Sproutlings

by andlat

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The Costume Box
2024

Chapter 1

Sproutlings

“Here we are.” Mom said “Do you need help?”

“No.” Andy said, but she was already almost out of the car. He quickly hit the buckle of his seatbelt, desperate to get out of his booster seat before Mom came and tried to help him. Mom opened his door and he vaulted out of the red and gray seat.

“Someone's eager.”

“It'll be fun.” He said, though he was not entirely sure just what free gym meant.

“Want me to go in with you?”

“No.” He said so firmly, she smiled.

“Alright, bud. Be good and I'll come pick you up at 3:30.” She looked like she might give him a hug, but then thought better of it.

Andy walked inside, wincing as he heard the squeals of little kids. It was not that he hated little kids, he just hoped he would not be stuck trying to make new friends while a bunch of kindergartners were running underfoot.

“Sproutlings over here.” A friendly adult voice called out. He saw a woman standing by a door. There was a sign with a smiling beanstalk or something and the word Sproutlings in playful font, so Andy was not sure why she had to announce

it. “Sproutlings over here!” He realized she was looking right at him, so he sped up and half-attached himself to a group of taller boys.

Andy knew he looked little. Some of that was his height, some was his head of blonde curls. It had been at least three weeks, but he still had not forgiven Mrs. DeWitt for saying he looked like a little cherub in flight as he tried to show everyone his super cool new jump into the swimming pool.

“Hey!” Andy jumped as he heard a friendly voice.

“Oh, hi.” He said, looking slightly up to see a smiling face, missing a tooth, that belonged to that voice.

“My name's Riley, what's yours?”

“Oh, um. Andy.”

“Cool. I like your shirt.” Andy looked down at his Capricorn shirt.

“Thanks. It's-” he stopped talking, realizing it might be good to admit to a kid he just met that he was wearing his cousin's handmedowns. “It's my favorite game.”

“Cool.” Riley said. “You wanna play basketball with me and my friends?”

“Uh, sure.” Riley took off jogging across the gym and Andy followed.

“Don't we gotta check in or something?” Riley shrugged.

“Don't think so. It's Free Gym, not school or something.”

Andy considered this and figured that made sense. “So, this is Brayden.” Brayden wore a blue camo t-shirt and solid blue shorts. “And that guy who just shot the airball, that's Brandon.” Brandon and Brayden? Andy thought. At least Brandon had brown hair and Brayden had a blonde buzz cut.

“Riley.” Brandon said, looking Andy over. “Who's that?”

“This is Andy. He's cool.”

“He's a baby.” Brandon said at once. Andy sighed and gritted his teeth.

“What?” Riley looked at Andy as if Brandon saw something he didn't. “No, he's not.

”

“He is.”

“No, he's got a Capricorn shirt.”

“So? Probably his big brother's.” Brandon said. “Right?”

“No.” Andy said, trying to stay calm. He'd dealt with guys like Brandon all the time. “Let's play two on two.”

“We don't play with babies.” Brandon said. “Right, Bray?” Brayden shrugged.

“I mean…” He did not seem to want to take sides.

“See?”

“I'm like an inch shorter than you.” Andy said. “You're not a baby.”

“Duh.” Brandon said. “But you are.”

“He's not.” Riley protested. “Right, Andy?”

“Of course not!” Andy groaned. “Let's just play.” That was the best way to prove that he was definitely not a baby.

“How old are you?” Brandon demanded.

“Nine. Just drop it.” Andy said, starting to get mad.

“You are not.” Andy rolled his eyes.

“I'm gonna go grab a ball and shoot hoops.” He began to walk away, jerking his hand when he felt someone grab his wrist before turning to see Riley.

“He's just a jerk.” Riley said. “You and I can play together.” He looked at Andy again before adding. “I don't think you're a baby.”

“Sure.” Andy said, figuring the best thing to do was just try and ignore it. “I'll go grab a ball?”

“Ok.” Riley said cheerfully. Andy walked over to a rack of basketballs. The first couple were flat, but he managed to find a good one. He gave it a few dribbles on his way back and saw Riley talking to Brandon. Is he bullying him now? Andy wondered.

“Hey,” Brandon thrust his chin toward Andy. “I was just joking, dude. Let's play two on two.”

“Oh, it's a good idea now that you thought of it?” Andy asked. Brandon shrugged.

“What, you want a medal or something? Let it go, dude.”

“I'm gonna go pee real quick.” Brayden said. “Me and Brandon versus Riley and…”

“Andy.”

“Andy.” He ran off, sneakers squeaking on the gym floor.

“Let's just shoot until he gets back, I guess.” Brandon said with a shrug.

