Puppy Love: Carnival

by andlat

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The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

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Maddox tried to hide his panic as he once again had to dodge a group of excited swimmers. Everyone seemed to be growing up so fast and he felt as though he was the only one who hadn't been told. Everything had seemed so normal at the start of summer but now that school was around the corner, suddenly his Sonic beach towel and his lime green clogs felt horribly childish. He had planned to spend most of the day at the community pool, but now that he had seen everyone else, he was too anxious to stay.

“Oops, sorry” his heart could not seem to decide if it wanted to stop or pound out of his chest as he realized he had nearly run right into Allison Klein. Of course. Of course it had to be her. “I didn't- Oh, wait. You're” she paused and looked him right in the eyes, no small feat with how much she towered over him. “Maddox, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Wow, I didn't recognize you out of your school uniform at first! I haven't seen you all summer! Course, I've been in camp after camp, but still, I can't believe summer's almost over.” She laughed. “Sorry, I ramble.” She smiled and he felt even more embarrassed. She clearly saw his Sonic beach towel, his clogs, his… his everything!

“Uh” was all he could say as he tried to avoid looking like he was looking at her navy blue bikini. “Yeah, I'm not looking

forward to going back on Monday." Wow, pathetic, Maddox. He thought.

"Me neither." She smiled. "Are you leaving?"

"Um, yeah. I gotta… gotta go mow the lawn." He knew Dad would never let him touch the lawn, but Allison didn't know that!

"Oh. Darn." She shifted slightly and he tried not to stare at her perfect legs. "Me and some friends are going to that carnival place in the park tomorrow. You wanna come?"

"Really?" She gave a small laugh, but it didn't seem like she was laughing at him. "Uh, sure. What time?"

"How about three? Is that after your… uh, whatever you might have planned tomorrow?" She laughed. "I guess what I'm trying to say is are you free then?"

"Yeah!"

"Alright, it's a date. Why don't we meet by that fountain? You know the one?" He nodded, but then realized that probably looked dorky.

"Uh, sure."

"Great. See you then!"

Maddox dug through his pants and shorts drawer, hoping against hope to find a pair of shorts he had forgotten about. After yesterday, he was acutely aware of how childish most of his clothes were. He had found a striped tank top that at

least felt mature, but what shorts would work?

Knock! Knock!

"Maddox, aren't you going to be late?" Mom asked, opening the door.

"Mom!" He tugged his shirt down over his underwear.

"What? I knocked." His brow furrowed. Parents just refused to understand the most basic things.

"You're supposed- forget it.” he just groaned and went back to searching.

"Why the tornado in your dresser?"

"I'm just trying to find" how could he explain it? "Something nice."

"I'm sure your friends won't mind whatever you wear." He stared at her. He could tell her Allison would be there, but then he'd have to explain why that mattered. Worse, he might get the dreaded 'and who else will be there?'. He had realized last night that he actually didn't know. Allison almost constantly had boys around her, including a few who were not the nicest to Maddox. She had said it was a date though.

Mom, sensing something about her son, leaned over and pulled out a pair of navy blue shorts.

"How about these?" She said. Maddox looked at them, wondering why he had rejected them. "They're nice."

"Those'll work." He snatched them from her and pulled them

on.

"You're welcome." She said, resisting the urge to pull him in for a hug. Like it or not, Maddox was growing up and he seemed especially teenage today in his grouchy mood. "You'd better hurry if you want to make it to wherever you're going."

"It's just that carnival in the park." Maddox dashed away before Mom could start asking more, sliding into his clogs before he turned and realized why he had rejected the shorts: Spongebob was on the back pocket!

"Shoot!" What if Allison looked at his butt? That was a thing girls do! Wasn't it? He would just have to be careful.

The benefit of the fountain was it was visible from the edge of the park, so he could see Allison was already there. Only then did he realize that this could have all been a joke. Well, she's here, he thought, and you don't have anything for her! Shoot, shoot, shoot! Spying some daisies, he grabbed them in a bunch. Better than nothing.

“Hi.” He said, clearing his throat. Allison looked up from her phone and beamed. Her smile was so nice, he felt his nervousness melt away. “Oh, um, I picked this for you!” He held out the daisies to her.

