment.

“There is nothing about you that is wrong,” Gretchen said.

“Exactly,” Graham said shooting to his feet. “I was just fine. I

had a job my own place and I was doing it all on my own, I didn't need help."

"You were getting by," Gretchen said nodding her head. Graham was shocked. To hear her talk about him as an adult was surprising in many ways. "But getting by and being happy are two different things. Were you really happy?"

Graham tried to form a response but felt himself getting tongue tied. He rubbed his hands against the side of his head out of frustration. Why couldn't he get the words out?

"You were all alone, and that's no way for humans to be, we need connections." Gretchen said.

Graham remained silent. This conversation was getting to him. He was starting to feel like he did when he talked with Claire, except now it was different. With Claire he felt safe, with Gretchen this was dangerous. His walls of defense were crumbling. He needed to get back on the offensive. What Gretchen had done to him was wrong, he needed to stay on that line of reasoning.

"You need guidance," Gretchen said. "You need it so much that you may not even realize it. That's all I want to give you. That's a parents job. Love and guidance is the recipe to make a successful happy adult."

Graham pursed his lips in anticipation. He had his next move.

"You're not my Mom," Graham said. "I already had parents, and to be perfectly honest you're not really any different than them. They didn't really like the real me either. When they

saw I wasn't what they wanted they tried to change me too, just like you are."

"Graham honey really, I'm not trying to change who you are." Gretchen said as she placed a hand on his hip gently leading him so that he was sat on the bench next to her with her arm around him. "The only thing I want for you right now is to accept the help I'm trying to give you."

Graham shook his head. She was high on her own supply. How could she say she wasn't trying to change him.

"You just want me to be the way you want, just like they did. You probably don't even know why I left them." Graham paused. He really didn't want to get into it. He knew it was sore spot for him.

"Go on honey, you can tell me whatever you want," Gretchen said.

"You know I'm gay right?" Graham said. He expected to feel Gretchen tense up or for her face to show some sign of disapproval but that never came.

"That doesn't bother me," Gretchen said.

"Why not," Graham spat as he sat up. "Or what you think you'll just cure me of that in time." Gretchen surprised Graham by embracing him holding him so that his chin rested on her shoulder.

"I'm not a bigot sweetie," She said. "I would never want to change that about you."

“You wouldn't?” Graham croaked.

“That's part of the real you. I thank you for being brave and telling me that.”

“Thanks,” Graham said. The word dribbling out of his mouth before he could even think about it. Her acceptance had hit him hard. Despite Graham's best efforts Gretchen had become an authority figure in his life and her acceptance of the very thing that had destroyed his relationship with his parents was affecting him.

“It makes me so sad to think that those other people made you feel less than because of something like that,” Gretchen said, being careful not to refer to Graham parents by their title. “You must have been so hurt.”

“Uh huh,” Graham mewled nodding his head as tears came to his eyes.

“That's not what parents do,” Gretchen continued as she rubbed Graham's back and holding him tighter. “Parents give their children unconditional love. Always.”

Graham couldn't hold back, the word unconditional stabbing into him. His own arms went up as he hugged Gretchen back and his tears increased.

“They betrayed you in the worst way,” Gretchen said. Graham let out some whimpers. He was like a junkie and Gretchen's words were the drugs he wanted. Validation, acceptance. “You will never have to worry about that ever again my darling. You are safe here. Me and your father love

you, unconditionally always and forever.”

Graham let out another sob hiding his face away into the fabric of Gretchen's shirt. A feeling had overtaken him. It was strange. Somehow he understood what it was. The thing he had never gotten from his parents. Unconditional love. It was more than ironic that he was now getting it from someone he considered out of her mind. For his whole life growing up he had been walking on eggshells around his parents. Accepting what they said as the truth. Their opinions and thoughts were his own even though deep down he knew he didn't agree. The minute he had pushed back they had abandoned him. Yet here he was now getting what he had wanted. Graham knew he could reason out of it. He could come up with a million different reasons why this was wrong, but he didn't want too. He was too caught up in his own emotions and feelings.

A little while later Graham was left sniffling his head up against Gretchen. He felt like mush and Gretchen's embrace felt like a warm blanket.

“Graham,” Gretchen said softly bringing her finger to lightly brush away a stray tear. “I want you to understand one thing. Whatever happens in the future I need you to remember that me and your Daddy will always do what it best for you. We are going to heal those scars and give you all the love you need in just the way you need it. Does that sound okay with you?”

“Yeah it does,” Graham said.

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Graham sat in his seat in the car letting the scenery go by. He was still feeling drained and raw. Gretchen had won. She had torn down his walls and delivered a blow straight to Graham's center. Most disappointing to Graham was that throughout the whole exchange he had not fogged out, not once. She had gotten to the real him. Even now as Graham looked at her he couldn't muster up any hate for her. She had served up the thing he wanted and he had lapped it up. Is this how it happened? Maybe the fog didn't just take control by force. Maybe the fog only worked when the person gave up and let it happen. He was feeling so at odds with himself. Even if he wanted to just drop everything and run straight into Gretchen's arms it just didn't seem right. He needed to talk to someone. As they got closer to home Graham was getting eager. He needed to talk to Cody. Get some sense knocked into him. He needed Cody to pull him back and show him what was really important.

Back at home Graham made his way up to his room to find Cody with a duffel bag on the ground as he was stuffing some clothes in it.

“Going somewhere?” Graham inquired. Cody seemed startled as he got to his feet spinning around to face Graham.

“Yeah kind of,” Cody said looking to the side for a moment. “I'm going to a sleepover.” Graham raised an eyebrow. “It wasn't my idea though,” Cody added quickly.

“I see you're packing the essentials,” Graham said peering down at the bag to see a nerf gun sticking out of it. “Whose

house are you going too?" Graham asked. Cody didn't really hang out with anyone at school that wasn't Graham or Zen and if Cody was going to Zen's then Graham assumed he would be invited too.

"Some kid from my basketball group," Cody said. "Actually its a birthday party so a lot of them are going to be there. One of the parents asked Gene and he said yeah."

"I guess if you're being forced you might as well try to have some fun," Graham reasoned. "Not a big deal," Graham added. He didn't want to make Cody feel bad about this like he had done when Cody had decided to play kickball at recess.

"I think its a big deal," Cody grumbled as he took a seat on the bed looking down at the ground as if he were bothered.

"Its just a sleepover," Graham said.

"I'm not worried about the sleepover, its the other stuff that Daddy said," Cody said as he wrung his hands out with nervous energy. "I told him I didn't want to go, but he said it would be good for me. They're transferring me over to the other school soon and Daddy said this was a good opportunity to make some friends so I'll know people once I start going there."

"I see," Graham said as he sucked some air through his teeth. He could see Cody was seriously bothered by it. Graham could understand that. He was a little surprised to hear it himself. The boys sat in silence. Graham thought about

telling Cody about what Zen had said that he was going to the others school soon as well. Yet that made Graham kind of sad. He would be left alone at school if Cody and Zen were gone. Graham decided against it upon seeing Cody sat on the bed. Now wasn't the time nor was it the time for him to tell Cody about what had happened with Gretchen. Cody was already worried. Graham instead took a seat next to Cody putting an arm around him.

“Don't worry about that,” Graham said. “Even if that does happen, its not the end of the world. Besides its a good thing. That just means you got them all fooled. “ Graham said using the same line Claire had used on him earlier.

“I guess you're right,” Cody said as Graham saw him relax a little.

“Just have some fun tonight,” Graham said. “We'll deal with all that other stuff tomorrow.”

“I don't know if I'll have fun,” Cody said. “I don't really know what to do.”

“Haven't you ever been to a sleepover?” Graham then asked.

“No,” Cody said. “Plus I don't know these kids all that well. I'm gonna be like the new kid.”

“You'll be fine,” Graham laughed. “You're good with people, by the end of the night you'll be everybody's best friend.” Cody chuckled.

“You know when you say stuff like that you sound like you're

my older brother or something," Cody said giving Graham an amused look.

"I am your older brother," Graham nodded.

"Nuh uh, we're the same age," Cody said sarcastically.

"You forget, my birthday is three months before yours," Graham said standing up and crossing his arms authoritatively. Cody looked at Graham as if he wasn't sure how to react. He then let a small smile form on his lips.

"You're right, guess I gotta listen to you oh wise one."

"That's the spirit," Graham said slapping Cody on the back. Just then Gene's voice was heard calling up to tell Cody it was time to go.

"Guess that's me," Cody said getting his bag and walking to the door.

"Just have some fun. Don't worry about anything. No matter what we're going to be okay."

"Thanks Graham," Cody said before he left.

As the night wore on Graham tried to not think about the big things. He still hadn't fully come to terms with his talk with Gretchen or what the future was going to look like. Being supportive for Cody had certainly helped him. It had given him a certain sense that nothing had changed. Gretchen had merely caught him off guard. As long as he did'nt ruminate on it though maybe he could get back to feeling like himself. If anything he just needed some distractions.

Graham played with Angie for awhile and then after dinner he was sat watching a movie in the living room with the rest of the family. At one point Graham looked back at his parents on the couch. There was a spot between them and for a moment he thought about going and sitting there. It looked cozy. He relented though. Despite his feelings Graham still couldn't bring himself to act like that. Even if he could imagine accepting that this was his life it still felt wrong.

Graham laid in his bed that night. He was looking up at his ceiling in his dark room. He couldn't seem to fall asleep. He was thinking too much. He was going to have to tell Cody that they were probably not getting out of here. It was probably time to accept that. As much as Graham wanted to feel like that meant he was doomed, there were good things about it. He and Cody would be together as brothers, they had a nice house and Gretchen and Gene were nice enough people if you ignored everything about the fact that they had kidnapped him. Graham wasn't about to just roll over though. He just needed to figure out what kind of victory he could still achieve here. Letting them win was not an option. Graham could not forget what had been done to him. He was going to fog out and forget all of it, which he couldn't let happen.

Graham got up from his bed. He pulled a little at the hem of his shirt that Gretchen had given him to wear that night. It was plain white and came down to just above his thighs. He had felt a little embarrassed wearing it around the house when he had been getting ready for bed that night. It really

was too short and if he bent over even a little it showed his rocket ship themed underwear. Angie had laughed at that when they had been brushing their teeth and Graham had dropped his toothbrush on the ground and had bent over to get it.

Graham went to his backpack and got out some notebook paper. He then began to write as he sat cross legged on the floor. The words seemed to flow out of him as he wrote quickly. In some ways he was writing a manifesto of sorts. He was writing about everything that had happened. Things he didn't want to forget. Things that would tell him the truth when he fogged out. He wrote about not trusting Gene and Gretchen and how when he grew up he would need to leave them behind and never look back. He also wrote about Cody and how he needed to be there for him and what he needed to do to make sure Cody had a happy life. Graham also wrote to Claire thanking her for everything if she ever read this and how she had been a good friend and also apologizing for not being able to help her find her brother.

To Graham this was the key. This was his victory. He would never become what Gene and Gretchen wanted. He would never let Golden Horizon win. He would never be used like that. It was all he could do and he would have to be okay with it. Short sighted plans of fixing his problems right then and there were not going to work. It was time to play the long game. He would lose the battle but he could still win the war.

Graham went back to his bed after shutting off the lamp. He hid the papers under his mattress before getting into bed. He

felt tired all of a sudden as if getting all that stuff off his chest had cured him of his restlessness. He fell asleep soon after.

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Graham awoke. As he opened his eyes he suddenly felt like something was off. Staring up at his ceiling the room was still dark telling him it was still nighttime. As he blinked he realized the lamp on the dresser across the room was on. He could have sworn that he had shut it off. Graham sat up rubbing his eyes.

“Look whose awake,” a voice came. Graham went still as he felt a cold feeling spread through his veins. He now knew what felt off. He could feel eyes looking at him. That voice it just couldn't be. He didn't want it to be true but there was no mistaking it. He would know that voice anywhere.

Graham looked at the chair in the corner where Gene or Gretchen would sit when they would read bedtime stories to him and Cody. Sitting in the chair was that person.

“Sebastian,” Graham wheezed as his throat constricted.

“Hey there handsome.” Sebastian said with a smile.

Chapter 21

Potential: Part 21

Chapter 21

Pushed into Place

Graham stared at the corner of the room where Sebastian sat. This had to be a dream. Yet as Graham kept on staring he knew he was awake. The cold hard reality is that Sebastian was here in the room with him.

“Cat got your tongue?” Sebastian asked as he crossed a leg over his knee.

“What are you doing here?” Graham asked finding his voice.

“Well my parents have been been on my case about visiting more often and I got some time now so

why not?” Sebastian said.

“And you came to see me?” Graham questioned. “Did you break in?” Graham said becoming somewhat alarmed. That seemed rather brazen even for Sebastian. This was the Callaway's house they were high up in the organization that Sebastian worked for. He couldn't just walk in here like he owned the place.

“You're a little slow in your young age,” Sebastian laughed. “Although I guess you did just wake up.”

“Wha,” Graham stuttered shaking his head.

“You really haven't figured it out yet?” Sebastian laughed again slapping his knee. “There are pictures of me all around here. To be fair they are a younger me and I've had a bit of glow up.”

The pieces were now obvious as they fell into place for Graham. He couldn't believe that he hadn't figured it out. Of course Sebastian was a fake name. The man in front of him was Alex, Gretchen and Genes biological child. Graham had only see pictures of a kid and then a teenager of Alex around the house yet as he looked now he could certainly see a resemblance.

“You're Alex,” Graham wheezed as if the breath had been punched out of him.

“Nice to meet you,” Alex said as he stood up. Graham got out of his bed standing as tall as he could. He was over his shock. He had wanted to find Alex anyways, just not like this. He was unprepared, he needed to be careful. Honestly he was like a dog chasing a car that he had finally caught it and now he had no idea what to do with it.

“What do you want?” Graham asked. Alex was silent as he looked Graham up and down.

“Gosh, you are adorable aren't you,” Alex said taking a step toward Graham. He stopped upon seeing Graham take a step back as if Graham were an animal he was trying to not spook. “No reason to be scared we're family. You can trust me.”

“We are not family,” Graham growled trying his best to sound

intimidating knowing full well he was doing a piss poor job at it. “And I will never trust you.”

“Oh don't tell me you're still mad. Look I'm sorry I lied to you, giving you a fake name and all. Big brother feels really bad about that, If it makes you feel any better I did have a good time on our date.” Alex said putting his hands on his knees and making a sad face as he talked in a way that resembled baby talk. “That's all behind us now,” Alex said as he leaned up against the dresser picking up a small toy and fiddling with it a bit.

“Did you just come in here to mock me or something?” Graham asked giving Alex a sneer.

“Not exactly,” Alex said. :I have thought about you a lot and its been awhile, so I was curious how you've been.” Alex said placing the toy back on the dresser.

“Terrible thanks to you,” Graham said crossing his arms.

“So I've heard,” Alex said. “Mom and Dad tell me you've got a little attitude and have been having problems at school, even got yourself into a little fight. Why don't you tell me about that, sounds like an interesting story.”

“That's none of your business,” Graham said. He went back to his bed and got under the covers. It had become abundantly clear that Alex was only here to mock him, probably deriving some sick pleasure from it. Graham was not going to play along. “If we're done here I'm going back to bed.” Graham said laying back down and hoping that Alex would just leave.

Alex however chuckled.

“That's what I like about you Graham. You're such a firecracker.” Alex said. Graham sat up to retort with some annoyance yet fell silent upon seeing that Alex now had the gun like object with the needle in his hand.

“What are you doing,” Graham squeaked upon seeing the device.

“Oh this,” Alex said holding the object up. “You know the routine just a little prick.” Alex said taking a step toward Graham.

“Why!?” Graham yelped pushing himself up against the headboard. Alex stopped as a huge grin formed on his face.

“Since I like you so much, I'll tell you. You see Mom and Dad have always had a plan for the type of family they wanted. However they are very careful people. They didn't want to make a choice until they were sure. They first wanted to see how you and Cody would do before they made their decision.”

“C-cody,” Graham said as his voice quivered.

“Yep, this whole time you and Cody were in a competition and you didn't even know it.” Alex said.