“He must be pooping or something.” Riley said after a few minutes – and a few good shots – had elapsed.

“Gross.” Brandon grunted, launching the ball at the hoop. It went in and Andy retrieved it. “Give it here, baby.”

“Don't call me that.” Andy thrust the ball from his chest at Brandon, hoping to hit him in the face. Brandon dodged it.

“One, you answered to it.” He said smugly. “And two, you better go get that ball.” Andy groaned, but gave chase as the ball bounced and then rolled toward a group of girls playing pickleball on the other side of the gym.

“Sorry.” He said as he scooped up the ball and then began the trek back over. “At least Brayden's back.” He muttered. “Still weird they're Brandon and Brayden.” The trio looked over at him as he approached and he felt suddenly unnerved. Why were they looking at him like that?

“Got the ball.” He said, panting slightly.

“Go ahead and shoot it up.” Brayden said. “For luck.” Andy

shrugged. Made sense to him.

“From the three point line.” Brandon said. “Right over here.” He pointed to a spot. Andy once again shrugged it off.

“Five! Four!” Riley began to count down. “Three!” Andy lined up his shot. “Two! One! Errrr!” As the ball soared through the air in an arc toward the basket, Andy felt his shorts fall to the ground, pulled there by Brandon. He tried to tug his shirt down over his Sonic briefs.

“Huh.” Brayden said. “No diaper.”

“We'll fix that.” Brandon said, grabbing the diaper that Brayden had secretly tucked into the back of his waistband. Outnumbered as he was, there was little Andy could do as the trio pulled him onto the gym floor. Brayden held his legs, Riley sat on his chest and covered his mouth with his hands.

“Ew! He licked me!” Riley said. “I thought we were friends, Andy.”

“You're… what are you even doing?” Andy demanded, his voice muffled.

“We're putting your diaper on.” Brandon said, tugging down Andy's underwear. “And if you lick Riley again, we'll drag you over to those girls, naked.”

“So be a good baby.” Brayden added, snickering.

“Please. Riley.”

“Sorry, man. They told me I hadta.” Riley whispered. “I like

your undies though.” Andy glared. He may not be able to see through Riley, but he could feel the diaper under his butt.

“Alright, Dandy Andy Huggies Butt.” Brandon said, pulling his shorts back up. “You're in your diaper.”

“This… this isn't fair! I don't need diapers.”

“But it fit you.” Riley said in disbelief. “Didn't it, Brandon?”

“It fit perfectly.” The three boys stared down at Andy's shorts, the diaper quite obvious against them.

“That doesn't prove anything!”

“But like, a baby diaper fits you.” Riley said.

“It would fit you too, I bet.” He tugged on his shirt to try and hide his puffy bottom.

“No way.” Riley scoffed. “I'm nine.”

“We're the same freaking age!” Andy protested. “I'm not a baby!” People were starting to look over at them.

“He's getting fussy.” Brayden said.

“Fussy?”

“I bet it's almost naptime over at Sproutlings.” Brandon added. “Let's get Huggies Butt on over there.”

“That's not my name!” Andy tried to dig his feet in, but with Brayden holding one wrist, Riley sheepishly holding the other, and Brandon pushing from the back, he had no choice but to stumble along, legs swinging wide from the diaper

between his thighs.

Brayden knocked on the wooden door next to the Sproutlings sign.

“What even is this place?”

“It's for little kids.” Riley said. “My little brother used to do it, but he got too old.”

“Dude! I'm your age. Let's just ditch-” The door opened and the happy woman from before stood there. She looked right at Andy as if she knew he was the reason they were here.

“Hi, Miss Senf! We found Andy here trying to play with the big boys, but-” Andy glowered as Brayden spun a whole tale about him.

“Did not!” He protested as Brayden said he had started to cry because everyone was so big. “Seriously, Riley, we can ditch these guys. You can't-”

“Alright, buddy.” Miss Senf said, leaning down and rubbing his back. “How about you let the big boys get back to their game and we'll find something fun to do with the other boys and girls?” Rather than wait for an answer, she slipped a hand under each of his arms and lifted Andy up, setting him against her shoulder and patting his bottom. Her eyebrows went up just a bit as she felt his diaper. “I think you'll be much happier in here.”

“No, please!” Andy pleaded, but the door closed behind him.

Riley felt guilty, but he figured Sproutlings couldn't be so

bad. Jonas seemed to enjoy it last summer when he had gone. By the time he, Brayden, and Brandon had finished a game of three-way Horse, he had all but left his guilt behind.