“That's so sweet!” She took them, admiring the small bouquet. “And that's so nice because I have something for you too. Close your eyes and stick out your left hand.” He did so, but a part of him suspected a trick. Sure, Allison seemed alone, but he knew she was usually surrounded by boys,

many of whom had participated in a trend a few months ago of pantsing each other as much as possible. I can trust her though, he thought as he felt Allison touch his hand and wrist before tying something around his wrist. “And… open!” He opened his eyes and looked at the beads that now adorned his wrist.

“What's this?”

“It's a thing some of the girls in my- our class do. Give your crush a bracelet.” He nodded before what she said sunk in. His eyes widened.

“Oh. Oh!”

“You are so cute!” She gushed, touching his cheek. He blushed. He had heard girls call their boyfriends cute, but she said it differently. “Is that a yes?”

“Hmm?”

“Don't you wanna be my boyfriend?” She still had that tone to her voice, sounding more like she was talking to an animal or child than to a classmate.

“I do, but” how could he explain that he was a little suspicious she was playing a trick on him?

“But what?’ She asked, brushing his cheek with her soft fingers again.

“Can you ask me normally?’

“What do you mean normally?” She pulled him closer to her,

giggling as he stomped in his clogs trying to keep his balance. “If you want to say no, I won't be mad.”

“I…”

“Such a cutie. Take your time.”

“Stop, I'm trying”

“You are cute though.” She talked over him. “The cutest. Like… a baby bunny wrapped in a cupcake. No, not a bunny, a puppy. You have total puppy energy, Maddie.” She cupped his cheeks in her hands. “Cutie patootie Maddie pup.”

“Quit!” She laughed.

“Alright, fine. I'll ask you formally.” She looked up at the sky, but then thought better of it. “Here, I'll cover my eyes so i don't get distracted by my cute boyfriend.” She covered her eyes with her hands. “Even if I miss your squishy little cheekies.” Maddox blushed, glad she could not see him. He ran a hand over his cheeks self-consciously. He still had a bit of chub there, but his cheeks were nowhere near as chubby as they had been when he had been a baby. “Do you, Maddox, want to be my boyfriend?”

“Yes.” She squealed and launched herself toward him, hugging him tightly.

“I'm so happy!” She peppered his cheeks with kisses. “Come on, let's go find my friends.”

He expected her to grab his hand, but instead, she slipped her hands under his arms and picked him up.

“Wha?” She set him against her side.

“What?” She asked innocently. “You don't like being carried?” He wanted to say no, but he realized that being held by her meant so much more contact than just holding her hand. He stammered and she giggled. “That's what I thought.”

Allison carried him toward the entrance of the carnival, seemingly unbothered by his weight on her side as she looked around.

“The guys must be inside.” She said, more to herself than to Maddox.

“The guys? I thought…” he felt immediately foolish. He had misunderstood.

“Hmm? Oh, don't worry. They're just friends. They won't interrupt our date.” She smiled so sweetly.

“Well, um, can you at least put me down?”

“Aww, but Maddie! Aren't you comfy?” He stammered.

“They might make fun of me.”

“They won't.” Allison said firmly. “But here, you can hold my hand. It's not too busy right now.” She set him down, smiling as he fixed his shirt. “You just let me know when you're done walking. Wouldn't want my adorable boyfriend to get tired out this early into our date.”

Without even asking, she grabbed his hand, but their fingers did not interlace. It's still hand holding, he told himself.

He looked at the sign by the ticket booth. Dad had told him the guy pays on dates, so he wanted to make sure he had enough for Allison too.

“Hi there!” Allison said, taking him right up to the window with her. “Two please.” The woman in the booth smiled down at Maddox before taking Allison's money.

“I wanted to pay.” Maddox said sheepishly.

“Oh, don't worry.” Allison said, scooping him up and giving him a cheek kiss before he even knew what was happening. “You can still hold out your hand for the nice lady to stamp.”

“Thank you.” Maddox said as she stamped his hand.

“You are too cute!” Allison said. “Almost like a little puppy.”

“What?”

“I'm just being silly.” Allison carried him into the carnival.

“Can you put me down?” He asked. “This is a lot of carrying.”

“I just don't want to lose my little puppy.” Allison said, planting a kiss on his cheek. “I bet you're really good at barking!”

“What does that even mean?”

“You know, the sound a puppy makes.”

“I'm…” he frowned. “I'm not a little kid.”

“I know that!” Allison said. “We're in the same class and we're probably only a few months apart. I just” she laughed.

“Think you're really cute and get carried away sometimes.” She set him down and patted his cheek. “You still want to be my boyfriend, don't you, Maddie?”

“My name's Maddox.”