“What does this have to do with Cody, what are you talking about?” Graham said clutching his blanket in between his fists.

“Honestly I thought for a moment there it was going to be

Cody, I mean talk about a mess. But you rewarded my faith. I was so happy to hear that you weren't adjusting well. I knew you wouldn't disappoint. You lost just as I hoped. You're being demoted. Mom says you need it to help you get over all those problems of yours."

"That's not true," Graham whimpered as he shook his head. "I'm doing better now. I've been good." Graham was now overcome with fear not able to offer a response that didn't sound like he wasn't a small child begging to not be put in time out.

"Oh Grammy no need for tears," Alex said. "Golden Horizons knows exactly what you need. We have this down to a science. And hey want to know the best part. This dose is less than half. You get to experience the whole change this time, no passing out now." Alex said as his eyes glinted and he began walking towards the bed.

Graham was out of his bed and grabbed the alarm clock on the bedside table.

"Stay away from me," Graham roared as he flung the alarm clock at Alex. It proved to be futile as Alex swatted the clock out of the air.

"You make this so fun," Alex said as he lunged at Graham grabbing him around the stomach as Graham made a dash for the door. Alex had Graham pinned on the ground. Graham was shouting until he felt the stab into his neck causing him to let out a pained mewl. Alex then sat back as he watched.

Graham curled up into a fetal position as he felt a warmth overtake his body that soon turned to a burning sensation. He felt his joints begin to constrict causing him to writhe with every spasm. He couldn't even scream and he could only let out groans and stifled whimpers. It hurt. The pain made his mind go blank, a small mercy as he could no longer comprehend the intense pain that was wracking his body.

Graham lost all sense of time. It could have been five minutes or a day when the pain began to subside leaving him sore and drenched in sweat. He was in a daze when he finally opened his eyes. Nothing seemed to make sense to him as he looked out blearily to see he was on the ground looking a a pair of shoes that belonged to Alex. Graham groaned as he tried to move but found he couldn't. His limbs just felt heavy and sore. He heard the door open as he closed his eyes again.

“Why is he on the ground?” a voice said bringing Graham comfort. He knew that voice, it was Mommy's. “He was supposed to be asleep.” Mommy said.

“Sorry,” he heard Alex say. “Kid woke up before I got to him. Must be a light sleeper or something probably should have drugged him.”

“Is he hurt?” Graham then heard another familiar voice that he knew was Daddy's.

“Not at all,” Alex said. “I held him while I did it. I was very gentle with him.” Graham went to say something. He knew that was a lie. It was all kind of foggy but he knew that Alex was lying and he wanted Mommy and Daddy to know. All

that came out was a pained moan.

“Oh sweetie come here,” Mommy said as Graham felt two hands come around him before he felt himself being lifted off the ground. Graham was now in Mommy's arms as he laid against her. He didn't feel scared anymore. He was carried over to the rocking chair as Mommy took a seat.

“Mommy,” Graham whimpered as he tried to lift his head. He was stopped as Mommy put a hand on the back of his head leading it back down onto her shoulder.

“Shhh shh, sweetie. Its all over now, Mommy has you.” Graham didn't try to speak again. It was just too hard. “Gene can you go get me a towel and some pajamas,” Mommy then asked. “Graham is absolutely drenched in sweat and needs a change of clothes.”

“I'll be right back,” Daddy said as he left the room.

“Alex how about you go get that gift you got Graham. He probably is going to want it,” Mommy then said.

“Oh you're probably right,” Alex said with a chuckle. Graham heard Alex's footsteps leave the room and that was alright by him. For some reason he didn't like Alex. He was scary. Graham lifted his arms as he clutched onto Gretchen. He made a small chirp as he cuddled into her. She felt so warm and he felt so safe with her.

Graham woke back up again as he had fallen asleep for a moment. He was being moved again as he felt his wet shirt be removed. He gave a little groan as his joints screamed with

ache.

“Just hang in there buddy,” Daddy said. Graham opened his eyes and saw he was facing forward in Mommy's lap as she held him around his tummy. Graham looked down and something struck him as strange. His body looked different. His tummy seemed to stick out a little more than he remembered. His legs also appeared shorter and chubbier. He brought a hand up to wipe his eye and even they seemed a little different. A second later though he dismissed the thought. He was too tired to even think about it. He put his head back against Mommy as he watched his Dad remove his underwear which came off easily as they seemed too big to fit him. Graham closed his eyes again as he felt Mommy begin to wipe his body with a towel. It felt good as all the sweat was wiped away leaving him feeling dry.

“Alright lets get his britches on,” Daddy said as Graham felt something tickle his foot.

“Put him in a Pull-up,” Mommy then said.

“Are you sure he needs that?” Daddy questioned.

“Lets just be safe, he's young enough that he might need it. Not to mention if he does need to go he's probably not going to wake up tonight.” Mommy reasoned.

“You're right,” Daddy said. Graham then heard the sound of plastic ripping before he heard the sound of something crinkling. Graham then felt something working up his legs and he was slightly lifted as whatever it was was pulled up to

his waist. Graham then felt a shirt be put over his head before his arms were pulled through the sleeves causing him to whimper a little from the soreness.

“He doesn't need the pants,” Mommy said. “Just hand me the blanket, I'm going to hold him until he falls back asleep.”

“We should still give him some medicine,” Daddy said as the sound of a cap was heard being unscrewed. Graham didn't like the sound of that. Medicine tasted yucky.

“Graham open up,” Daddy said. Graham kept his mouth shut as he turned his head still keeping his eyes closed.

“Nuuu,” Graham began to moan before he felt the plastic object pushed into his mouth. The medicine was then squirted down his throat causing Graham to sit upright with a cough. He frowned as he looked at his parents seeing Daddy holding the medicine syringe in his hand now empty.

“I know you didn't like that buddy,” Daddy said petting Grahams hair. “It'll make you feel better thought promise. And here big brother Alex brought this for you,” Daddy said holding up a large stuffed Dalmatian toy. Graham looked at it and smiled a little as Daddy placed it into his arms. Graham clutched the stuffed animal close to his chest as Gretchen re-situated him so he was now cradle in her arms wrapped up in a blanket. Mommy began to rock as Graham felt the gently sway. He was starting to feel better as the soreness started to fade away. Graham closed his heavy eyes.

“You rest now darling. Tomorrow will be the first day of your

life and you will be so happy now and forever," Mommy whispered. Graham smiled a little. Happy sounded nice.

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Graham woke up not knowing where he was. He sat up with his stuffed dalmatian still in his arms. He nuzzled it a little feeling its soft fur against his face. He then took a look around. The room he was in was strange to him. He was in his house he knew that, yet this was an unfamiliar room to him. Looking around there wasn't much in there. In fact it was pretty much empty except for the bed. He looked around looking at the covers with dinosaurs all over it. He didn't recognize that one bit. He also didn't recognize the bed that looked like a race car complete with some bed railings. Where had it come from, it wasn't his?

Graham got out of the bed stepping onto the carpet with his bare feet. He looked down at himself. He was wearing a long sleeved pajama shirt with a big fire truck on it. Graham was confused, hadn't he been wearing a different shirt when he had gone to be bed? Whats more he didn't have pants. He did remember thought that he hadn't been wearing pants last night either. He saw a Pull-up around his waist. It had Mickey Mouse on it and was sagging a bit. Graham squirmed a little. He could have sworn he had on underwear last night.

As Graham stood puzzled he did start to remember some stuff. Something had happened last night, and he remembered that it had hurt. But then Mommy and Daddy came.

"Oh," Graham said as if an idea had suddenly come to him.

Mommy and Daddy had been there. They had changed him into these clothes. That seemed to settle Graham's confusion. The door then opened as Mommy came in. Graham smiled upon seeing her.

“Good morning sweetie,” she cooed. Graham walked up to her before raising his arms up. Mommy obliged picking her up into her arms as Graham hugged her. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Mhmmm,” Graham sleepily answered.

“How do you feel, does anything hurt?” Mommy then asked bouncing him a little.

“No,” Graham answered. He felt fine, he was just still curious about some things. “Mommy where am I?”

“You're in your room silly,” she said moving Graham onto her hip.

“My woom,” Graham asked as he furrowed his brow. That didn't seem right. This was the guest bedroom wasn't it? He didn't sleep in here.

“I sweep with Cody,” Graham said. He remembered that.

“No, sweetie you sleep here, remember?” Mommy said as her face looked worried. Graham looked around some more. “Although we really need to get more stuff in here don't we. What does Grammy need in his room?” Mommy continued. “He's already got his super cool big boy race-car bed doesn't he?”

“Uh huh,” Graham said looking at the bed. It was pretty cool after all.

“We also need a dresser so we have a place for all your clothes and a place to put all those books of yours, and some decorations.” Mommy then listed. Graham nodded along he didn't really care about that stuff.

“What else does Grammy need?” Mommy then asked. Graham thought for a moment before he thought about the biggest thing that was missing.

“My toys,” Graham said smiling.

“That's right,” Mommy gasped. “What kind of toys does Graham have I wonder?

“Trucks,” Graham yelped. “And superheroes and boats,” Graham began to list of a myriad of other types of toys that he liked. Although he wasn't sure if he had that stuff. “And my Nerf gun,” Graham yelped. He knew he had one of those, he was sure.

“That's right, Mommy thinks she saw that in Cody's room,” Gretchen said.

“Why it there?” Graham questioned. It didn't belong there it should be in his room, that's where it belonged after all.

“Oh Mommy must have put it there because she was being silly,” Mommy said. Graham laughed a little bringing his fingers up to his mouth as he sucked on one of them.

“Silly Mommy,” he lisped.

“We'll have to move it back here won't we?” Mommy then asked. Graham nodded. “But first of all someone needs to eat some breakfast because we have lots to do today.”

“We do?” Graham asked cocking his head. He did seem to remember that today was a special day but he didn't remember why.

“We do,” Mommy answered as she began walking out of the room. “Mommy is going to give you a haircut mister and then she has a very special outfit for you to wear so we can go on the boat.”

“Boat,” Graham squealed. That seemed really exciting.

“Yes,” Mommy enthused as she brought him into the kitchen. “You get to be a big sailor today,” Mommy said setting him in a chair at the table where a bowl of cereal was waiting for him.

“I wanna be a sailor,” Graham cheered.

“I know you do,” Mommy said smiling down at him. “But first breakfast and then haircut.”

Graham nodded as he picked up his small plastic spoon and began to eat. Something seemed off as Graham ate. He kept having to get on his knees in the chair. It was kind of hard to eat at the table. Mommy kept reminding him not to stand up in the chair. It seemed harder to eat, but he remembered eating at this table plenty of times before, but it hadn't been so big. He had clear memories of sitting on his butt and eating normally, so why couldn't he do that now?

“Come here you,” Mommy said as she lifted Graham up before sitting in the chair herself with Graham in her lap. “There better?” she asked. Graham nodded as he plunged his spoon back into the bowl. It was much easier to eat now. “We need to get you a booster seat,” Mommy said more to herself than Graham. That seemed like a good idea. He could certainly use one, yet something didn't make very much sense again. If he needed a booster seat why didn't they already have one. Its not like he had just shrunk or something. However Graham didn't think much about that. Whenever something didn't make sense Graham found it easy to not think about it. He didn't need to think about stuff like that. Mommy and Daddy took care of things like that after all.

As Graham continued to eat he heard a pair of footsteps coming down the hall. He looked to see Daddy and Angie coming into the room. Graham's face lit up when he saw Daddy.

“Daddy look I'm sitting in Mommy's lap,” he said waving. Daddy smiled at him as he and Angie came up to the table. Graham thought it was kind of weird though. Angie was holding Daddy's hand and hiding behind him like she was scared of Graham. Why would she be scared of him though? Angie then looked up at Daddy with an unsure look.

“Go on sweetie,” Daddy said. “You can say hi, its just Graham he won't bite.”

Angie looked at Graham her brow was furrowed. A second later she smiled as she grabbed him around the neck and

hugged him.

“He is so cute,” Angie squealed. Graham pulled back as Mommy gave him a reassuring squeeze. “I'm really his big sister?”

“Of course honey,” Mommy said. “You're six and Graham is four so that makes you his big sister.” Graham shook his head. Why did she need to be told that? Graham was younger than her and even he knew that, girls were weird.

“Just remember honey,” Daddy said kneeling down next to Angie. “Graham is little so you have to be careful with him.” Graham's mouth dropped as he felt deeply offended.

“I'm not little,” Graham yelled slamming his hand down. Both of his parents looked at him for a moment. “I'm a big boy,” Graham mumbled.

“Of course you are buddy,” Daddy said. He sort of looked relieved.

“You are a very big boy,” Mommy said as she rose with him in her arms as she walked over to another chair before setting him down and fashioning a large towel around his neck sot that his front side was covered. “And big boys sit nicely for Mommy while she cuts their hair don't they?”

“Yeah,” Graham conceded. Big boys did do that sort of thing and he was a big boy.

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Graham was up in Mommy and Daddy's room as he stood

waiting. He saw Angie standing in front of the mirror with her dress on. It was a dark navy blue and had a red kerchief. She also had on a pair of white tights and black shoes. Mommy had braided her hair before putting a bow in it.

“I'm so pretty,” Angie squealed as she twirled.

“You look great darling,” Mommy said before she looked at Graham. “Are you ready to put on your sailor outfit?”

“Yes,” Graham said jumping up and down. He was going to be a sailor and he was going to be so cool. Mommy smiled before she pulled his shirt off of him. She then got his Pull-up off. He was glad to be rid of it. It was wet and it was getting to be cold and clammy against him. Graham was eagerly anticipating what his outfit would look like that he didn't even mind that he was naked. He then saw something that made him balk. Mommy was holding another pull-up like she expected him to step into it. Graham stood just looking at it.

“Come on honey step in,” Mommy coaxed yet Graham shook his head. This wasn't right. He wore underwear like a big boy especially during the day.

“Mommy undies,” Graham said, his Mommy must be being silly again.

“Mommy knows you wear undies but today she wants you to wear this. We're going to be on a boat and there is no bathroom. We don't want an accident do we?” Graham stood with his lips puckered, why was Mommy doing this to him? He was a big boy. He looked at her shaking the Pull-up as she

held it open as if to coax him. Graham would not stand for it.

“NO,” he shouted. “I WANT UNDIES,” Graham roared. Mommy's face hardened.

“Graham that is no way to talk to Mommy,” she said reaching over and giving him a warning swat against the side of his butt. Graham let out a little yip, it hadn't hurt but it did make him feel anxious. Now he had really done it. “Big boys do not yell at Mommy. Do you need a spanking like a bad little boy?”

Graham shook his head as he began to sniffle and fight back tears.

“No, Mommy I'm sorry, I'm a big boy,” Graham choked out through shuddering breaths. Mommy then hugged Graham as she rubbed his back.

“Mommy knows you are,” she said softly.

“You still love me?” Graham then asked as he clutched Mommy.

“Of course I do,” Mommy said. “Mommy will always love you even if you were a little naughty.” Graham nodded. It felt good to know that Mommy still loved him. Graham was then released .

“Can Mommy have a kiss?” Mommy then said puckering her lips. Graham leaned forward giving quick peck in return.

“I love you Mommy,” Graham said in a syrupy voice. Kissing was kind of gross but it was okay as long as it was Mommy

or Daddy.

“You are so sweet, Mommy could eat you up,” Mommy said as she tickled him a little causing Graham to jump and twist around with squealing laughter.

“Graham's pee pee is bouncing,” Angie laughed as she pointed. Graham's eyes widened as he covered himself and his face went hot.

“Angie that is impolite,” Mommy said with a tut. Angie apologized as she went back to twirling in the mirror.

“C'mon Grammy step in,” Mommy then said holding his pull-up open for him. Graham stepped in without complaint. “Can you pull them up?” Mommy then asked. Graham smiled as he pulled them up so they were all the way up around his waist. “Wow what a big boy,” Mommy praised. Graham smiled. He was a big boy. Only big boys wore pull-ups. If he was a baby he would be wearing a diaper.

Mommy then proceeded to help him into his clothes. First was a pair of navy blue shorts and then a sailor shirt that complete with a sailor color with white borders. Mommy then tied a red kerchief that was similar to Angie's. She tucked his shirt into the shorts and clasped them together with two gold buttons. Mommy then put a pair of white socks on his feet that went to his knees and then had him put on two black pairs of shoes with a golden buckle.