Lunchtime came and they all went to the cafeteria. Riley ate his turkey and cheese sandwich as Brandon and Brayden competed to see who could belch the loudest. He watched the Sproutlings come in for lunch, all holding hands in a big chain. He spotted Andy and almost waved, but thought better of it. If he had been in the Sproutlings chain, he knew he would have stuck out like a sore thumb. Andy though, he looked like he belonged as he sat down in a little green plastic seat, even if he seemed a bit upset when Miss Senf slipped a plastic bib down over his curls.

“Told ya.” Brandon said, looking over his shoulder to see what Riley was looking at.

“Geez.” Brayden said. “What a baby.” Riley felt conflicted.

“Let's do rock climbing after this.” Brandon decreed. That sounded fun to Riley. Andy seemed to be in good hands, didn't he?

After rock climbing, they headed out to the soccer field and each took turns trying to score while the other two guarded the goal. Riley managed to make Brandon trip over Brayden and scored, pumping his arms up in the air in celebration. He spotted the Sproutlings over by the community center exit, doing what looked like hopscotch with hula hoops instead of chalk squares.

“Lucky shot.” Brandon said. Riley smirked, thoughts of finding Andy lost as he turned back to prove that it was skill, not luck.

“Alright, kids.” The first adult they had seen since lunch announced as they trudged back inside. “Free Gym's over. Go to the bus stop, parking lot, or walk home.”

“What are we gonna do about Andy?”

“What do you mean?” Brandon asked.

“His mom or dad or whoever will come get him, right?” Brayden shrugged. “Why's it matter?”

“Well, we have his” his voice dropped to a whisper. “Underwear.”

“Should've tossed it.” Brandon said with a sigh. “He's a baby, after all.”

“But you still have it, right?”

“Why are you taking this-”

“Brandon.”

“Yes, Riley! Geez.” He pulled Andy's underwear out of the pocket of his shorts. “See?”

“It was just a joke.” Brayden said.

“Kinda mean of a joke.” Riley mumbled, but he felt conflicted. The diaper fit Andy and he really did look like he belonged in Sproutlings at lunch… “C'mon.” He marched

toward the Sproutlings door, trusting that Brandon and Brayden would follow.

“Let's go, Bray.” Brandon said, following Riley.

Riley stood in the doorway, Brandon and Brayden muttering behind him as they all looked at the circle of little kids sitting on the rainbow rug. Once again, he could not shake the feeling that Andy did not look out of place, though he glared at them. Well, he thought. Even if he's a baby, we put him in here, we gotta get him out.

“Hello, boys.” Miss Senf said. “You must be here for Andy.”

“Yes.” Riley said. She smiled as Andy got to his feet, making it obvious he still had a diaper on.

“Andy, let's do the goodbye song.”

“No.” Andy said, but she had already started.

“It's time to say goodbye to all your friends.” She gestured for Andy to clap twice. “It's time to say goodbye to all your friends.” Clap, clap. “It's time to say goodbye, so smile and wink your eye. It's time to say goodbye to all your friends.” Clap, clap. “Bye-bye, Andy!” He quickly walked toward them, trying to figure out some way to push past them, but they still outnumbered him, grabbing his hands and dragging him out of the Sproutlings room.

“Did you have fun, Huggies Butt?” Brandon asked.

“That's not my name.”

“Well, if you're gonna be a fussy baby about it, we won't give you your underwear back.” Brayden shrugged.

“He probably should stay in diapers anyway.” Brandon said with a smirk, looking around for the nearest garbage can.

“Here.” Riley snatched the underwear from Brandon and patted Andy's shoulder. “I'll help you.”

“I don't need help!” Andy protested as Riley shepherded him toward the boys’ room. Brandon and Brayden followed, snorting as Riley locked the door. “Turn your back or something.” Andy said.

“I already saw.” Riley turned his back all the same, but Brandon and Brayden did no such thing.

“Is that a different diaper!?” Brandon exclaimed. Andy's face turned a deep shade of red.

“It is! The one I took had Mickey on it. That one's got Sesame Street!’

“I… I didn't have a choice!” Andy exclaimed, sniffling as his eyes welled up with tears. Brandon and Brayden were both laughing too hard and Riley stood there, looking uncomfortable and confused, so no one interfered as Andy ripped the diaper off before pulling his underwear and shorts back on. He snarled and shoved past everyone, marching right out into the afternoon sun.

“What's wrong?” Mom asked, picking him up and setting him in his booster seat. He was too angry to even care about that.

“I'm never going to Free Gym again.” He muttered. Mom gently tousled his curls. She would get more details later, like why he had a sticker on his shirt that said ‘my diaper was changed at 1:43 PM.’