“Maddie's cuter and with you” she tapped his nose. “I want everything as cute as possible.”

“Just promise to” he wanted to ask her to take it down a few notches when they actually saw her friends, but part of him was worried that would hurt her feelings. It would be just my luck to lose my girlfriend ten minutes into our date, he thought. “Just promise to let me walk.”

“You can walk to the mini donut stand, Maddie.” She said, offering her hand. He took it, but stared at her hand.

“They didn't stamp your hand.” He said.

“I didn't need a stamp, silly.” She replied. He looked at his own hand. “Come on, I want mini donuts!” She pulled him along. “Quit dragging your feet or I'm picking you up.” He hurried along with her, but he had to wonder why the woman in the ticket booth had stamped his hand with ‘under 3’. What did it mean? He was well over three feet tall and obviously older than three. Did it mean that they were a pair and not three or more? That made no sense.

“What a little gentleman!” A woman about his mom's age said, looking at him and Allison.

“We're on a date.” Allison said, giving Maddox's hand a

squeeze.

“Oh, I'm sure.” She said with a knowing smile. Maddox glared at her as she walked away.

“Ok, Maddie.” Allison picked him up yet again. “I want mini donuts. Wanna share, boyfriend?”

“Uh, sure.” He said, distracted by her close proximity. “Why do you keep picking me up?”

“I don't want you to get lost.” She said.

“Lost? I’m not-”

“Taken by some other girl, silly. You're perfect boyfriend material.” She grinned mischievously. “Do you know why?”

“Because I'm” he hesitated. “Because I'm handsome.”

“Of course you are.” She said. “A handsome little man.” She gave him a little bounce in her arms.

“A handsome man.” He agreed.

“Well, would my handsome little gummy bear like to walk again?” She asked.

“Yes.”

“Alrighty, but remember, let me know when you're tired.” Once again, she took his hand and somehow managed to juggle the bag of donuts and her phone. “Oh, perfect. They're over in the shade.”

“Who are we meeting-” he asked, but as soon as he saw the

broad back of Mallak, he had his answer.

“There you are!” Mallak said, turning around and smiling at Allison. Everyone knew Mallak had a huge crush on Allison, so Maddox felt at least a little pride that she was his girlfriend.

“Where's everyone else?” Allison asked.

“Grant wanted a slushie and Jake went with him.” Grant, Mallak, and Jake? I struck out, Maddox thought. Still, Allison is my girlfriend. He tried to sit down on the bench next to her, but somehow ended up in her lap. He wiggled, which drew Mallak's attention.

“You didn't say anything about having to babysit.” Maddox glared at Mallak.

“Dude, we're in the same class.”

“He's just jealous that he's big and stinky and ugly, while you're a cute little squishmallow!” She whispered, giving him a squeeze.

“Well, he should apologize.”

“Maddie's my special guest.” She explained. She pulled a mini donut out of her bag and brought it to his lips. He accepted it into his mouth and she gave another little laugh. Apparently she liked something about the way he had eaten it because he had to stay right there as she fed him the rest of the donuts, one by one.

Once Grant and Jake came over with their slushies, the group decided to wander the carnival. Maddox wanted to ride the

rides, but he didn't know how to bring it up to anyone. I guess just walking and holding Allison's hand is okay, he thought.

“Are we actually going to do something?” Allison asked, as if reading his mind. Mallak shrugged and looked over at Grant and Jake, who also looked clueless. Grant stretched his arms over his head, showing off his armpits. Maddox made a face. His armpit hair looked like it was exploding out of his skin or something. “Well, if no one's going to pick something.” Allison looked down at her purse and her hand holding Maddox's. “Up you come.” Before Maddox even knew what was happening, she pushed him at Mallak. “Here. Hold him while I'm finding the list of rides.”

“I can walk!” He whined as she handed him over.

“You're fussy.” Mallak said, bouncing him slightly to get him situated. “Suck your thumb. Isn't that what-”

“I am not sucking my thumb!”

“He's big, Mallak.” She said. “Here, I can take him back now.”

“I… this is ridiculous! I want to walk like all of you are!”

“How could I give you a kiss if you weren't right here, cutie?” She cooed. He blinked and she laughed. “Unless you don't want a kiss?” He pursed his lips, his heart racing. She smiled and kissed his cheek. “Mwah! Cutie patootie, cheek like a peach, that's why I'm keeping you in my reach.”

“Allison!”

“Do you need to, uh,” Grant stammered. “Change him?’