“Lets not forget your hat,” Mommy said as she put a sailors cap on his head. Graham looked at himself in the mirror. He

smiled seeing he really did look like a sailor. For a moment though he felt weird. He looked different somehow. His face seemed rounder than he remembered and he his cheeks seemed to bunch up as he smiled. Why did that seem strange? He didn't recognize himself. Graham then noticed his hair, it was lighter and didn't look right. Then he remembered that Mommy had given him a haircut. It was a bob haircut that was accentuated by his hat. That must be it, he looked different now with his haircut.

“You look so adorable,” Mommy cooed. “Do you like it?” Graham turned to look at Mommy. He smiled back nodding his head. It made Mommy happy and so it made him happy too. He liked it when Mommy was happy. That meant she loved him a whole lot. Mommy would always love him and that's all Graham needed.

“Are we going now?” Angie asked.

“We need to wait for Daddy to come back from picking up Cody from his sleepover and then we can go,” Mommy nodded.

“Then we can get on the boat!” Graham exclaimed.

Mommy brought him and Angie down to the living room. To Graham's surprise he found a big boat toy there waiting for him. He began to play with it while keeping an ear out for Daddy and Cody. He couldn't wait for them to get back. The real boat awaited. He was a sailor today.

Chapter 22

Potential: Part 22

Part 22

Abandonment issues

Cody's stomach felt like a tight knot. He was standing in front of the door in the garage. He couldn't bring himself to go in. Right now he could just tell himself it was a joke that it wasn't real. Yet Gene wouldn't joke like this. Cody knew this, but standing here and not seeing it meant Cody would not have to accept it as reality. He didn't want to go inside. What he wanted to do was scream. How could they do this and how in the world could they just tell him about in the span of a fifteen minute car ride? Did they think that's all it took? That Gene could just tell him he had to be a good big brother and that everything would carry on as if it was normal? That he would just accept it?

“Coming in?” Gene asked as he held the door open. Cody looked up at him his emotion not being able to be masked. Gene let out a sigh before closing the door and kneeling down to Cody's level as he put a hand on his shoulder. “Cody, I know this is a lot to take in, but its for the best. Remember what I told you in the car. Graham needed help, just like you did. You guys are both where you need to be. Are you going to be a good big brother and help him out?”

“Yeah, I'll help him,” Cody said. Graham needed help and Cody had to help him. Graham would do the same for him.

Graham had done the same for him. Cody followed Gene into the house. Cody braced himself as he saw Graham and Angie in the living room. Cody had to fight back a gasp.

There Graham was in his sailor outfit. He looked different, a far cry from the seven year old Cody had talked to last night and a even further removed from the thirty two year old he had first met. Graham had a calm look on his face that did strike Cody as familiar but as he locked eyes with Cody a wild smile erupted on the little boy's face.

“CODY,” Graham shouted shooting up to his feet. He hopped and scurried colliding into Cody almost knocking him down. “We can go to the boat now!”

Cody stood blinking as Graham stepped back looking at him.

“Graham you uh look different,” Cody said searching Graham's face for any recognition that his greeting had been an act. Cody was hoping and praying that Graham would give him a wink that would tell him that everything was okay. That this was an act.

“I'm a sailor,” Graham lisped standing up straight. “Mommy said so, I'm a big boy sailor.” Graham was smiling as he looked down at himself.

“You are,” Cody said slowly as realization was starting to hit him. It came over his body like a slow sap covering his skin and as it did he could feel it start to prickle against him.

“Cody lets go, Graham and Angie have been waiting for you,” Gretchen said looking at him from the couch.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” Cody suddenly said.

“Okay,” Gretchen said nodding. “Then get dressed after, I already set your outfit out in your room.”

Cody nodded as he went upstairs. He stumbled into the bathroom locking the door behind himself. He was crouched over the toilet. He felt sick like he was going to puke at any moment. Graham was completely fogged out, they had broken him. Cody stood as his nauseous feeling passed. He went to the sink and splashed some water on his face. That couldn't be. Graham would not fog out just like that. Cody knew he was just going to have to break him out of it. He could do that, right? Although thinking about how Graham had been doubt began to seep in. What if Cody couldn't do that? Cody thought about how scared Graham must have been. Did he even know what had happened? Or worse what if he did and it had been too much for him to deal with like with Angie. What if Graham had given up? Cody shook his head. No that wasn't the kind of person Graham was. He needed Cody help to break out of the fog and then everything would be okay.

Cody came back downstairs dressed in the clothes Gretchen had set out for him. A pair of khaki shorts and a blue white striped shirt with a navy blazer and some strap on sandals.

“Are we ready to get this show on the road,” Gene asked looking in his own blue blazer complete with a red ascot.

“I think we are,” Gretchen said in a floral print white dress with a billowy sun hat.

In the car Cody looked at the spot next to him wishing Graham was sitting next to him like always. Instead Graham was up in the middle row with Angie strapped into his car seat with a five point harness. Cody watched him hoping to see signs that Graham was still there. Yet Graham acted as if nothing was amiss and was chewing on the ear of his dalmatian stuffie looking completely at ease. As Cody sat watching he realized they must have been planning this. They already had a car seat for Graham and a whole outfit for the regatta in Graham's new size. Cody had no way knowing of course that if things had gone differently he could have found himself wearing that outfit and strapped into a car seat.

Getting down to the docks it was clear to see the whole town was out in full force. Booths lined the boardwalks and many people were walking around dressed to the nines. It was easy to see who the locals were and who were the tourist. Coming onto the main dock the family was met by Alex who was dressed similarly to Gene.

“Don't you look handsome,” Gretchen beamed as she hugged him and gave him a kiss.

“Got to look good for the regatta,” Alex said before turning his attention to Graham who was in Gene's arms holding his dog. Cody saw Graham look a little nervous to see Alex. “Like that gift I got you?” Alex then asked pointing to the stuffie. Graham looked at the dog before smiling as he nodded his head.

“Has'nt left his side all the morning,” Gene chuckled.

“Does your friend have a name?” Alex then asked.

“Ruffer,” Graham whispered as he held the dog up to his face.

“What a clever name,” Alex said as he ruffled Graham's hair. Angie then asked if Alex liked her dress. Cody watched as Alex praised her as she gave a twirl. That's when Alex set his sight on Cody.

“Hey there bud, good to finally meet you face to face,” Alex said extending his hand.

“Yeah,” Cody said as he shook Alex's hand. Cody wondered what Alex thought about what his parents were doing. He obviously knew what was going on, but was he aware that Graham had been a seven year old just yesterday? A woman then approached addressing Gene as Mayor Callaway and asking if they were ready for photos. The family was ushered in front of a back drop with the words Merryweather Regatta on it. Cody stood as some people took photos. Cody thought this is must be what Gene and Gretchen meant when they had told the kids they were going to need to be on their best behavior. Here they were getting their photo's taken, the first time Gene and Gretchen were showing off their new family to the wider community who had no idea about Golden Horizon. There was a sort of finality to it all in Cody's mind. There was even a news crew their who were currently interviewing Gene. The only silver lining being that they wouldn't be able to regress any of them any further now. How would they explain one of their children suddenly getting younger? No they were showing them off now because

everyone was exactly where Gene and Gretchen wanted them. This was their family.

“The regatta is a great opportunity for Merryweather to show off the hospitality we are know for and helps our local business's, not too mention its all for a great cause,” Gene said.

“Could you tell us more about the Merryweather adoption agency?” the reporter asked.

“Of course as you know the adoption agency is who we are raising money for. They help families all over the world not just here in Merryweather. Their are many families out there waiting to become whole and the MAA as we call it does a lot of work to make that happen. They've even helped me and my family,” Gene said as he gestured to the three children. Cody raised an eyebrow. So that's how they did it. No one raised an eyebrow when the mayor suddenly had kids, they were all adopted. It wasn't just here in Merryweather, either apparently they sent kidnapped people all over the world. Cody counted himself lucky that he had ended up here with Graham instead of somewhere else.

The interview came to an end as Graham squirmed in Gretchen's arms.

“Mommy when do we get on the boat?” he asked.

“Soon honey soon,” she said as she set him on his feet. “I know you're excited.”

“C'mon Graham,” Alex said extending out his hand. “How

about big brother takes you to look at the boats.” Graham didn't need to be told twice as he took Alex's hand. Cody grimaced as he watched Graham and Angie walk off to the side of the dock to look at boats.

“Cody, don't you want to go too?” Gretchen asked.

“Oh no umm,” Cody stuttered. “I need to go to the bathroom actually.” Gretchen narrowed her eyes for a moment.

“Do you have an upset tummy or...” she prodded.

“No I'm fine,” Cody said quickly “Just need to go.”

“Bathrooms are right over there,” Gretchen said pointing to a building near the stairs that lead up from the docks. “Hurry back though we are going to be boarding soon,” she said with a nod.

Cody walked quickly to the building he got to the door at the side leading into the men's room but stopped. He didn't need to actually go. His stomach did hurt but not because it was upset more so because the knot that had been there refused to go away. Every time he looked at Graham it seemed to pulse. Cody went over to a water fountain taking sip. He stood back up taking a deep breath. The cool water helped him clear his head. He was feeling at a loss. His whole world had been turned upside down in the matter of a morning. He was struggling just to keep it together.

Just then a hand clamped around Cody's mouth as he was pulled into a vice like grip around his torso. Cody let out a muffled scream as he struggled.

“Familiar,” a voice said cooly into his ear. Cody froze. This did feel familiar. A moment later Cody was released as he stumbled forward and whirled around to see Alex bent down.

“What did you do that for?” Cody spat.

“An experiment,” Alex said with a shrug as he stood up. Cody stared back at Alex not understanding what he was saying. “I was testing you, seeing if you remembered the first time we met.”

Cody's eyes went wide as he now understood what Alex was saying. When Cody had been taken it had been just like that. Someone had grabbed him from behind. He now knew that person had been Alex which meant Alex was the supplier.

“Y-you're the one, “ Cody stammered.

“Sure am,” Alex said. “Most of the kids around here are my doing actually.” Cody's eyes widened. Did that mean that Zen and Angie and even Graham? Was Alex the one that had done this to all of them.

“Why would you tell me that?” Cody asked shaking his head.

“Graham knew so I figured it was only fair you did too, I don't want to play favorites.” Alex said as he took out a cigarette and lit it up before taking a long drag.

“Graham knew?” Cody questioned.

“Sure did,” Alex said. “He is the only one I ever showed my face too actually. I was in his apartment when I did it,” Alex chuckled. Cody shook his head. That couldn't be true. If

Graham knew why didn't he say anything? Cody thought back to when they had talked about how they had gotten taken. Graham had said he never saw him. Had he really lied? Alex had to be up to something.

“That's not true,” Cody said.

“Believe me or don't it doesn't really matter,” Alex said.

“Well I don't,” Cody said giving a Alex a glare. Graham would not keep a secret like this from him, Alex was lying.

“So suspicious,” Alex smirked as he got closer to Cody causing the boy to back up.

“Just leave me alone will you,” Cody sneered.

“Can't do that,” Alex chuckled.

“Why the hell not?” Cody spat back.

“Language little boy,” Alex said giving Cody a terse look.

“I'm not a little boy,” Cody growled. Alex gave Cody a long stare before shaking his head.

“You and Graham are so different,” Alex said. “You see he is interesting, probably the reason why I showed myself to him. But you mystify me. I don't like that.” Cody was unsure of how to take the comment.

“The less you know about me the better,” Cody said crossing his arms and giving Alex a pouty look.

“I know everything I need too,” Alex replied looking as if he

was mad. “It just doesn't add up. Its wrong.” Cody didn't know what Alex was going on about. Whatever it was seemed to bother Alex which was fine by him.

“Whats wrong?” Gene's voice said as Cody saw him walk up to the pair. “There a problem here?” Gene asked looking from Cody to Alex.

“No problem,” Alex said with a smile. “Just giving my little bro a reminder about potty mouths.”

“Cody,” Gene said giving the boy a look. “Are you swearing?”

“Just a little slip up, right bud?” Alex said mussing up Cody's hair. “I dealt with it.”

“Okay then,” Gene said sounding satisfied before looking at Alex eyeing the cigarette. “You really shouldn't smoke in front of the kids.”

“Sorry,” Alex said dropping the cigarette and stomping it out with his foot. “Guess that wasn't a good example to set.”

“Just don't let your mother see, she'll blow a gasket,” Gene chuckled. “Anyways its time to get on the boat.” Gene said as he went over and took Cody's by the hand. “We better hurry before Graham explodes from excitement.”

The boat was larger than Cody had expected. It was a small yacht that had a small indoor area and a bedroom down below. Cody sat in the back on the bench of the deck with his life jacket on. He had his chin rested upon his hands as he stared at Graham who was sat in Gretchen's lap. Gene and

Alex were up top steering the boat into the bay.

“Look at the birds,” Angie shouted as she leaned over the side. Cody quickly grabbed her by the back of her life jacket and pulled her down into her seat.

“Sit down Angie,” Cody said sounding more than a little annoyed. It was the third time he had done it.

“I want to see the birds,” Angie whined.

“Angie listen to your big brother,” Gretchen called out before giving Cody a smile. The boy frowned. He really hated hearing them call him big brother. He didn't want to be anyone's big brother least of all Graham's. It was all wrong. He and Graham were supposed to be equals, they were supposed to be in this together, it was them against the world.

What concerned Cody was that the more he watched Graham the less concerned he was becoming and it was being replaced by a feeling of pity. He couldn't seem to look at the little boy in Gretchen's lap who smiled as she kissed him and praised him for being a good boy and sitting nicely, and see any sign of the old Graham. Could it bee that he was truly lost?

Cody felt alone, just like he had so many times in the past. He should be used to it by now. Friends always disappeared on him, often not by choice, just like Graham.

The boat came to a stop as Gene and Alex came down to join the rest of the family.

“We are anchored,” Gene announced. “Hope everyone enjoyed the ride.”

“No more boat ride?” Graham asked looking up sadly at Gretchen.

“We'll have another boat ride when we go back,” Gretchen said as she put Graham down onto his feet. “But now we can get you ready to go swimming!” Gretchen said clapping her hands with big smile which Graham copied as he hopped up and down.

“I want to swim too,” Angie said jumping up in her seat.

“Then lets go put on your swimsuits,” Gretchen said as she took Graham by the hand and began to lead him and Angie inside. “Cody I have a suit for you too,” she called back.

“No thanks,” Cody said waving his hand. “I'm gonna wait.” Gretchen gave him a disappointed look before nodding as she disappeared with Graham and Angie.

Ten minutes later Graham came running back out onto the deck. His life jacket was gone and he was in a pair of baby blue swim trunks decorated with little bears in inner tubes. Cody noticed that Graham seemed to be running straight towards the back of the boat. He jumped up grabbing Graham to stop him from jumping in.

“Gene grab him,” Gretchen yelled out as she came out of the boat with a harried look. Her face washed over with relief upon seeing that Cody already had Graham secured.

“Good catch their big brother,” Gene chuckled patting on the back before grabbing Graham up into his arms and sitting him down in a seat.

“Graham you need to wait until Mommy says you can get in the water do you understand?” Gene said sounding a little cross.

“Sorry Daddy,” Graham said sticking out his lower lip.

“Both of you need sunscreen and floaties first,” Gretchen said as she pulled a tube of sunscreen out of her bag. She started in with Angie who was wearing a pink polka dotted one piece with a a ruffly skirt on it. Graham sat swinging his legs as he waited patiently.

Cody turned his back watching the other boats in the bay. He hated seeing Graham act so obediently, mostly because he knew it was'nt an act.

Cody felt a tug on his arm as he looked down to see that Graham was now ready to swim noting the stray white lines of sunscreen on his cheeks. Whats more he now had a life preserver that was a band featuring a green sea turtle across his chest complete with attached floaties.

“Cody don't you wanna swim?” Graham asked looking up at him with big saucer eyes.

“No not really,” Cody said sullenly.

“Are you scared?” Graham then asked. “We can jump together.”