“What!?” Maddox almost leaped out of Allison's arms.

“Shh, don't worry.” Allison said, holding him close to her until he calmed down. She smelled so nice. None of the other boys got to be this close to her. “Maddie doesn't wear diapers, Grant. He's a big boy.”

“He seems crabby.”

“How about this?” Allison said. “Maddie and I'll sit over there in the shade while you three go on the Zipper.”

“I'll go with them.” Maddox said at once. The Zipper was the only ride worth going on here, plus it would prove he wasn't a little kid.

“I guess that's ok.” Grant shrugged.

“What do you think, Mallak?” Jake asked.

“I want to go too!” Maddox insisted, but Allison silenced him with a bunch of cheek kisses. He had to do something! Inspiration struck. Everyone called him Mallak, so surely calling him his first name rather than his last name would prove he wasn't a toddler.

“Aaron!” He exclaimed, but Mallak, Jake, and Grant were walking away.

“Are you even tall enough for that ride?” Allison asked.

“Yes!” She laughed.

“But you'd miss out on alone time with your girlfriend.” She laughed again as his face lit up. “There's my happy little

puppy!”

“Allison.” He whined. “Can't I at least walk?”

“Not yet. Let's get to the soft grass in the shade.”

Allison sat down in the grass, somehow managing to hold Maddox the whole time until she set him in her lap. Before he even noticed she had let him go, his shoes were off and she was cupping one of his feet in her hand.

“Is everything about you just the cutest ever, Maddie?”

“My name is Maddox.” He tried to sound reasonable. He liked the attention, but it was getting embarrassing! Why were the other boys acting like he really was an annoying little kid?

“Maddie's much cuter.” She kissed his cheek. “Squishy little cheeks, jelly bean toes, Maddie.” She chuckled as he pulled his foot away. “I'm just having fun. Aren't you?”

“Yeah.” He mumbled.

“And what's wrong with Maddie?”

“I know a girl named Maddie.”

“Sure, but there are lotsa names that boys and girls can have. Sam, Cameron. Ashley used to be a boy name, y'know. I had a great uncle Ashley.” She gave him a squeeze. “And I'm sure girl Maddie was actually Madeline or something, just like my boyfriend Maddie is Maddox.”

“I guess.” It did make sense. Maybe he was being overly

sensitive. After all, Allison was his girlfriend. She wasn't trying to make fun of him.

“So, what do you say? Can I call you Maddie?”

“Yeah.”

“Such a dour puppy face.” She turned him around, sitting him on the grass right in front of her. “Would you feel better if it felt like your idea?”

“Huh?” She smiled and grabbed his chin with one hand, squeezing his cheeks. She almost cooed right then and there, he looked so adorable.

“Ask me. Say, my name's Maddox, but would you please call me Maddie?” She smiled warmly. “That way, it's your idea.”

“Uh”

“Go on!”

“My name's Mad-” he had hardly began before she jumped in.

“Not like that! I don't want to hear your gruff voice. Ask me with your real voice. I hear you singing in music class.” Maddox cleared his throat, confused. He remembered Mr. Rose telling them that you sing best with a smile, so he made himself smile. It became a natural smile when he saw how happy Allison became.

“Uh, my name's Maddox, but would you please call me Maddie?” She squealed with delight.

“Of course I will, Maddie! Doesn't that feel better?” He

nodded nervously. Girls were really confusing! “Still so serious though!” She said. “Do you not like being called Maddie?”

“Not really?”

“Then why'd you ask me to call you Maddie?” She lunged and began to tickle him, Maddox collapsing into the grass as she tickled and tickled him.

“See?” Mallak muttered as they walked over. “She's going to keep ignoring me until we get that little kid out of our way.”

“How are you gonna do that?” Grant asked.

“It's gonna be hard to get her away from him.” Jake said. “Isn't she babysitting or something?” Mallak considered his options as they walked over.

“How was the ride, boys?” Allison asked, pulling Maddox into her lap and, despite his squirms and protests, put his shoes back on for him.

“Fun.” Jake said.

“'I've got a plan, guys.” Mallak muttered.

“It didn't break down?” Allison asked, standing up and brushing grass off of her.

“Not this time!” Grant was obviously relieved. Mallak was trying to whisper his plan to Jake when Allison played right into his hand.

“I'm gonna go to the bathroom. You boys be nice to Maddie.”

Maddox looked at her, betrayed.