Cody shook his head.

“Graham you cannot get in the water until Daddy and Alex get changed,” Gretchen said.

Cody turned to see her putting her stuff away as Angie stood nearby in her own life preserver that was similar to Graham's except her's was pink and had a unicorn on it. Cody was now sure he wasn't going to swim especially if Gretchen was going to insist he wear something like that.

Gene and Alex returned having donned their own swimming suits and got into the water before Graham and Angie were given permission to jump in.

Cody sat glumly as he watched the splashing and fun happening in the water. He wiped his hair a little noticing he was sweating under the hot sun.

“They sure look like their having fun,” Gretchen said as she took a seat next to Cody. “You look hot, maybe you should hop in yourself.”

“I don't want too,” Cody said gruffly.

“Oh c'mon your little brother would be thrilled if you did,” Gretchen said. Cody's face twisted up, it took everything in him not to scream.

“He's not my little brother,” Cody said gritting his teeth. He expected a quick reprimand from Gretchen yet she remained silent before she let out a sigh.

“I understand this is a big change,” Gretchen said. “But you

can't push your brother away, its really not fair to him."

"I'm not," Cody replied. The last thing he would do was push Graham away.

"You are," Gretchen said. "I've seen it. You barely look at him."

Cody looked at Gretchen his face laced with guilt and anger.

"Go on say your piece," Gretchen said with a patient expression. Cody had a lot he could say, that he wanted to say.

"That's not Graham," Cody finally said turning his face away.

"I don't understand how you could say that," Gretchen said.

"You changed him," Cody said his throat tightening with frustration. How could she try and tell him that what he was saying wasn't true.

"Oh darling you are looking at this all wrong," Gretchen said wrapping her arms around Cody's stomach as she pulled him close so that he was rested up against and looking out at the rest of the family in the water. "I know that you and Graham knew each other before you came here."

Cody's eyes widened hearing her refer to a time when he had not been a kid. Cody had never heard her or Gene make mention of the time before, it had felt like it was forbidden.

"You two had no problem accepting one another as siblings when you arrived, so why is it any different now?" Gretchen asked her voice measured and calm. "He's still Graham."

“No he's not,” Cody said. All day he had been watching Graham. He knew that it was him but something was different and it wasn't just because how Graham was acting or how he looked. “He's little,” Cody said. Its all he could say though it didn't really describe what he was feeling. “He wouldn't have wanted that.”

“Cody I need you to understand that me and Daddy would never do anything to hurt you. We do what is best for you. Graham needed this. In fact I had a long talk with him a yesterday. He wanted this.”

“He asked you to do this?” Cody said twisting his body so that he was looking at Gretchen. The just could not be true. Graham would never do that.

“Not directly,” Gretchen said. “We had a very long talk though. Graham was hurting and it was apparent that he needed something that he was not getting. He needed more care. He needed us to build a more secure world for him. Its working, don't you see. Look how happy he is.”

Cody did look as he saw Graham laughing as she splashed water at Angie.

“Graham hasn't changed,” Gretchen said. “He is allowed to be the most honest form of himself. He will have everything he needs including you. So please don't push him away, he needs his big brother.”

Cody was silent. It finally dawned on him what he was feeling. He felt abandoned. For so long even before all this,

he had been relying on Graham. He had been relying on him to help him off the streets and then he had relied on him to be his rock when things felt too hard. Cody felt immediately guilty. He had put so much on Graham without even realizing it. Graham had seen him at his worst, at his lowest moments. He had never abandoned or gave up on Cody and yet now Cody was doing that to him.

“I want to go swimming now,” Cody said standing up. He had been waffling all day. One moment he was sure he was going to help Graham before a minute later despairing that Graham was lost. Not anymore.

“Your suit is right inside,” Gretchen said smiling. Cody walked into the boat finding a red and blue swimsuit with race cars on it laid out for him. He got it on and walked back onto the deck. Gretchen slathered him in sunscreen before helping him get his orange life jacket buckled on. Cody wasn't going to be happy about what happened. He never would. He couldn't abandon Graham though he had to be there for him. It didn't matter if Graham was thirty or three, he would never not be there for him.

Cody went towards the back of the boat before jumping in. The water was cold and as he came up he felt refreshed.

“Cody, you came,” Graham said paddling over to Cody with a smile on his face.

“Yeah, well I came to be with you,” Cody said. Graham looked at him his face seemed to look almost sad. He grabbed onto Cody's jacket pulling himself closer.

“I'm happy you here,” Graham said his voice sounding small. Cody wrapped Graham up in hug as Graham put his head on Cody's shoulder.

“I'm gonna be with you forever,” Cody said. “I won't leave you.” Cody wasn't sure if Graham understood what he was really saying yet he felt Graham grip him harder.

“Thanks,” Graham whispered.

Chapter 23

Potential: Part 23

Reading the opening of this chapter and listening to Handel's Sarabande in D Minor (made popular by the film Barry Lyndon) on repeat for YouTube... well let's just say it adds to the emotional effect tremendously. Why did I have to have that on repeat while I was writing and then took a break to read this chapter? Ahh well, the music I referenced is down below, if you're curious.

Poor Cody... poor Claire. And thank god some flicker of Graham remains, even if it's buried. Because like Cody and Claire said it's like mourning the dead and being unable to at the same time.

And did we ever get Chris' occupation, I wonder? I'm going to have to go back and reread to be sure. I'm not sure we did, or if we did it was a reference that came and went without drawing too much attention to itself--something that you're very good at doing as a writer.

This is where the emotional overlap of what Cody and Claire are experiencing occurs with someone living with and watching someone suffer through dementia or Alzheimer's comes in for me. And having had my Aunt suffer through dementia and recently pass... my heart goes out to Cody. It's horrible to watch a person you love, care for, and know erode away and it's difficult to live with the person who remains. There's some great advice for those who have to live that way

that my cousin gave at my Aunt's funeral--learn to live with the person who they become and celebrate the joys that are there.

That said, this situation is more than a little different, though that advice would work for Cody. Lean into what Graham finds joy in now and live with him in that.

Chapter 24

Potential: Part 24

Part 24

A Painful Homecoming

Graham sat on the floor of the living room playing with his boat. Yet it brought him no joy, it just wasn't fun. All day he had been feeling off. After Mommy had left him at preschool he had spent most of his time sitting by himself hugging Ruffer. Even when the other kids had offered to play with him he had refused. He didn't like the preschool it made him feel weird almost as if he shouldn't be there. But that seemed wrong too. He was a big boy who went to school but their was a nagging at the back of his skull that told him he was not. So then what was it, was he a baby?

Graham got to his feet. That could not be. He definitely wasn't a baby, but he wasn't a big boy, was there something in-between? He wanted to ask Mommy about this, but he hesitated. She would tell him he was a big boy surely. She had already made a big deal upon getting home and letting him change out of his pull-up into some undies making sure to tell him what a big boy he was. Graham looked down at his underwear since he wasn't wearing pants. They were certainly for big boys and he quite liked the yellow excavators all over them. But Graham couldn't help but shake the feeling that there was something Mommy wasn't telling him.

Graham walked upstairs. He saw Cody's room and felt drawn

to go in. He slipped in almost as if he wasn't supposed to be here. As Graham stood in the room he looked at the two beds. It was kind of weird that Cody had two beds. No one else had two beds in their room, not even Mommy and Daddy.

Graham walked up to the bed that did not belong to Cody. It didn't have any sheets on it and was just a plain mattress. Graham placed his hands on it and his head started to ache again.

“Graham,” a voice called out causing the boy to jump as he saw Cody walking into the room. “What are you doing?”

“N-nuthin,” Graham said as he stepped away from the bed. “Sorry.”

“For what?” Cody asked cocking his head.

“For coming in,” Graham said putting his hands behind his back feeling like he was in trouble.

“I don't care if you come in here,” Cody said as he went and sat on his bed.

“You don't,” Graham said feeling a little surprised.

“Of course not this is your –“ Cody then paused before shaking his head. “I mean you can come here whenever you want.”

“Lets play,” Graham then said clapping his hands.

“Yeah you can play, there are some toys over there,” Cody said pointing to the corner of the room where some bins with

lego and action figures were.

“I want you to play too,” Graham whimpered. “You never play with me anymore.”

Cody looked at Graham for a long time before he rested his chin in his hands as if he were thinking very deeply about something.

“What have we played?” Cody then asked. Graham went to answer but came to a stop, that question seemed strange to him. Graham began to think. He liked playing with trucks and his boat but he couldn't remember Cody playing that with him, but he was sure they had played together before. Graham was really searching his memories now. His head started to hurt again but he pressed on.

“We...played...video games,” Graham said wincing almost as if it physically hurt him to say it.

“We did,” Cody said shooting up towards Graham so that he now crouched in front of him holding Graham's shoulders. “What else did we play?”

“Ummm we played nerf guns,” Graham said. “And I shot mommy.”

“You did you did,” Cody said excitedly. “You remember, what else?” Graham shook his head. His skull was pounding. These memories seemed strange. They were fuzzy but they made no sense. It scared Graham as well. There was something dark to them, and something told him he didn't want to know.

“You remember, I know you do,” Cody said. “Whats your name surely you can remember that?”

“Gwaham,” the boy said proudly. The pain subsided a little.

“Yeah, but like your last name,” Cody said chuckling a little.

“Cawaway,” Graham said. That one was too easy.

“No, no, that's wrong,” Cody said as his face screwed up. Graham was a little taken aback. Cody seemed angry now.

“You're Graham Hayes. You're not some little kid either. You're 32. We're adults not kids and Mommy and Daddy aren't our real parents, none of this is real.”

Graham took a step back. Cody was coming at him intensely and Graham was getting scared. Every word out of Cody's mouth stabbed into his brain like knives.

“You have to remember,” Cody said. “You just gotta.”

“NOOO,” Graham screeched as he crouched into a ball holding his head. “Stop it, stop you're making my head hurt,” Graham whined as he began to whimper. Cody went to put his hands on Graham. They had been getting somewhere. Yet he hesitated, his hands hovering above Graham seeing him quivering and curled into a ball. Cody gently placed a hand on Graham's back rubbing it softly up and down.

“I'm sorry,” Cody said. “I didn't mean to hurt you.”

Graham peeked out at Cody. His head felt like mush and still there was a singular voice screaming at him to keep going.

“Say it again,” Graham muttered.

“No,” Cody said. “We don't have to play that game anymore.”

“Keep going,” Graham demanded as he straightened up and stomped his foot.

“Not if it hurts you,” Cody said crossing his arms. He wanted too more than anything. If there was a chance to bring Graham back then it seemed like the thing to do. But Cody could not accept that course of action if it hurt Graham. There was now way to tell if it could cause lasting damage. What if it broke Graham for good. Right now Cody would just have to be okay knowing that a small part of Graham persisted. “We can play something different,” Cody said authoritatively as he walked over to the toys in the bin. “Want to play superheroes,” Cody said picking up a figure and showing it to Graham.

The small boy looked at the figure in his brother's hand. The way they were standing across from each other reminded Graham of something.

Alex. That was it. Alex had been holding that figure, but he and Graham had not been playing. Something else had been happening. Once again Graham's head began to hurt. That was good. He wanted his head to hurt. He wanted it to hurt so much until it broke.

Graham looked around the room. He marched up to the spare bed again placing his hands on top. That had made his head hurt. What else had made his head hurt?

“Cody I'm big right?” Graham asked.

“Uh yeah sure you're big,” Cody said unsure of what was going on.

“How big?” Graham asked.

“You're a big boy I guess,” Cody said knowing that Graham seemed to get upset if there was any comment that alluded to him being a little kid.

“So I'm little,” Graham sneered taking Cody by surprise.

“Um that's not what I said,” Cody said more than a little confused.

“Boys are little,” Graham said. “So you think I'm little. Men are big. So am I a little boy? Or am I a man?”

“Well you're not a man,” Cody said.

“So I am little,” Graham growled. “You think I'm little.”

“Fine Graham, you're a man,” Cody said a little exasperated. This toddler logic was a little maddening.

“Say I den,” Graham spat.

“You're a big man Graham, the biggest man ever, is that what you want?”

Graham smiled. Yeah that hurt alright bringing back the throbbing just like when Mrs. Ernst had said it. But it wasn't enough. Graham looked back at the bed. The pain seemed to bring things to Graham's mind. There was something about

this bed that was important. He got on the floor looking under but found nothing, that wasn't it but he was close. He stood for a moment letting the pain pulse against his head. Under, there was something under. He began to push the mattress but he didn't possess the strength to lift it up.

“Cody help,” Graham mewled. Cody walked over as his eyes narrowed. Something was happening. As Cody helped lift the mattress up, Graham saw some pages stapled together. He grabbed them before plopping on the ground as he looked at the pages. He couldn't read them but looking at the handwriting made his head reach new heights of pain. He flipped through the pages until he came to large letters repeating over a single page. He could read them.

DO NOT TRUST MOMMY AND DADDY

DO NOT TRUST MOMMY AND DADDY

DO NOT TRUST MOMMY AND DADDY

DO NOT TRUST MOMMY AND DADDY

DO NOT TRUST MOMMY AND DADDY

Graham could feel pain stabbing outwards in his head. It felt as if at any moment it would burst through his skull. He gave the packet to Cody.

“Read it,” he demanded. Cody took the pages looking at them a moment, his face screwing up a little.

“Did you write all this?” Cody asked.

“Read it to me and don't stop.” Graham said standing on his feet as if he was bracing himself for Cody to beat him up. And so Cody began to read out loud.

“Graham this is you, everything here was written by you. I am the real you. I know you better than you know yourself. Your whole life is lie. You need to do something about it.”

Graham stood with his eyes closed. Cody was like a preacher and Graham was a parishioner with their hands to the sky ready to accept the holy spirit. Except Graham was not feeling anything close to euphoria. Instead each word Cody said felt like someone was bashing his skull in. Cody was now on the third page.

“You have to leave and take Cody with you,” Cody said pausing for a moment.

“Don't stop,” Graham whimpered.

“Uh yeah sure,” Cody said quickly as he began reading again. “You and Cody must get away, leave these lives behind. Don't take no for an answer do what you have to. You both made a promise to each other. You have to get out of this together. Your parents are not to be trusted.” Cody was now at the page with the repeating words. He read each one, his voice reaching a zenith.

“Do not trust Mommy and Daddy,” Cody said reading the last line. Graham could no longer take it. He heard a pop.

“STOOP,” Graham screeched. Cody did. He looked up from the page and his face grew concerned.

“Umm Graham,” Cody said. As he looked at Graham the boy looked like he was drenched in sweat. His face pale. Cody reached out a hand. Graham's eyes went to the back of his head as he fell backwards onto the ground.

“Oh shit!” Cody exclaimed as he went to the ground next to Graham. “Hey are you okay? Graham, Graham!”

Graham didn't move as his eyes kept on fluttering.

“Just stay there, I'll get Mom,” Cody said panicking as he got up and raced towards the door. Graham, as if he was vampire awakening from sleep sat straight up.

“Cody stop,” Graham said as he slowly looked at Cody who stood frozen at the door his hand on the knob. “That's not necessary.” Graham said giving Cody a small smile. His head was still throbbing but he could feel a sense of relief/ For the first time in a couple of days Graham felt like he was actually able to see again.

“Graham, are you...” Cody asked taking a couple of steps forward.

“Yeah, I'm back,” Graham said nodding. Cody wiped the singular tear falling down his cheek before smiling.

“Welcome back,” Cody said as he went to Graham and squeezed him tightly in a hug.

“Cody you're squeezing me,” Graham croaked.

“I don't care,” Cody said. He didn't want to stop. Right now nothing else seemed to matter. He didn't care that he had been

shrunken down or that they didn't have a plan to escape that would work. No other problem in Cody's life mattered. Graham was back with him, and right now that made everything okay.

Chapter 25

Potential: Part 25

Part 25

To make Peace

Graham and Cody were sat in the room they once shared. They had their back's rested up against one another. Both of them were emotionally spent. Still it felt good to be sitting with one another, both of them feeling as if they had been apart for some time.

“Hey Cody,” Graham finally spoke up.

“Yeah?” Cody asked.

“Thanks,” Graham said.

“For what?” Cody asked.

“For keeping your promise,” Graham said.”You know for bringing me back.”

“Oh,” Cody said his voice mixing in with some shame. “I didn't really do anything. I think you kind of helped yourself. Especially with this,” Cody said lifting up Graham's writing. Graham was silent as he thought about his next words. Graham could only surmise that wasn't true. Cody had played an integral part, how it all worked though Graham wasn't sure.

“What is this anyways?” Cody said as Graham heard the rustling of paper. Graham quickly twisted around and

grabbed the paper out of Cody's hands.

“Don't read that,” Graham said holding the paper close to his chest like a dog guarding its bone.

“Why not?” Cody asked.

“Its personal,” Graham grumbled. He didn't want Cody to see the rest of it. That was for Graham and he thought that Cody might not like it, the same as when he had read Graham's secret during the trust exercise.

“Really Graham what is it, when did you even write it?” Cody asked.

“It was the night you went to the sleepover. I just felt like I had to get some thoughts down you know in case anything happened.”

“Good thing you did,” Cody said. “I mean if you hadn't, who knows what would have happened. We should probably keep it around.”

“Maybe,” Graham said. He still wasn't convinced that this had been the silver bullet Cody thought it was. “We can't keep it here though. Gretchen might find it.”

“True,” Cody agreed. Graham then folded up the papers handing it back to Cody.

“Give them to Claire, tell her to keep them safe,” Graham instructed. “And don't read it.”

“Are you sure that's okay,” Cody asked. “What if you slip

again?” Graham shook his head, maybe it was better to let Cody believe that they had a sure fail safe. There was no point in worrying him, not when Graham was unsure of things.

“Then at least we will know its safe,” Graham said. Cody took the papers hiding them in his pillowcase, he would give it to Claire tomorrow.

Just then the door opened as Gretchen came walking in.

“And what is going on here?” she asked smiling. Both boys looked at her dumbfounded for a moment.

“We playin Mommy,” Graham suddenly chirped causing Cody to do a double take.

“That's nice,” Gretchen said as she picked Graham up into her arms. “Cody is really fun to play with isn't he?”

“He da bestest,” Graham said throwing up his arms. For a moment he thought he might be laying it on too thick yet Gretchen seemed to buy it.

“You can play more later,” Gretchen said. “But right now my big boy needs a bath.”

Cody was worried that Graham had slipped again. But as Graham was carried out of the room he gave Cody a wink letting him know he was alright.

In the bathtub Graham was finding out the realities of his situation. Even if he was back that didn't mean he didn't have to keep up the act in front of Gretchen. He was relieved to

find out that even acting wasn't pulling him back into the fog. What was concerning is he could tell it was harder to resist. It had been hard enough at seven to beat it back, but he had gotten used to it. Now though it was more intense. Graham could only feel he was steps away from the edge.

That night Graham lay awake in his bed looking up at the ceiling. He had been put to bed first of course even before Angie. Not that he was complaining he actually felt tired. He had made it through the whole night routine convincingly enough. He had let Gretchen get him dressed in the red and black striped sleeper with the little shark at the hip, and had played along with her lovey dovey doting as she kissed him and had even kissed her back. He should have been reviled to put on such a display yet he couldn't muster up any sort of feeling. He hated her for sure. She had gotten to him and Graham had messed up. That made his situation worse. He had to keep it up, Graham knew there was danger to that but he had no choice.

Graham let his arm flop out from under the blanket as it landed on Ruffer. He looked at the stuffed animal. Even now he felt the tug of familiarity. He hugged the stuffed animal to his chest. It was comforting. He looked into the beady eyes of the stuffed animal. It was almost as if it was speaking to him. What are you going to do now? That was the question of the hour. He was screwed in so many ways. He couldn't fight the fog forever. But he couldn't let it end like this.

Graham stood on top of the slide at the preschool playground. It was late afternoon soon enough Gene would come with

Cody and Angie to pick him up. It had been a few days since Graham had broken out of his fog. He had gotten a grasp on the routine of his day. He sat on his butt and went sliding down. That was an apt metaphor for his situation. Here he was after climbing out of his fog only to be sent back to the bottom. It wasn't for lack of trying either. He and Cody had run an experiment of sorts on Angie. The idea being that if Graham was able to break out of the fog maybe others could too. If they were able to do that, maybe they could form a group of sorts. Going around bringing people back and sowing seeds of resistance. Get enough people together and they could bring about a revolt. That had been a stupid pie in the sky idea though.

They had tried to tell Angie she wasn't a kid, try to get her to remember she had been an adult. Angie had simply laughed. She thought it had been a game and the boys had then gotten pulled into playing house with her. The conclusion was apparent. Angie was completely gone, how many others were like her? Graham looked out across the yard at the preschool building. The developmental center. The place where they made the stuff, the beating black heart of this conspiracy. It was a huge revelation yet Graham could do nothing with it. It felt like he could see all the pieces now, but he couldn't put them together. He was a little kid in front of a puzzle that he couldn't complete, what was he to do, smash it all and wipe it off the table in a fit of rage?

Graham smiled.

There was something to that.

Graham walked into Cody's room full of apprehension. An idea had wheedled its way into his head and it wouldn't let go. He wanted to know what Cody thought though. He could only do it if Cody agreed. Graham found Cody laid out on his stomach on his floor flipping through a book.

“Whatcha doin?” Graham asked unsure of how to approach what he wanted to say.

“Reading,” Cody said looking over at Graham.

“I see,” Graham said nodding. Cody furrowed his brow before closing the book and sitting up. For Cody it was a funny thing. Ever since Graham's regression it was easy to read him. His emotions displayed on his face without deception. Right now Graham had something to say.

“You want to talk I'm guessing?” Cody said giving Graham a smirk.

“Yeah, I do,” Graham said as he tapped a set of toes onto the carpet. “It's kind of hard to say though.”

“Just say it,” Cody said with a sigh. Graham winced, if only it was that easy. What Graham had to say was harder than that. In some ways it was a complete reversal of everything they had been working towards. Still it seemed to be the only way forward. Just then Gene walked into the room.

"There you are,” he said hoisting Graham up into the air. “It's bath time and then it will be time to get ready for bed.” he said in an enthusiastic voice as if he were telling Graham he was the million dollar prize winner.

“Daddy wait,” Graham bleated like a caught lamb. This was so annoying. He needed to talk to Cody but it seemed like the world was not going to allow that.

“No complaining now Grammy,” Gene chuckled bouncing Graham up and down. “You can play with Cody tomorrow.”

Graham grimaced. He had thought it had been bad at seven with how little control he had over his life. At four it was completely overwhelming. They would have him ready for bed by seven and then some bedtime stories till seven thirty which left little time during the night. Cody could see Graham had something to say though and he was curious enough to hear it.

“Daddy can I take a bath with Graham tonight?” Cody then asked. Gene looked at Cody a moment before shrugging.

“Sure I don't see why not.” Gene said smiling at Graham. “Doesn't that sound good buddy.”

Graham may have appreciated Cody's effort but it didn't seem to work out. While Gene scrubbed Graham from head to toe not even really paying attention he was giving Cody spelling words to spell out with the magnetic letters. It did make Graham feel just a little demeaned. He was being talked over while the big people did their business that he was too little for. Once Graham was washed he just sat watching Cody, who looked over at him seeing Graham's bored expression.

“Maybe Graham should do the next one?” Cody said. Graham looked at Cody with some confusion. Why would he

suggest something like that? He was in a position where he was'nt supposed to be able to do something like that. Gene seemed to agree as well.

“Graham's too little,” Gene laughed. “But maybe...” Gene said looking at Graham for a minute.

“Graham can you find the A and the T. Graham dug into the basket remembering that he was four, so he made sure to take some time to find the letters. Graham then attached the letter to the tile wall causing Gene to clap his hand and congratulate him. Graham forced a smile.

Gretchen then called out for Gene that there was a phone call. Miraculously Gene saw fit to leave the two of them alone yet not without a reminder to Cody to keep an eye on Graham. Finally Graham had his opportunity yet he was still unsure of how to approach it. He figured he might as well just get it out.

“Cody are you happy here?” Graham asked.

“No way,” Cody said. “Who would be? I think I would like to be an adult again.”

“Yeah of course,” Graham said. “But like if you couldn't be an adult again. If this had to be your life would you be able to accept that?”

“Oh, so that's what you mean,” Cody said as he picked up one of the magnets and tossed it at the wall. “I guess there are worse places to be. And with us being together I guess its bearable.”

“I've been thinking,” Graham said. “I think we're kind of stuck here for the foreseeable future.”

“Is it hard?” Cody asked.

“Huh?” Graham questioned not having expected the question.

“I mean resisting the fog,” Cody clarified. “Is it harder now?”

“Yeah it is,” Graham admitted. For some reason a conversation he had with Claire what felt like forever ago came back to him. She had told him that being vulnerable was a form of trust. Admitting something like this was certainly showing a vulnerable side to Graham. A weakness within him. Yet it was okay to show it too Cody. Graham looked at Cody who was staring at the wall. He wondered what he was thinking.

“Its okay you know,” Cody said softly. “If its getting too hard, you can let go. Just let me know when you're ready.”

“When I'm ready?” Graham repeated.

“Yeah,” Cody said looking at Graham with a smile. “We can go together, that way the other one won't feel so lonely.”

Graham was struck for a moment by Cody's acceptance of the idea. Not too mention he did feel a fair bit guilty. He hadn't really considered what Cody had been through the last few days. Cody must have been so scared and lonely. Feelings Graham had felt during those times when he had thought Cody had been slipping. Although Cody had always been fine giving Graham some relief. Cody had no such grace.

“You'd really be okay with it?” Graham asked.

“I've been thinking too,” Cody said. “The writing's on the wall. We are coming to the end here. Its scary but I know we'll be fine. Because you'll still be my brother.”

Graham was silent. Cody's words were comforting in a way. He was right, they would be okay.

“Not yet though,” Graham said his face turning deeply serious. “You're right. Gene and Gretchen are going to get their kids. But first their going to pay, and not just them but this whole cult. They are going to pay for what they've done.” Cody raised an eyebrow looking at Graham with an intrigued look.

“And how are we going to do that?” Cody asked. Not out of skepticism but with the sense that he would follow Graham along whatever road he was suggesting.

“We can't save ourselves. But we can make sure they can never do this to another person ever again.” Graham said. He then told Cody the plan.

Chapter 26

Potential: Part 26

The Farewell

Graham followed Cody towards the playground of the park. He was a little nervous. They were there to see Zen whom Graham hadn't seen since his regression. Apparently Gretchen and Mrs. Nestor, Zen's Mom had become friends. The boys had been brought to the park to play while the ladies visited. It was going to be a quick stop though as Gretchen was doing morning errands while Gene took Angie to her gymnastics lesson.

Upon seeing Mrs. Nestor, Graham didn't know what to expect yet the woman had not seemed surprise to see the boy that had once come over for a playdate looking younger. In fact she had treated him as if he had always been four. It was to be expected. Mrs. Nestor was one of them after all.

Cody and Graham found Zen in the bottom of the playground in a small area underneath the slide tower. Coming into the enclosure Zen stood up walking up to Graham as if he were sizing him up.

“Geez they got you good huh,” Zen sighed. Graham grimaced for a moment feeling a little intimidated. It was weird having to look up at Zen now. “Is he like alright?” Zen asked looking at Cody.

“I'm fine,” Graham said with some indignation at being

talked over and not too.

“Thats great,” Zen said smiling down at Graham. “From how Cody was talking it sounded like you were like gone gone.”

“I'm here,” Graham said. “Probably not for long though.”

Zen grimaced as he leaned back.

“This will make coming up with a plan harder,” he said.

“We actually have a plan,” Cody said. Zen looked from Graham then to Cody before nodding his head.

“I'm all ears,” he said. “So whatcha got?”

“Graham should explain it,” Cody said pointing to Graham. “Its his plan after all.”

Graham furrowed his brow. Cody had just put it all on him and he knew Zen was probably not going to like it. At the same time though it was his plan.

“Do you remember the Developmental Center?” Graham asked.

“Yeah,” Zen nodded. “That's the place they make the stuff.”

“I found it,” Graham said. Zen's face lit up.

“Really!” he said.

“Yeah, its the preschool that Graham goes too,” Cody added.

“No shit,” Zen laughed a little. “But like you're sure, like really sure.”

“Positive,” Graham said. He had been observing intensely for the last couple of days. It operated as a preschool of that there was no doubt, but Graham had seen people walking around that were not teachers of any sort. There was also whole wings of the school that the teaching staff and kids never went to. Somewhere in that place they were making the stuff.

“It says so right on the front sign,” Cody said. “Rainbow skies Preschool and Developmental Center. I read it myself.”

“Really,” Zen said with a frown as if he were disappointed. “It was right there.” The three of them were silent for a moment until Zen spoke up again. “I guess it wasn't all bad what happened to you then,” Zen said. Graham shot Zen an exasperated look. “I mean it sucks and I wish it hadn't but I guess without it we never would have found the place,” Zen said hurriedly. “Still, to think it was right there with a sign and everything,” Zen said. The irony was not lost on the boys.

All their plans or whatever had really been useless. It was as if they had really been kids playing pretend. Everything had been right there yet they hadn't a clue. But now they did have a plan.

“So whats this great plan you got?” Zen said ending the silence.

“We're going to break in of course,” Graham said.

“Yeah duh,” Zen said slapping his hand together. “We find where they make the stuff and find the antidote.”

Graham and Cody looked at Zen their faces stone hard.

“That's not the plan,” Graham said. “We're going to destroy it, all of it.”

Zen looked confused for a moment.

“But what if there is an antidote?” he asked.

“Then we'll take it,” Cody shrugged.

“But why look for something we know isn't there,” Graham said.

“Then what?” Zen said. “If there is no antidote what do you do after?”

“Go back home, go to sleep,” Graham said. “And let what is going to happen, happen. We move on.”

“Move on?” Zen questioned as his face screwed up. “ This sounds like you're just going to give up.”

“There is no use in fighting anymore Zen,” Cody said stepping a little in front of Graham like a big brother defending his sibling. “Its happening whether we like it or not. At least this way we'll know we did everything we could. We can stop them from doing this again. We can end the cycle.”

“You don't even know that, what if you don't, what if you cant find the stuff or or.. they find out what you did?” Zen asked throwing his hands up. .”

“It doesn't really matter,” Graham said. “This is the nuclear option. There is no plan b or other option. Whatever they do

in response doesn't matter.”

Zen stood for a moment staring at the ground before shaking his head.

“No, just no,” Zen said. “This is stupid. You would throw away everything for nothing. And then just move on like that. Not me, I can't move on.”

“If that's your choice,” Graham said.

“We still have time,” Zen said. “We just need a plan okay. We can still get out of this.”

“This is the plan Zen,” Cody said as if he was drawing a line in the sand. Just then Gretchen's voice was heard calling for Cody and Graham.

“Guess that's us,” Cody said as he began to walk off. As Graham was leaving he turned and looked at Zen who had an angered look on his face.

“We're doing it Tuesday night. We're doing this. Be there or don't.” Graham said. He crawled out from the play enclosure. Zen followed him stopping at the entrance.

“You're a failure you know that,” Zen said. “I thought you were better than this, and to think you would drag Cody down with you.”

Graham looked back at Zen.

“Cody can make his own decisions. Its not my job to save him. I can't even save myself.” Graham then walked off

Tuesday morning came for Cody. It seemed like Zen was out. In fact Zen had given Cody the cold shoulder all day yesterday and was continuing to do so today. Cody understood so he didn't hold it against Zen. Cody's counseling session arrived and he was sort of nervous. He didn't know what to tell Claire or if he should even say anything. He couldn't imagine her being mad at him for wanting to do such a thing. What he could imagine is her saying it was too dangerous. Would she try to stop him? Maybe tell Gretchen on him, that seemed far fetched. Still the thought of Claire being mad at him gave Cody pause.

Walking into the office Cody took his usual seat on the couch swinging his legs back and forth nervously. Claire gave her usual cheery greeting which got a small hum from Cody. She could tell something was up. She took a seat on the couch next to him.

“So what have you got on your mind?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Cody answered back.