“Oh, this is perfect. Here's the plan,” Mallak said excitedly. “I'll wait here for Allison, you two take” he looked down at Maddox. “What's your name, bud?”

“Maddox. We're all in the same class.” Maddox said, annoyed.

“Ok, you two take Maddox on the” he spun around and pointed. “The Caterpillar Crawl.”

“We're not riding on that.”

“No, you just put him” he jerked his thumb at Maddox. “On it and keep an eye on him. That way, I can get Allison on the Tunnel of Love.” He grinned wolfishly.

“Like that'll work. She's my girlfriend.” Maddox said. “Hey! Let go!”

“Carry him or something, Grant.” Jake said. “Don't fight us, little dude. You'll have fun! Look, it's perfect for little kids like you.”

“Seriously?” Maddox said as Grant tried to pick him up. He kicked out and Grant dropped him with an oomph.

“He got me, man.” He said, dropping to his knees.

“Come on, Maddox.” Jake said. “We're gonna go on this super cool ride.”

“We're in the same class! You and I did a presentation together!” Maddox was starting to get nervous. Why did they all seem blind to who he was?

Once Grant recovered, they took Maddox over to the Caterpillar Crawl. Maddox stared at it in disgust. The ride was a green caterpillar with a goofy smile and big friendly eyes making a slow trip around in a circle. Each segment of its body was a seat under a red polka dot canopy.

“Guys, this is a funny joke, but seriously. Don't make me ride that. It's for babies.” He watched it inch along. It would take like an hour to go around even once!

“Doesn't that look fun?” Grant asked, kneeling down. “My little brother rode it last time I was here and he loved it.”

“Isn't he like three?” Maddox asked, vaguely remembering when Grant's little brother had been a newborn at Grant's birthday party. “I'm your age.”

“You're up, dude!” Jake said, nudging Maddox toward the ride attendant.

“This is ridiculous.” Maddox muttered as he was coaxed into standing up against the cartoon sunflower that served as a height check. It had bright labels from Sprouting Seedling (too small) through Wiggly Worm (just tall enough) and Crawlin’ Caterpillar (perfect fit!) to Butterfly Buddy (almost too tall).

“Looks good to me.” The ride attendant said. “Won't even bother measuring you two.” He chuckled before shifting into his bored instruction voice. “Go ahead and get him in the third seat. Make sure he's buckled up before stepping through the exit.”

“You guys, come on.” Maddox whined. “Allison's gonna-”

“No, Mallak, I want to watch Maddie.” As if on cue, Allison was standing at the fence. She beamed and waved at him when she saw Maddox notice. “Are you gonna go on the Caterpillar Crawl, Maddie?”

“No!”

“It'll be so fun.” She gushed. “And you wanted to go on a ride earlier.”

“Yeah, I wanted to do the- get off me!” Grant picked him up and put him in the ride, Jake lunging in to get him all buckled.

“So helpful!” Allison called. “Why can't you be like them, Aaron?”

“I don't want to ride this!” Maddox yelled, but it was too late. Grant and Jake joined Mallak and Allison as cheery music began to play. The caterpillar lurched forward and Maddox's ride began.

Wiggle waggle, scoot and slide!
A lovely day for a caterpillar ride!

Through the garden, nice and slow!

Round the garden we will go!

In front of and behind Maddox were little kids giggling and waving at their parents. Allison leaned over the fence, waving at Maddox as her phone captured every minute. He groaned as the song's second verse began.

Bump and bounce as round we go!

Past the flowers in a row!

Wave to the ladybugs, giggle with glee!

A lovely crawl for you and me!

“When does this thing stop!” Maddox muttered as the first verse began again. His only hope was that they would only go around once. To his relief, it stopped. He grabbed at the safety belt, but couldn't get it undone until the ride attendant made his way to him.

“Out you come!” He said, lifting the boy out and setting him down on the ground. He walked to the exit, thrilled to be finally done.

“You were so cute!” Allison gushed, scooping him up and peppering his cheeks with kisses.

“That was awful!”

“Oh, please. Your puppy pout on the Caterpillar Crawl? Absolutely adorable.”

“Come on, they put me on it as a joke. It's a baby ride.”

“If it was just for babies, they wouldn't've let you ride, Maddie.” She kissed his cheek before setting him down and taking his hand.

“No, you are not making me ride it again!” Allison giggled, but relented just outside the line to go on the ride again. She sat down on the bench and pulled Maddox up to her.