“That's a lie,” Claire chuckled. Cody looked up at her with a startled look. Was he really so easy to read?

“Its just a secret okay,” Cody sighed. “Sorry.”

“Oh a secret huh,” Claire said. Cody looked down ashamed for a moment. Claire put a hand on his shoulder. “Its okay, you can have your secrets even from me.”

“Its not really a secret more of a plan,” Cody said. “A secret plan.”

“A secret plan,” Claire repeated. “That sounds fun.”

“Its not fun,” Cody grumbled. “Its serious.”

“Of course of course,” Claire said putting her hands up. A few more moments passed before Claire spoke again. “It sounds like maybe you're a little unsure though. You know you can tell me anything right?"

“Maybe I am a little unsure,” Cody admitted. “But Graham is all in on this. Its his plan after all. I guess I wish I could be more like him.”

Claire could only smirk. It seemed Graham and Cody had shifted back into their old dynamic. Graham had always been like the older brother, even now that he was four Cody was still following along after him. Though it did give Claire some worry to hear this was a Graham plan. Before she would trust that whatever it was Graham would have come up with some measured idea that took into account all the scenario's but he was younger now and she hadn't been able to talk to him to see where his mental state was at. Not too mention that writing he had done.

Cody had given it to her to keep safe and she had read it, despite saying she wouldn't. It had worried her. The first part had come off as some manifesto against Golden Horizon which was fine, it was the second part that had concerned her. The stuff he had written about Cody and herself had sounded almost like some last will. It had sounded as if Graham was thinking about a future he was not present for.

“I guess I could tell you,” Cody finally said as he nervously fidgeted with his hands. “I mean it would only be fair. Who knows what might happen.”

“Only if you want too,” Claire said, yet inside she was fighting back the urge to demand Cody tell her.

Cody then proceeded to tell her the whole plan. They were breaking into the developmental center, finding out where they made the stuff and destroying as much as they could. Hopefully putting a stop to it forever. Yet Cody added that he and Graham were fully aware that they might not be able to pull that part off.

Claire was silent. It was a terrible plan, foolish even. They were really riding on a hope and prayer and fully realizing that it would likely mean nothing in the grand scheme. The deck was stacked to ensure that the only people who truly lost were Graham and Cody. Claire wanted to tell Cody how stupid it was. Plead with him on her hands and knees if necessary to not go through with it.

“You can't stop us, we are doing this,” Cody said. Claire knew that. They were doing this regardless of what she thought. As much as it pained her, there was nothing to be done, except wish them luck.

“I know that,” Claire said as she hugged Cody. “You two are making the decision, just promise me you'll stay safe. And watch out for Graham.”

“Um I will,” Cody said as he hugged Claire back. He felt a

little sad though. The hug made him feel calm and fuzzy and some part of him felt like this would be the last time he ever got a hug from her.

“I'm going to see you tomorrow okay,” Claire said still embracing him sounding as if she were bargaining with some unknown entity. “I love you,” she said before kissing him on the cheek.

Cody flew back from Claire skittering back across the couch.

“Y-you j-ust kiss...kissed me!” Cody said stammering and red faced covering the spot on his cheek where she had laid her lips.

“Well yeah,” Claire said looking a little surprised at the reaction. “Did that make you uncomfortable?” Claire looked at Cody who un-tensed a little. She then smiled a little. “Don't tell me that was your first kiss?”

“What! No way,” Cody exclaimed as he sat straight up on his knees. “I've kissed plenty of women. You just surprised me was all.”

“Okay if you say so,” Claire said with shrug. “Sorry to surprise you. It was just a friendly kiss. I just wanted you to know that you're my friend and how much I care about you.”

Cody sat for a moment still reeling from the moment. It was true that wasn't his first kiss. Yet what had surprised even him was how it made him feel. It was different. Claire was an attractive woman but Cody never thought that way about her. That kiss had been a very different. It had been nothing but

pure affection. In some ways it was a first for Cody. No one had ever kissed him like that. The boy crawled across the couch and sat back on his knees next to Claire.

“We have some time left,” Claire said softly. “I don't think we need to talk about this plan of yours anymore. So anything else you want to do?”

“Can I sit in your lap?” Cody then asked.

“Sure,” Claire said a little taken aback by the request but leaning back all the same. Cody got himself situated before leaning his head back onto Claire's shoulder. He then took her arms and wrapped them around his torso.

“Can we just sit here for awhile?” Cody then whispered. The closeness with a trusted person was like a salve for his worries.

“Of course, whatever you want,” Claire said wrapping her arms tighter. It was a few minutes before Cody spoke again.

“You know this hasn't all been bad, some good things happened too.” he said.

“You think so?” Claire said.

“Yeah well I did get to meet you didn't I.” Cody said. He then turned around and hugged Claire.

“Thank you for everything.”

Claire felt her chest tighten as she put a hand on Cody's head holding him close to her shoulder.

“You silly boy,” she whispered. “I should be thanking you.”

Chapter 27

Potential: Part 27

Break in

Graham's feet hurt as he plodded up the hill. His legs were sore as well and if it wasn't for the crazy amount of adrenaline coursing thru his veins he would have sat down long ago. Despite the fact that he was huffing and puffing, the night air was biting coldly at his cheeks making him grateful that he had put on the green puffy coat yet the pajama bottoms with Elmo's smiling face were too thin to keep his legs warm.

“Car,” Cody called out and Graham was glad for the rest as they ducked behind some foliage before the headlights made out their forms. A necessary precaution of course. Seeing two small children walking around after eleven p.m would make any adult question what they were doing out at this time of night unsupervised.

“Okay the coast is clear,” Cody said rising up out his hiding spot before looking at Graham. “Do you need a rest?”

“No,” Graham said as he got up taking the lead. “We're nearly there.” Graham unzipped his coat he was sweating and the cold felt nice. As they walked Graham was starting to think how much they had not planned any of this. It had never occurred to him that they would have to walk to the developmental center from their house. It had always seemed like a short distance in a car. Graham had been thinking about

it in terms of his adult capabilities and that had been foolish, in fact the whole thing was foolish. Yet they were doing this no matter what.

They crested the top of the hill. The preschool was in sight yet they still had a little ways to go, at least it was downhill.

“This is kind of funny don't you think,” Cody said.

“What is?” Graham asked.

“Us walking to a school together,” Cody said. “Never thought we would do that again.”

“Oh yeah,” Graham said quietly.

“What do you think they'll do to us when they find out?” Cody asked.

“Who knows,” Graham said. “I mean I guess they could always change us into babies.”

“You think,” Cody said pondering the question.

“Sure why not,” Graham said. “If they think that's what it would take to finally break us why wouldn't they. Its hard enough fighting back against the fog at four. Being a baby would probably be overwhelming”

“Makes you wonder why they didn't just do that in the first place.” Cody mused.

“Maybe its too dangerous,” Graham said. “We were chosen for a reason. Maybe they didn't want to run the risk of losing whatever it was that they wanted us for. If you think about a

baby they are kind of creating everything like personality from the start. They can't ensure that we would have the same foundation.” Graham said. For the first time in a long time Graham actually found he was able to say exactly what he wanted in the way he wanted too.

“I guess that makes some sense. Still building someone from scratch exactly the way they wanted isn't that kind of the idea.” Cody said.

“Gretchen didn't want that,” Graham said, uprising even himself. Yet he could see some truth in that. Gretchen had wanted them for them, she had said so herself. Although Graham was not seeing it as a charitable read for his would be mother. She was a thief. Both Graham and Cody possessed something she wanted and she had done what she wanted to get it.

“Still I don't think it would be so bad if they made us into babies,” Cody said laughing softly.

“What are you even saying?” Graham said smirking a little. “You like the idea of pissing your pants or something?”

“No,” Cody laughed back. “But at least we would be the same again, we could grow up together, me and you just like old times.”

“I guess,” Graham said. The idea did give him some comfort. They would be going through it together. That seemed to make it a bearable destiny. Graham's thoughts were cut short as a rustling was heard from some shrubs. A dark figure

darted out. Cody took the flashlight he had turning it on to illuminate the shadowy figure. To both boys surprised they saw Zen standing covering his face.

“Could you not point that in my eyes,” he said.

“Zen!” Cody exclaimed switching the flashlight off. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought about it,” Zen said looking a little hesitant. “You might have made one or two good points. I figured I might as well come and find that antidote myself.”

“And if there isn't one?” Graham questioned.

“Then I guess I can work off some aggression breaking stuff,” Zen said with a shrug. He then looked the other two boys up and down. “That's what you wear for a break in,” Zen said snickering a little.

Graham pulled his coat shut to cover up Elmo's face while Cody looked slightly embarrassed about pajamas with colorful dinosaurs all over it.

“Um we didn't really think about that,” Cody mumbled. They definitely looked silly compared to Zen who was dressed in all black.

“Lets just do this thing,” Zen chuckled as he turned to face the building. The boys walked the short distance before coming to the front door.

“So I guess this is it,” Cody said sounding ominous before smiling. “Its too bad we never came up with some name for

our group.”

“What are you talking about?” Zen questioned.

“You know like some team name or something,” Cody said shrugging his shoulders. “I mean we worked hard to get here.”

“That's kid stuff,” Zen said furrowing his brow.

“Well we are kids,” Cody said. In the past this is where Graham would interject yet now there was no reason. Cody was right. Even if the plan went off without a hitch they would still be kids in the end.

“The Three Musketeers,” Graham suggested.

“Whose that?” Cody asked.

“You don't know the three musketeers?” Zen asked looking at Cody with a skeptical look.

“I haven't seen many movies,” Cody said.

“It seems to fit though,” Graham said putting his hand in the middle although he didn't quite remember the plot of the story himself. Cody followed suit.

“Are we really doing this?” Zen mumbled but put his hand with the others.

“All for one and one for all I guess,” Graham said laughing a little. The hands went up leaving the boys staring at one another.

“Okay now I'm pumped,” Cody said as he walked up to the

front door and pulled on the handle only to find it locked.

“Did you really think that was going to work?” Zen asked shaking his head.

“Kind of,” Cody mumbled looking embarrassed.

“We need to find something to break in with,” Graham said looking around for a rock yet the only ones around were large rocks creating a border around a patch of wood chips. Even with all three of them there was no way they were going to be able to lift something like that.

“You boys need some help,” a voice asked from behind. The boys turned around startled. Standing behind them was Claire.

“Claire!” Graham exclaimed blinking as if this was trick of the eyes. Claire looked down at Graham and smiled.

“Long time no see, Graham,” she said. “Although I think now is not the time for reunions, we got to do something about this door.”

No, no, no. Claire could not be here. This was so far out of a possibility for the plan that Graham thought for a moment he must be dreaming. How did she even find out? Graham then looked at Cody.

“You told her,” Graham said looking at Cody with an incredulous look.

“Sorry,” Cody said. “It just kind of came out.”

“Don't blame him,” Claire said. “I fished it out of him.”

Cody gave Claire a small smile grateful that she was covering for his loose lips. Claire then stepped up to the door brandishing a stick like object in her hand.

“What's that?” Zen asked.

“Oh this,” Claire said. “My mom bought it for me when I got my first car. Its for breaking the window if you drive your car into the water I guess. Lets see if it works.”

Claire pulled her arm back before striking the window causing the glass to shatter. She cleared away the edges of glass before stepping through. Zen and Cody followed through with Graham bringing up the rear. There was no alarm going off so that was good.

“So where too now?” Zen asked looking around.

“Not sure,” Graham said. “I think we should just start on that side, its just preschool classrooms that way,” Graham said pointing down the hall that he went down every day. It was weird being here at night. The building looked alien and strange.

“Maybe we should split up?” Cody suggested.

“Great idea Cody,” Claire said causing Cody to smile a little.

“Alright me and Cody will go that way and Claire and Graham the other,” Zen said.

“Um well,” Cody said a little unsure.

“Sounds good,” Claire said interjecting. “Me and Graham

have some catching up to do.” With the arrangements made Claire reminded everyone to be careful and to meet back here in fifteen minutes. As Cody and Zen were leaving Cody gave a happy wave to Claire before darting off. Once Zen and Cody were gone Graham looked at Claire.

“You should leave,” he said bluntly.

“Why's that?” Claire asked.

“Because if they catch you it will be bad.” Graham said.

“The same can be said for you,” Claire said as she began to walk down a hallway.

“We're kids,” Graham said. “There is not much they can do to us that would be any worse than what they've already done. Its different for you though. You could just leave. This has nothing to do with you.”

“I can't just leave,” Claire said stopping as she turned and looked at Graham with a sad look on her face. “Not after everything I've done.”

Graham could see guilt on Claire's face. But now was not the time for her to feel guilty, and she had no reason to be.

“That was different,” Graham said. “You had too, you had no choice, you were helping, besides it was for your brother.”

“I can't hide behind that excuse anymore,” Claire said. Graham let his head tilt back, excuse? It wasn't an excuse. Claire had gotten wrapped up in a bad situation that was all. That's what it had to be, because Claire wasn't like the rest of

this cult, she just wasn't.

“We were never going to get away with this, that wasn't part of the plan,” Graham said. “You cannot get caught. You still have things to do, you still have to find your brother.”

“My brother,” Claire said softly. “I just don't think that's going to work.”

“So you're giving up,” Graham said as if he was accusing Claire of a great crime.

“I'm being realistic. My brother is dead.” Claire said.

“You don't know that,” Graham retorted. “He may be here.”

“Even if he was, he wouldn't be my brother. He would have no memories of who he once was. In the end the person I knew is long gone.”

“You don't have to accept that though, you don't know for sure. I came back didn't I?” Graham said. He couldn't let Claire think like this. What if Cody had given up like this? Graham would still be a little four year old never knowing what had been done to him.

“Graham,” Claire said softly kneeling down so that she was face level with him. “I have grieved for my brother for a long time while still never believing he was dead. That grief made me do terrible things, and I can't live like that anymore. I need to accept the situation. My brother is lost to me and I cannot let my grief keep making me do things that I don't want too just to hold out hope. Whatever happens I still need

to be able to live with myself. So if I can atone for my crimes even a little bit by being here, then I will. At least that way I can say I tried to do what I could."

Graham was stunned. She was here for the same reason they all were. A chance to move on while saying they did what they could. A way to live with themselves with whatever came after.

"I get it," Graham said. "I don't like it, but I get it. I just wish there was some other way."

"Believe me," Claire said smiling a little. "If there was a way to even just see Chris again I would take it in a heartbeat, but I don't think that's in the cards."

They were silent for a moment, two souls commiserating in the hopelessness of it all. Nobody would get what they wanted. They had to okay with scraps.

"You know I've been thinking a lot about you lately," Claire said as she stood up wiping a tear from her eye. "How you were able to come back when so many couldn't."

"I can't really figure it out myself," Graham said. "If I knew that I think I would have come up with something different."

"You really think its such a mystery?" Claire said laughing a little. "Its obviously thanks to Cody."

Graham nodded, he didn't disagree.

"You and Cody have such a strong bond. I can see it clear as day. Its like the two of you are attached by a rope and when

one of you slips the other is there to pull you back up."

"I guess it does feel like that," Graham said laughing as well. He knew that Cody was the magic sauce. All those things Graham had written to remind himself of the truth would be nothing if it had'nt been Cody saying them. Cody was the only one who could have gotten through.

"You two are special," Claire said. "And I say that with some authority. You two are different than any other people I've come across here. The cult made a big mistake when they put you two together."

"You say that like we aren't still screwed, it doesn't really matter, the cult still won," Graham said. "I can't save Cody or myself."

"If your plan works you might save lots of people," Claire suggested. Graham nodded it was a big if. Failure was was all but certain but they still had a chance and they needed to take it no matter how minuscule it was. "And you still have time, both you and Cody."

"Guess we should use that time we have left," Graham said looking around. Nothing was going to happen if they just sat here talking.

"Oh right," Claire said. As she began to walk Graham spoke up again.

"Hey Claire," he said as she turned to face him. "I know I said you should leave but for what its worth I'm glad you're here." Graham then gave her look with his eyes that made

Claire smirk. “I did miss you.”

Claire walked up to Graham and gave him a hug.

“I missed you too,” she said.

As the two searched they weren't coming up with much. Most of the rooms looked like offices or storage. One room however seemed somewhat out of place. Walking in Claire and Graham found a room with a few beds and a couple of cribs. There was a toy box with a paltry selection in it along with a small tv on the wall.

“Must be a nap room,” Claire guessed. Yet Graham shook his head.

“We take naps in the classroom with mats on the floor,” Graham said as he inspected the room. Claire found a binder on a small table near the door. She opened it as she began to page through it.

“Oh geez,” she said. “They keep people here.”

“Keep people here?” Graham questioned. Claire showed Graham the book, not that he could read it. Even if he was thinking clearly somethings had not come back. Graham knew that not everyone that was abducted ended up on Merryweather and this only confirmed it. Each entry had the person name and new age as well as discharge dates complete with the places they were to be sent. All over the world it seemed. Different states, different countries. It was a cold realization at just how widespread Golden Horizons was. Graham was here on Merryweather though. The beating heart

of it all. Graham felt a shiver go down his spine thinking what would have happened if he had ended up in this room. Kept prisoner until the fog took its hold.

“Does that book say if anyone else is here right now?” Graham asked. Claire flipped to the last page which was the most current entry. Her mouth dropped when she read it.

“The last entry is Angie,” Claire said slowly. Graham's eyes widened as Claire kept reading. “It looks like she was only here for a day though.”

Graham nodded. Things suddenly made sense. Angie was to be shipped off somewhere else, to a different family altogether. Yet something had happened. Graham could remember Gretchen saying something about an emergency placement. He could only wonder if Gretchen had pulled strings or merely seen an opportunity when something had fallen through to get herself another child.

“Was your brother here?” Graham then asked pointing at the book. Claire nodded as she began to page through matching up the dates to around when her brother disappeared. She was going quickly reading names before she closed the book.

“Did'nt see a Chris,” Claire said.

“So that means he must still be on Merryweather,” Graham said. Claire gave him a grateful sort of smile to show her appreciation that Graham was not letting go of the idea that Chris may still be alive, yet it gave her no hope.

“They might be using different names,” Claire said. Graham

knew that was a possibility. He still had his name as did Cody but Zen's had been changed after all. “We should meet back up with the others,” Claire said. Graham followed along back to the meeting spot. A few moments later they saw Zen and Cody walking towards them. Graham could see by the looks on their faces that they hadn't found anything.

“We got nothing just a bunch of offices and stuff,” Zen grumbled.

“What if it isn't here? What if we were wrong?” Cody said sounding sad. Graham had never thought about that. It was true that he and Zen had seen in the papers he had gotten that they made the stuff at the developmental center but what f there was more than one. What if they were at the wrong place?

“We haven't looked everywhere yet,” Claire said trying to bolster morale.

“Its just preschool stuff over there,” Graham said dismissively as he racked his brain. There is no way anything would be there. It would be ironic to think that Graham had seen the entrance to some secret area in plain sight. They would never just leave it out in the open. Something like that would be kept secret far away from anyone who would be curious. Suddenly Graham's eyes widened. Something clicked for him. “This way,” Graham said as he ran off. He made his way back to that room. He pushed open the door. It was the same normal looking room from when he had been here for his diagnostic with that man Fred. Graham remembered Fred had

walked in from someplace other than the front door. Graham walked behind the dividing screen to find it. Another door, different from the others. It was windowless and made of metal. If there was ever a door to a secret lab this was it.

“This must be it,” Zen said gleefully walking up to the handle and trying to turn it yet it didn't move. “The only thing now is how to get in,” Zen said. The handle looked like it belonged in a hotel complete with a slot for a key card.

“Maybe this will work,” Cody said fishing something out of his coat pocket to reveal a key card with Gretchen's face.

“Where did you get that?” Graham asked looking surprised.

“I got it out of her purse before we left,” Cody said. Graham could only laugh. He remembered right before they had snuck out that Cody had been lagging behind. He had been a little worried that Cody had been getting cold feet.

“Alright Cody,” Zen said slapping him on the back. “That was some good thinking and took some balls.”

“Well,” Cody said looking down at the card sheepishly. “Its not the first time I've stolen something out of a purse.”

“Lets hope it works,” Claire said bringing some reality back to the situation. They let Cody do the honors. Time seemed to be moving in slow motion for Graham as he watched Cody. Graham was convincing limescale that this would work. Gretchen was obviously a higher up when it came to this stuff, she ran the school so that seemed to be justification that her credentials would get her past the door. Yet there was still

doubt, it would make perfect sense for this not to work – it would be so typical.

The small led turned green and the mechanical lock whirred as Cody opened the door. They were in. No one spoke as they walked down a long hallway. It was dark but there were lights that gave off a dim glow. Turning the corner they came into a large room with a high ceiling. Graham surmised they were underground. Claire found a switch near where they were and flipped it as bright lights came on illuminating the room. There was about four large tables put together to make one giant table in the middle. Papers and laptops were set on it. There was lab equipment all over. Vials of different colored liquid secured behind glass with rubber gloves attached when someone needed to reach inside the controlled environment. Microscopes lined another table near the side. There were also some cubicles further back. At the front of the room was another container with another lock on it,

“I think this is the place,” Cody said looking around.

“What do we do now?” Zen asked following after Cody.

“Wreck it,” Graham said picking up a mop and wielding the handle as he swung at one of the microscopes.

“Works for me,” Zen said gleefully.

The sound of crashing glass and plastic emanated around the room. Cody had his hands in the rubber gloves and was smashing beakers and vials with reckless abandon. Claire was using her glass breaker to bash keypads and other equipment

while Zen now had the broom handle and was smashing anything he could. Graham had climbed ontop of the tables and was kicking and stomping on laptops and ripping up papers. After ten minutes the destruction came to a stop as the group caught their breath.

“I think its safe to say we wrecked this place.” Zen said looking around proudly at the carnage. “Mission accomplished?”

“No not yet,” Graham said climbing off the table. “We might have stopped them for a little while but they can replace all this stuff. Besides I haven't seen any of the actual serum around.” Graham said referring to the vials of the clear liquid he had seen Alex load into the injectors.

“We kind of destroyed everything already,” Cody said looking around. “Maybe this will have to be good enough?”

Graham crossed his arms with his brow furrowed. Maybe Cody was right. Maybe this was all they could really do. Graham hated to think that way. Then again they had gotten further than he had really ever imagined. If only... That's when he spotted the container at the front. It kind of reminded him of a church Eucharist where priest kept the bread for communion locked up.

“Cody see if Gretchen's card works on that thing,” he said pointing to the front of the room. All in all he was at least curious as to what was in there. Cody did so and to Graham's surprise the card worked again. They heard a sound like pressure was being released before the door slid open

revealing something that Graham could not have expected.

It was a plant in a pot. It had dark green leaves and little red spiny looking berries hanging off of it.

“A plant?” Cody said cocking his head. “Why do they have a plant here?”

“This must be it,” Claire breathed. “The secret ingredient. It must come from this plant.”

Graham nodded along. That had to be it. Why would they keep it here in the lab under lock and key and in a container that kept it as safe as possible.

“We should take it,” Zen said grabbing the plant out of the container. “Maybe we can get this to some scientist who can create and antidote and get us back to normal.”

“No,” Graham said. “We have to destroy it right here, right now.”

“But –“ Zen protested.

“Zen do you really think we'll get away with that?” Graham asked looking at Zen with a sympathetic look. It wasn't as if the thought hadn't passed through Graham's own mind in a split second upon hearing what Claire said. But there were problems with that. “If they found that its gone missing they will stop at nothing to get it back. They'll pull out every stop and they have people all over. We can't let them get it back or all this will have been for nothing.”

Zen stood holding the plant as he looked down at it. He

finally looked up with a sigh.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “You're right,” Graham let out a breath of relief that Zen was seeing things from his point of view. Zen placed the plant on the table. “Lets kill this thing,” he said.

“Stop right there,” a voice called out. Graham looked up to see the two worst possible people they could have run into. Standing across the table from the group was Alex who had a smirk on his face as he surveyed the damage around the room. The other was Dr. Grosse and he had a gun pointed right at them.

“Hands behind your heads now,” the doctor growled.

Chapter 28

Potential: Part 28

I've been eagerly awaiting this chapter for a bit now. Glad to see it posted now.

That said, thank god Alex got his comeuppance. The only question is, does Claire take him with her to raise him right, or does she leave him for his parents to find? Part of me likes the idea that Alex gets sent back to his parents and has Angie as his older sister as further comeuppance, but part of me also likes the idea of Alex getting an actual second chance to get out of the toxic environment that produced him now that that's potentially on the table, because sending him back to his parents is just going to get him right back to where he ended up in 30 years' time or so, and Claire would know it.

So I guess the follow up to this chapter is perhaps years later, Cody and Graham growing up as twin brothers with their mother Claire (my preferred ending), and maybe Zen too as a big brother (reasoning down below)... and perhaps Alex as another brother (age to be determined).

With the way that Chris has just been used as a plot device instead of being developed as a character in his own right, Claire can't justify taking him back if he's settled. As she said in the last chapter, in all effects, her brother is dead. He has no memories. She may attempt to check in on him before she leaves, just as a way to say goodbye (you know like having a viewing before a funeral) but that's only if she has time

before she has to hoof it for kidnapping Zen at least. Because Zen can't stay on the island with Dr. Grosse still an adult and remembering what he did.

I do hope that someone makes sure that they didn't just stomp on the plant and call it a day--but did something else like burn the goddamn thing. Any gardener can tell you, a cutting from a plant, put in water, will eventually grow roots and be viable for regrowth. Heck, Dr. Grosse, if he has samples, might try and clone the damn thing if he gets desperate enough.

And I'm assuming Dr. Grosse has tried his hardest to find seeds and store them away somewhere but that perhaps the mutation of the plant caused the seeds to be infertile in a plant sense while giving the rejuvenating effect for the serum (that would make the most sense, especially if the plant's seeds are berry-like). Still, I hope Claire burned the goddamn thing before collecting her gaggle of sons. We don't want anyone using a cutting from the plant to try and bring it back to life.

And Claire is going to have her hands full with at least three boys to raise at minimum--four if she decides to take pity and try and undo the psychological damage on Alex.

Sorry... here I go... rambling again. Just shows how invested I am.

Chapter 29

Potential: Part 29

Chapter 29

Found

Graham came too yet everything was dark and still. He could hear a radio humming softly in the background. He moved his arm, it felt a little sore but not so much that he couldn't move. He groaned sitting up as the blanket that had been covering him fell away. Graham shut his eyes against the bright light before opening them. The first person he saw was Zen sitting at a window. Graham looked around realizing they were in a car. Zen looked over noticing Graham sitting up in the seat.

“Oh hey you're awake,” Zen said smiling.

“Graham,” he heard before he saw Cody staring back at him from the front seat of the SUV. It took Graham a moment to recognize him. Cody's face was now a little more round with two chubby cheeks and a smile that looked bigger than his face. He looked like he was four maybe five if Graham were being generous.

“Cawdy,” Graham said stopping as he found the word hard to say. “Wah,” he said trying to speak yet his mouth didn't seem to want to cooperate. Claire looked at Graham from the drivers seat.

“Is it hard to talk?” she asked. “That would make some sort

of sense. You should probably look at yourself," she said opening a compact mirror from her purse and handing it to Graham. The boy had to pull up his sleeves first as the pajamas he was wearing were incredibly loose on him. Looking into the mirror Graham saw a baby looking back at himself. He had a full head of hair yet it was light and not thick. He had some teeth but he knew he was missing some. Graham let out a huff through his nose he knew this was probably going to happen but it was certainly strange and would take time to get used too. There was no use dwelling on it. He had somehow gotten used to this.

"Wha hee," he said slipping over his words.

"Oh yeah we're at the school," Zen said sounding a little annoyed. Graham looked at the window with some alarm. It was morning yet they were still on the island, why hadn't they left yet? There was no way they could stay. "Cody won't let us leave," Zen said knowing what Graham was thinking.

"We have to get Chris first," Cody said assuredly. "We can't just leave."

"This is a bad idea," Claire said.

"We know he's here and what he looks like," Cody said. "We'll find him."

Claire sat back in her chair. Graham could tell she was conflicted. She knew they should get out of town fast, yet she probably couldn't pass up the chance to see her brother once more.

While they waited Graham was filled in on what had happened after he passed out. Claire had ambushed Dr. Grosse when he had been taking Zen back. After everything was settled they had used the last vial on the Doctor himself.

“Should have just let him die,” Zen said bitterly.

“I didn't want to be a murderer,” Claire said. They had taken Dr. Grosse and Alex to the room with the beds. Alex had been placed in a crib already having been transformed into a toddler. Dr. Grosse had looked much younger probably around ten by the time they had gotten him into the bed no telling how young he would get and nobody wanted to stick around to find out. Claire had then gotten everyone into her car. It was Cody who insisted on going to the school.

“She needs to see him,” Cody said. “Its only fair. That's why she was here. She saved all of us. We owe her this.”

“Well have you seen him yet?” Zen asked as they looked at the playground full of children.

“No,” Claire said staring straight ahead. “I've done this a lot. I know what my own brother looks like and he's not there.”

“He's here,” Cody said looking at the paper Alex had given her. “His Mom is a teacher he has to be here.” the car was quiet before Cody turned around looking at Zen. “Lets switch clothes,” Cody said.

“What why?” Zen asked furrowing his brow.

“I'm gonna go find him. And I cant walk around in my

pajamas.” Cody said already taking off his shirt. Zen looked at him for a moment before shaking his head before taking off his black shirt and taking Cody's dinosaur top.

“As soon as you get back we're changing,” Zen said pulling the dinosaur shirt on. :The Nestor's did'nt ever make me wear stuff this babyish.”

“I never said you had to wear mine,” Cody chuckled.

“I'm not sitting here in my underwear,” Zen said as he began to pull off his pants. After changing Cody adjusted the pants a little. They were loose on him yet still fit. He went to get out as Claire grabbed his shoulder.

“You don't have to do this,” she said looking worried. Cody removed her hand and held it for a moment.

“I'll get him,” Cody smiled. “Don't worry.” Cody then got out of the car. Graham wanted to give some reassuring words. He had learned to trust Cody implicitly. He knew Claire's worry though. That her brother wouldn't be her brother any longer. Yet Graham had come back so maybe someone else could too. There was a bond here. That's what had brought Graham back, his bond with Cody. Maybe Claire and Chris were the same.

Cody walked onto the schoolyard. Kids indigent really pay him any mind as he walked. Why would they? He didn't exactly look out of place. He had studied Chris's photo but he didn't see him even as he walked further into the playground. Cody looked around he spotted a group of boys sitting by a

slide trading cards they looked to be the same age as Chris. Cody walked up to them.

“Hi,” he said cheerily. One of the boys looked up at him with a glance.

“Hi,” one of the boys said back looking annoyed no doubt thinking Cody was a little kid bothering them.

“You guys know Chris?” Cody asked not wanting to beat around the bush, he didn't have all the time in the world.

“Uh which one?” the boy replied looking around. It took Cody a second to remember what he had read on the paper.

“Chris Hadley,” Cody responded.

“Yeah I know him,” the boy replied.

“So where is he?” Cody asked feeling these kids were being a little daft.

“Probably where he always is,” another boy replied. “In his Mom's classroom”

“Could you tell me where that is?” Cody asked deciding to switch up his approach. “Its my first day and I'm in her class.”

The boys gave Cody a curious look. He didn't know what grade she taught and he had perhaps just said something that didn't make sense. The third boy though nodded.

“Yeah, thought you were in kindergarten,” the boy said pointing towards the school. “You go through those doors her class has a giraffe on the front okay,” the boy said in a

cloying tone that made it apparent that he was talking to Cody as if he were a small child. Cody didn't say another word instead he ran towards the school.

Getting in he did have to look around a little before he finally found the door. Walking in he came into a rather normal looking classroom. There were small tables all set up facing towards a whiteboard and little cubbies in the back. Sitting at one of the tables was another boy. He had a short black hair swept to the side and was playing on a phone. That was him all right.

“Hey Chris,” Cody said excitedly running up to the boy who seemed surprised to see him.