“You never did tell me what sound a puppy makes, Maddie.” She said. She cupped his cheek. “Maddie the puppy. I love the sound of that!”

“Maybe I should give you a nickname.” Maddox said, wincing inwardly at how pathetic it sounded. Still, he wanted to get the focus off of embarrassing things.

“Oh? Like what?” She seemed so genuinely interested, he wished he had had one ready. He stammered.

“Um, well, maybe you're Allie cat?” Her nose wrinkled.

“I don't really like that.”

“Well, I don't like being called Maddie!”

“You asked me to call you Maddie though.” He yelped as she pulled him into her lap yet again. “See? Puppy yelps from my puppy.” She kissed his cheek. “And cats and puppies don't really get along like we do, now do they?”

“I guess that's true.” He mumbled.

“Come on.” She poked his sides.

“What?”

“You owe me. What sound does a puppy make?” She smirked. “If you don't do it now, I'll make you do it in front of Mallak and the boys.”

“Why-” Maddox frowned. “Do you know why they think I'm a little kid?” He should have known better than to expect an answer from Allison.

"Does someone have marshmallow fluff under their shirt? Maddie does!" She began to blow raspberry after raspberry into his tummy, reducing him to inarticulate squeals. By the time Mallak, Grant, and Jake had found them, Maddox's face was bright red from laughing so hard and he was sprawled across Allison's lap. His shirt was hiked up to his armpits and he had kicked his shoes off, which had only given Allison more territory to tickle.

"He's cute." Grant remarked, smiling down at Maddox.

"See?" Maddox said to Allison, trying to regain his composure. She shifted him up to sitting and fixed his shirt.

"Jake, can you grab Maddie's shoe? We got a little carried away."

"It's so little!" Jake exclaimed, picking it up.

"It is not." Maddox muttered. "Your feet are only like a size or two bigger."

"I like your feet just the way they are." Allison reassured him.

"We're gonna go eat." Mallak said. "Do you need to-"

"Maddie and I were just talking about how starving we are!" Allison said.

"We can take him." Grant said, grabbing Maddox off of Allison's lap.

"Hey! Get off!" Undeterred by Maddox bucking in his arms, Grant set him down on the ground.

"Grab his other hand, Jake." Grant said.

"What's going on?" Maddox looked over his shoulder and saw this for exactly what it was. Jake and Grant were distracting him while Mallak made his move.

"My little brother loves this." Grant said. "And... swing!" Maddox's feet kicked as the pair swung him forward.

"Stop it!" He whined as they did it again.

"It's fun, not scary!" Grant said, but Maddox disagreed. "Swing!"

"I told you, Aaron." Allison said. "I'm not interested."

"Come on!" Mallak protested. Allison watched Maddie being swung along. He seemed happy, so she stopped and looked up and right into Aaron's eyes. He was tall and good-looking, she supposed, but she didn't want tall and handsome. "Why'd you ask me to come to the carnival if you didn't want to date me?"

"Why'd you bring Grant and Jake if you thought it was a date?" His cheeks turned pink.

"I... mentioned it to them and couldn't get them to not come." He said. "But" he scoffed. "It's not like you have a boyfriend."

"I do." Allison said.

"Who?" Allison wondered if he even realized how demanding and aggressive that had sounded.

"Maddie." She nodded to the little boy. They were about to

go into Burger Barrel.

"Yeah, right." Mallak snorted. "Fine, if you don't want to tell me..." he began to walk.

"Don't be like that." Allison said, running after him even though she did not know why. "There's tons of girls in our class and almost all of them are crazy about you." She saw him cheer up. "So," she shrugged.

"Like who?" She rolled her eyes.

"Everyone. Just not me."

By the time Mallak and Allison came inside, Maddox sat in a wooden highchair. He quickly covered the disposable plastic bib around his neck, but Allison pulled his hands away as she sat in the booth next to him.

"Burger Barrel Baby!?" She gushed.

"They made me." Maddox muttered, cold fury in his voice. "They said I'm too little for the booth." By now, he had realized that this was beyond a joke. Somehow, everyone except Allison saw him as a very little kid.

"Your own special seat." Allison said. "Besides, there's four of us, so it would be a little snug in the booth." She held up her phone. "Smile!"

"Not happening."

"Smile!"

"No!"

"Smile!"

"Alli-"

"Goochie goochie goo!" She tickled his side and an infantile giggle escaped from deep inside Maddox. "Oh, perfect!" She turned her phone to Maddox, who stared in disbelief. Somehow, her efforts to tickle him didn't appear in the photo at all. All that there was was him, mouth open in a dopey grin with the bib fully on display.

"Do not post that anywhere."

"Oh, that's just for me." She said with a giggle. "If you hate puppy, maybe we can call you Burger Barrel Baby." She snorted as he glared at her and turned her attention to the boys. “Did anyone order Maddie food?”

“No.” Grant and Jake at least had the good sense to be sheepish.

“Can I get the Barrel Buster?” Maddox asked. Allison smiled and kissed his cheeks.

“Don't be silly. The Little Buns menu comes with a toy! You can do the Lil Moo Burger or the Chicken Barrel Bites.”

“Allison.”

“Want me to surprise you?”

“It's not enough food!” Allison only played with his cheeks.

“You ate an entire bag of mini donuts, Maddie!” She got up and went up to the counter, planning to get him the chicken

nuggets.

“More like Booger Barrel.” Jake said to Grant and Mallak, paying Maddox little to no mind. They all snorted and laughed until Allison came over with the food, giving them all a critical eye.

“Maddie's the most mature one here.” She said. Maddox felt like that hurt him more than them since he was wearing a bib and stuck in the highchair. She was about to sit down when her phone went off. “Shoot, that's my mom.” She had been looking forward to feeding her captive boyfriend his kids’ meal. “Can you guys watch Maddie?” She hurried outside.

“Oh, we'll watch him.” Mallak said. “Jake, go grab Maddie” he said the childish nickname with none of the warmth Allison put into it. “Some more ketchup.” He grinned at Maddox. “So, you're Allison's boyfriend, huh?” Maddox knew he was in trouble, so he nodded once. Why was he stuck in this stupid highchair? Every single part of him told him to run fast and far. “Well, let's show her just what a little baby brat her precious little boyfriend is.”

“Hey! Stop! No!” Maddox tried to kick, punch, do anything to stop Mallak as he smeared ketchup everywhere from Maddox's face to his hands, putting a big splotch on his shorts and even getting some in his hair. “Messy eater!” He said, feeding Maddox the chicken nuggets and fries as sloppily as he could, throwing a few fries all around the highchair. “Oh, look. Apple slices and caramel!”

“That is enough!” The voice was so stern, all four boys froze,

eight wide eyes turning to look at the mother standing over them. She had a toddler in one arm. “What on earth are you boys doing?”

“Babysitting.” Mallak said, thinking fast.

“I doubt that. That nice girl outside is the babysitter. You're just… terrors!” She gave Mallak, Grant, and Jake such icy looks, Maddox almost shivered. “I want you three gone. Immediately.” They hurried to their feet. “And tell her” she jutted her chin at Allison's back. “I'm cleaning up this little guy.” An experienced mother, she pulled Maddox out of his highchair, setting him on the opposite hip from her own child, not even caring that he got ketchup on her clothes. “Let's go, sweetheart. Your name's Maddie, right?” Maddox was so shellshocked, he simply nodded as she carried him into the womens’ room. Mallak and his friends left and Allison was still on the phone outside, so no one could hear his desperate cries of protest from inside the bathroom.

Allison finished the phone call and returned to the table, sighing as she did her best to clean up the disaster area the boys had made.

“And he wonders why I don't want to date him.” She said. She went back up to the counter to order ice cream: a hot fudge sundae for her and the Tiny Treat sundae for her sweet little Maddie.

"Thank you so much." Allison said as the woman brought Maddox back, not even missing a beat as she slid him back into the highchair. "I hope he wasn't too much trouble."

Maddox wasn't even meeting her eyes.

"No trouble at all. He was a little fussy, but once he realized I was just trying to help, he calmed down." Maddox mumbled something, but she didn't notice. “Those other boys though.” She huffed and left.

"Can... I want to go home." Maddox said softly.

"Finish your dessert first." She said. Maddox seemed defeated as he took small, obedient bites, finishing the entire strawberry sundae. “Alright, up you-”

“No! I'm doing it myself!” He said with such force, she stepped back and watched as he managed to worm his way out of the highchair.

“Impressive.” She said, eyeing his shorts curiously. Could it be? She might just be imagining things since Spongebob was smiling up at her and she had been thinking all day about how it was hard to find shorts like that in any size above maybe six. Still, she had a feeling there was something more there, even more absorbent than that sponge. You're a dork, Allison, she told herself.