“Um who are you?” a woman asked rising from her desk, no doubt it was Mrs. Hadley. Cody looked caught off guard for a moment.

“Oh I'm in this class,” Cody said with a little quick thinking. “Its my first day.” Mrs. Hadley cocked her head.

“I didn't hear about a new student starting today,” she said looking at a clipboard in her hand. “Are you sure this is where you're supposed to be?

“Umm maybe I'm not sure,” Cody said doing his best to look unsure.

“What is your name sweetheart?” Mrs. Hadley then asked.

“Micheal,” Cody said after a second. “Its Micheal Nestor.”

“I see,” Mrs. Hadley. “Lets go to the office Micheal and we'll

get this all sorted out."

"Can I just stay here," Cody said. "With Chris." Mrs. Hadley smiled for a moment.

"Is that okay with you Christopher," she asked. "Can you keep an eye on him?"

"Sure," Chris said with a shrug.

Mrs. Hadley left saying she would be right back. Cody turned back to Chris who had went back to his game.

"Good now that she is gone we can go," Cody said tugging on Chris's arm.

"Go where?" Chris asked looking confused.

"Your sister is waiting for you, she wants to see you," Cody said bluntly.

"I don't have a sister," Chris replied.

"You do," Cody said. "You just don't remember."

"I think I would know if –" Chris began.

"There is lots of stuff you don't remember but if you could if you wanted too." Cody interjected. "Like Claire, Claire Redding." Cody saw Chris wince a little. Had that hurt his head, as it had with Graham when Cody had started trying to make him recall memories.

"How do you know that name?" Chris asked looking at Cody his face etched with anxiety. Cody saw that he had latched

onto something here.

“Does it bother you, that name?” Cody asked.

“No it doesn't bother me,” Chris said sounding a little upset.

“I think it does,” Cody said. “I know what its like. There are all these things that remind you of other things, but you can't quite remember what those things are. One minute you feel like everythings normal and then the next minute you feel out of place. Its like a word you're trying to remember. Its on the tip of your tongue but you never seem to remember it.”

Chris was silent as he studied Cody. To Chris there was something about this kid who he had never seen before. He was saying things that made too much sense. As if he had reached into his mind and read it. And why did he know that name, the name he had dreamt of so often? That dream he had that would make him wake up in a cold sweat. That dream that was filled with blurred faces that never came into focus and voices that seemed so familiar yet alien.

“Who are you?” Chris said shaking his head.

“I'm no one,” Cody said. “But if you want answers then you should come with me. I'm leaving now,”

Cody said walking towards the door. “This is your last chance.”

Claire was tapping the steering wheel with her finger. She had been a bag of nerves ever since Cody had disappeared into the sea of kids.

“We need to go,” she said it was dangerous to stay long. “Go and and find him,” she said looking at Zen.

“I ain't going out there like this,” Zen said holding his arms up.

“Cawdy gum back,” Graham said.

“Yeah, he'll be back,” Zen said with a nod. “He can do this..” Claire tuned back to watch. There was nothing else to do. Graham so wished he could string together more than a couple of words that almost sounded like what he was wanting to say. If he could he would tell Claire that this was going to work. That Cody would come back with Chris. Because that's what Cody did. He always came through in the end. This was only something he could do. That's why Cody was special. That's why he was a five on the cult's scale. Because Cody had something they wanted. Cody had a way with people. A way to talk to them that made them feel like they could trust him. It wasn't something that could be taught either. You either had it or you didn't. Cody had it.

Cody was walking beside Chris, they had slipped out of the schoolyard with little problem. Cody lead the way to the secluded spot Claire had parked.

“We're going kind of far,” Chris said sounding nervous.

“Nothing bad is going to happen,” Cody reassured him. “Just say hi and then you can go back, promise.” They came to a stop a little ways a way from the car. The door opened and Claire stepped out. Her hands covered her mouth and small

tears were forming at the sides of her eyes.

“Oh my god Chris,” she said taking a step towards them. Chris took a step back making Claire pause.

“Sorry,” she said, before kneeling down to make her self as non-threatening as possible.

“So you're like my sister?” Chris asked.

“You remember?” Claire asked. Chris shook his head.

“That's just what Cody said.” Chris said. Claire nodded her head. It was just as she thought. He didn't remember her or who he was.

“I used to be your sister,” Claire said. “But not anymore I guess.”

“What do you want?” Chris asked. Claire looked tongue tied for a moment before speaking.

“I just wanted to see you one last time, to say goodbye.” Claire said sniffling a little. “You look well, are you happy?”

“I guess,” Chris said rubbing the back of his head unsure of what to do with his hands.

“That's good,” Claire whispered. She stood up. “Cody go get in the car we have to leave.” she said.

“Okay,” Cody said sounding a little disappointed. He had hoped that Chris would have suddenly remembered upon seeing Claire. He wasn't going to get his miracle though.

“You're leaving?” Chris asked watching Cody walk off.

“Yeah,” Claire said softly. “We won't bother you anymore.” The two stood looking at one another for a moment. “Hey,” Claire said speaking up. “If you're okay with it do you think I could get a hug. Just one last time?”

“Sure, I guess,” Chris said approaching. He didn't know why but it was like his legs were moving on their own. Claire and Chris embraced. Chris was surprised for a moment. For some reason he felt happy. He had felt happy before plenty of times. Christmas mornings, birthdays, having fun with his friends. But this felt so different. He felt calm and nostalgic at the same time. Claire pulled away first.

“Goodbye Chris,” she said turning away wiping tears away from her eyes.

“Wait,” Chris said. “Can I come with you?”

Claire turned around a shocked look on her face. She then slowly shook her head.

“No, that's not possible,” she said slowly. “You don't know me, there is no reason to take you away. Your life is here now.”

“I may not remember you,” Chris said. “But I do know that you are supposed to be someone important to me. You're in my dreams. Every time I have that dream I wake up feeling so sad and I don't know why, but it really is you. You're from that dream.”

Claire was surprised to hear his words. He was dreaming about her? Did that mean that part of the old Chris still remained? But would that justify taking him away from everything that had become his life?

“If you come with us, you can never come back do you understand? You would be leaving everything, your parents, your friends, your entire life.” Claire said. Chris looked back towards the school thinking about that. Could he really leave. Wouldn't be easier to go back and just forget this ever happened? Even if he did that though the dreams would persist, the feeling of things not quite feeling right.

“You have the truth,” Chris said. “That's what I want.” he had never felt so sure of anything in his life. He wasn't caught up in emotions. That hug had felt so real to him. For the first time he had felt completely whole.

“Then that's your choice,” Claire said. She walked back to the car not looking back. She was Orpheus leading Eurydice out of the underworld she felt that if she looked back Chris would be gone. She got into the driver's seat and then heard the passenger door open as Chris got in.

“Chris is coming with?” Cody asked excitedly from the back seat.

“Yes he is,” Claire smiled placing a hand on her brother's shoulder. Chris smiled back. Somehow he knew this is where he belonged.

Chapter 30

Potential: Part 30

One thing i excited to see 1 Graham getting to take care of Cody as he having a episode of withdrawals outside of the fog now at their new ages or 2 seeing it after Graham and Cody all out fog out

I not sure if you want do a other withdrawal chapter but that something i instruction in seeing

But on the chapter itself

The scene of Graham woking up in a car sit wear a onesie and in a wet diaper was cute for me at least

I love how Claire tell him he alright wet himself once pretty hard and a second pretty hard that see at least he a big bed wetting now and he need to be maybe potty trained again

I loved the scene with Mitch and how Cody safe Claire butt ask about the Zoo that was so cute and well done

But I so excited to see what life we'll be like for they now

And I very excited to see more Zen and Chris they going make very cute older siblings to Cody and Graham who are the youngest

Chapter 31

Potential: Chapter 31

What a great chapter!

I can tell way it take you so long to write it you had a lot to hand in this chapter

But I loved everything with Graham

The “weee” scene with him and Claire was very sweet and wholesome

I like how she trying to do speech therapy with Graham

Because I mean with the state he in it’s more like speech therapy that a baby learn how to talk

I love how Graham get upset at Cody trying to put him in a highchair and it’s only Claire hehe

She because more Graham mommy that Cody and have I thought it would be the other way around

And I love with Claire we learn more of how the cult worked from the inside and how they done things and how different some of them looked at things and wanted things to be for the age regression people

But i excited for the next chapter and to

See how much more chapters we have

But i excited to see how things were end and want Cody and

Graham will fog out together like they said their do together

But we see if that happen

Chapter 32

Potential: Part 32

Crap. I had hoped the cult wouldn't bother with them or had lost sight of them.

We've established the cult is extremely dangerous, has loose morality, and cannot be attacked head on at least in areas it controls.

Even if it's baby making power is permanently gone (And sadly I don't think we can count on that, within a few years to a decade I bet they find another plant or come up with a substitute if they didn't secretly have a backup already.) it remains a malevolent force and elements in it have reasons for personal revenge on all our favorite characters.

My prediction:

The cult doesn't intend to stick to whatever 'agreement' it claims will be enough.

And that assumes the 'agreement' is reasonable enough to be assented to anyway.

Which means:

They have to flee and manage to hide permanently from the cult

OR

They have to somehow destroy it which MIGHT be possible

from a position in the outside world : Perhaps by taking the kids to a government lab with all the evidence they have (including the adult brains and ability to answer questions about a missing persons life a strange kid shouldn't know). In that case, the cult becomes a National Security Issue and elements of the intelligence community or even the armed services could move in and shut it down, seizing records, machinery, drugs, etc.

If they can't do 1 or 2, that means they have to make an agreement with Bitchit (Sorry, I really do not like her) and hope she keeps her end of the bargain as basically the cult will determine their fate from here on out and I'm not a fan of this ending at all.

Chapter 33

Potential: Part 33

A other great chapter! I loved how at the end Graham started thumb sucking that so cute

But I hope the cult does fully leave they alone like they said

It make everyone with Graham worry about the cult coming after they a part of his arc of moving on from the shawarma of being a “part of the cult”

I feel like what you be excited to read all 4 of the boys try to move on from they’re own shawarma

The what happens next part of the story after getting out how do you move on from how do you adapt to live outside

It reminds of my grandpa he fight in a war and had a hard time adapt to live outside after

The cult scary know they around before the age remember and we’ll come on being a thing after all this

It makes they scary to me

For me I was hope the arc would be all about all 5 of our characters having to learn how to move on after the cult

Chapter 34

Potential: Part 34

I never really had plans to delve into Chris much in fact he was kind of more of a cheeky joke than anything (any resident evil fans here?) The entire point of his character in the plot was wrapped up in Claire's motivations and giving her a reason to do what she did. She wanted her brother back and she did get that. Zen also did what he needed too and I'm speaking from a purely mechanical point of how he functions in the story. He knew more about the situation and could give exposition when needed. Not that I sat down and added him because I needed someone to give exposition or nothing. Zen's motivations were clear from the start and this being the end of the story it was time to see whether he got there or not. He wanted to be with Andrea and he did.

The whole cult moving on thing was me trying to subvert some trope or make some point about the world at large (I don't really know how successful that was though) mainly I didn't want Graham to come off as some chosen one that would slay the great evil at the end. He is a small person in a big world as pretty much everyone is. He exceeded expectations I guess as he did stop some cult from continuing on with their plan. But he was never going to stop them completely.

In the coming chapters though we will see a little more of Chris of course and see how things are going for him. I also do have a little hint to show how things turned our for certain

people in the story as well.

Sorry to write so much I've just been holding back talking about nitty gritty stuff like this for so long as to not spoil things. Thanks for commenting so insightfully I really enjoy reading all the comments.

Chapter 35

Potential: Part 35

Omg! I cry at the part with Chris reading to Cody Graham note! That was an awesome sickle off gun!

I never thought Graham note would be used like this! Awesome writing!

What a awesome read for my birthday heheh

And I can remember but after like chapter 33 or some I thought Cody was wetter the bed

But now I question if Cody mommy getting to get he pull-ups or diapers for the bedwetting or maybe goodnites but I not sure there’s ones out there for a 4 year old like Cody

And Cody was a drug attic before age regression so it’s a bit of a miracle he wasn’t a bed wetting at 7

He luck it’s only at 4 he wetting the bed

I bet it be phase for he with bed wetting

I love that Chris Cody mommy now it feels so right! And I love that Cody called her mommy he for sure a mommy's boy

I feel like next chapter we see what Graham thinks of it and what Cody will do with Graham in the morning after he up

I bet Chris going to need to call her mom for what to do with Cody and Graham and it for sure feels like Cody thinks Graham going to join him their brothers after all but we see

what Graham says next chapter

I so excited to see everything you can’t fit this chapter next chapter

Chapter 36

Potential: Part 36

One thing I want see what try of shows Graham end up liking we know Cody likes that robot show and Zem likes a fighting robot show

It’s cute in a way Graham know he was a part of the family but thought he was there protesting but yet he Cody baby brother who watch his back and Mommy little man who she can talk to about anything

But yet Graham can’t see it

Graham as he said in one of the beginning chapter he was a good well behaved kid the first time around so of course Graham going be the very good boy out the two of them

I very much enjoyed everything with Cody in this Chapter he a absolute little boy who needs cuddles and love and I so happy he getting it with his new mommy and it looks like Graham getting it to

I happy Claire pointed out Graham fallen down about as much as Cody but no one saw it yet

Like with Cody bed wetting it be set up from pretty much the start of this story arc

But I am very excited to see Cody and Graham playing together at some point next chapter or this talk with one another one on one like 2 chapters ago see they talk with cute

I love how you write they together I can’t get enough of it

But I excited for next chapter and the epilogue in the next couple of weeks

Good luck with writing the ending

I sure it feels odd that your about to say bye to all of them

Chapter 37

Potential: Part 37

Think about the story I think it’s a little bit of a meditation on the role parents play in a child’s life

Graham his parents wants he to be one thing and want he can’t do it they let him go

That Graham work all his life to safe others with the group he work for before everything

Cody no family what so even he wasn’t potty trained at 4 that pretty big he was a drug attic he had a bad life used by monsters

That meet Graham who try his best to save him and then they become brothers after the age regression

The cult try to use our 4 boys for there own ends they don’t love they

them wanted they for something not because they wants to help the boys out it’s for their own ends and nothing else

Clair and the other end game parents

They wants the best for the boys

They wanted to take care of them after the age regression

They wants the boys to be happy and this to be kids not to use they or to play mind games with they

The parents only want them to be happy not what they think they can be but the real they the people they are deep down to be happy

They one but there I can see in the story after thought about it

I be loving the story I experienced to read the ending to a great story

Thank you

Chapter 38

Potential: Final

That was a sweet ending I wasn't expect

I thought it be more focus on Graham or Cody POV but I liked Ryan and see he talk with and play with both the boys

And I happy Graham 2 years old now he getting some big now

But I think Ryan he'll make a good dad

He be better than the old one

Like with monkey bars scene he recognizes Cody skill in it the evil dad wouldn't have done it he would want to put it down to make he more of a 5 year old but Ryan want he do it and respect his level at it

And the monkey bars scene remind me of the one character in part one with Graham Cody and Zem playing on the monkey that was so cute and with everything Cody said he feel like he still take pride in playing hard like back in part one

It's cute Graham likes Thomas and that Ryan play with the trains with Graham that was very adorable

It was super adorable after the one on one scene both boys loved him and played with him for a long time

I loved how Cody tell Ryan Graham didn't like being babied but the only person he wants do his mommy and Cody if it's

peekaboo or Cody carry him around lol

It’s cute how independent and introverted Graham is at times it’s cute and I hope Graham keep up the art from last chapter I sure he’ll get very good at it

But I was hope to see one last one on one chat wish Cody and Graham as brothers the last one we saw in a way was the breakfast scene back in chapter 36

But I happy with what we get to see

And this chapter hit home with the parents theme I was talking about last chapter in a way we saw how good kids look at bad parents who want use they and at the end we get to see we get to see how good parents look at good kids there trying to know and understand

Like with how Ryan was trying to think how to talk with Graham not like a 2 year old That he does it and gets Graham to like him

All Ryan did was listening to the 3 of them and he does it great

But thank you for for a beautiful story I enjoy find it and read it over this year

Good luck pick your next story

I excited for what’s next by you