As Maddox marched out of Burger Barrel, Allison's suspicions were confirmed. She had to bide her time though. As they returned to the park, she waited until no one was around and pounced.

“Hey! Quit!”

“It's just me and my boyfriend.” She said, pulling him into the

shade where no one could see. “And my little Maddie has a surprise for me!” She yanked down the back of his shorts far enough to see the entire back of his diaper.

“I can explain!” He said desperately.

“Nothing to explain.” Allison said. “You're not cute anymore. You're absolutely adorable!” She pulled him into a big hug, kissing and kissing and kissing his perfect cheeks, his shorts down around his ankles as she drank in that perfect moment, ruined only by the fact that he still smelled strongly of ketchup. “I hope you thanked that nice mommy for changing your diaper.”

“She didn't change my-”

“Oh, so she took off your big boy underwear and put you in a diaper? Is that less embarrassing, Maddie?” Maddox stared at her. “And back to your lost little puppy face.” She worked quickly, setting him in the grass on his back, her phone seeming to materialize in her hand as she snapped a flurry of photos. “Just for me.” She said. “Oh, so adorable.” She whispered as he struggled back into his shorts. “Maybe I need to explain, Maddie.” She pulled him into her lap, smiling as she could feel the softness of his diaper on her legs.

“Explain what?”

“Shh, shh.” She smiled. “But maybe everything that's happened today is normal for you?”

“...no.” She nodded and grabbed his wrist with the friendship bracelet on it.

“To put it simply, when you wear this, everyone sees you as-” she stopped herself. “You're different from the other boys, aren't you?” He shrugged and she laughed. “They're all so obsessed with masculinity.” Her voice deepened cartoonishly. “I'm a young man, not a boy and all that silly stuff.” She kissed Maddox's cheek. “But then there's you.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you! My perfect little Maddie with his jelly bean toes, marshmallow fluff tummy, and those squishy cheeks just right for kissing!” Maddox squirmed as she once again kissed and kissed him. “Everyone's in a hurry to grow up, you're not afraid to just stay a little baby boy.”

“What?” He pulled away from her. “I- I do not! I am not!” Allison just smirked.

“Oh, but you are. And thanks to that bracelet, every single person will see you just the way I do. A cute, perfect little baby boy.”

“What? That's impossible!” What was she talking about? He wasn't a baby! And how could a bracelet she made make everyone see him as a baby?

“Boys you've known since preschool put you on the Caterpillar Crawl, then in a highchair. You got into the carnival for free because the ticket taker thought you were under 3. A total stranger diapered you!”

“Well, but, well” he sputtered, feeling like he might faint. “What about Mallak! He knew I was your boyfriend.”

“That is a good point,” Allison said. “But I think he was feeling a lot of strong emotions, I know, that's a shock, but it might've short circuited things for a bit.”

“I am your boyfriend, aren't I?”

“Of course you are, diaper butt!” She laughed. “And I hope I'm your girlfriend.”

“Yeah.” He shifted slightly, blushing as he felt the papery plastic against his legs. That woman had said he had calmed down when he realized she was trying to help, but in truth, he had shut his eyes tight and hoped he would wake up from the nightmare that had him half naked in the womens’ room of Burger Barrel.

“Okie dokie.” Allison got to her feet. “Let's walk you home. Don't worry about your parents. The bracelet shouldn't work on them.”

“What about school?”

“Meet me at the flagpole.” She frowned. “Actually, you'll probably-” she stopped and laughed. “I'll pick you up at your house. Not literally.” At least not every day. “We'll take the bracelet off then and then put it back on after school. Seem fair?”

“Uh” Maddox frowned. Would she be offended if he said he didn't want it back on? Something told him he couldn't take it off himself. “Sounds good to me.” It didn't make any sense to object when he was wearing it. Who knows what she would do! Once she took it off him, then he would negotiate.

“Bet your bedroom's cute.” Allison said as they came to Maddox's house.

“I've been in Grant's room.” Maddox heard himself say. “It looks like his room.” Allison snorted.

“Like that means anything to me.” She picked him up. “Goodbye kiss?” He nodded, pursing his lips. He half-expected her to miss his lips and plaster his cheeks with kisses, but their lips connected and suddenly, he didn't mind the fact that he was diapered so much. “See you on Monday.” She said, setting him down and seizing her chance to pat his perfectly diapered bottom. She watched, amused as he toddled up to the front door and went inside.

“How was your day?” Dad asked.

“I have a girlfriend.” Maddox replied with a happy sigh.