Summer of the Tiger

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The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

Summer of the Tiger Chapter 1: Another New Start - Chapter 1

Another New Start

The blue SUV traveled down the road into town at a good clip. From the road one could see that it was packed to the brim with bags and boxes nearly bursting out from the trunk which was held down with a bungee cord.

“I think the speed limit is twenty five,” Colton said from the front passenger seat.

“Oh, yeah,” his mom Grace said looking around the streets as she brought the car down to a appropriate speed. “Good thing there wasn't a cop around, huh,?” Grace said with a mischievous smirk. Colton gave his mom a exasperated look. He put his head back into the seat and crossed his arms happy to be traveling at the legal speed.

“Geez, someone's grumpy,” Grace teased giving her son a playful shove on the shoulder.

“Stop,” Colton said with a huff. Grace grimaced for a moment and let out a sigh.

“How long are you going to mope?” she asked.

“I'm not moping,” Colton said.

“You've been moping since the very moment I told you about

the move," she retorted.

"I just thought we were going to stay longer in Minnesota is all," Colton said. There it was, Grace had known that was what had been bothering him this whole time, she was just trying to get him to say it. Grace was what one could call a free spirit, she loved traveling all around and never did like being in one spot for long, always looking for the next adventure. Which made her job perfect. Her chosen profession did not have a title of any sort she kind of did a lot of different things. One day she could be designing and implementing large landscaping projects and the next she could be managing renovation crews.

Colton on the other hand did not inherit his mother's wanderlust. He was quiet most of the time and kept to himself preferring to lock himself up his room on his computer. In fact just looking at Colton and Grace was enough to show they were complete opposites. Grace was wearing bright tank top showing off her tanned skin cultivated by the fact that she spent most of her time outdoors, aviator sunglasses adorned her face and a bandanna was tied around her forehead to keep the hair out of her eyes. Colton on the other hand was wearing a black polo shirt tucked into a pair of jeans with a belt. He had a mop of dark brown hair on his head but that was only because his mom had not had time to take him to get a haircut with all the moving preparations, usually he kept it cut high and short. Most of Colton's wardrobe was filled with button down shirts and collared shirts or overly baggy sweaters. Colton's

preference for his appearance was not a matter of taste however. He did this to try and give himself an older appearance. To any passer by Colton appeared no more than seven years old, given his height and youthful features yet in reality he was actually thirteen and was set to start eighth grade in the fall.

Colton's appearance was a source of much displeasure for him, between the constant moves every couple of years and his appearance it had made it hard for him to make connections or friends. The only people that seemed to give him any attention in school were the bullies who no doubt salivated at such an easy target like Colton. Whenever they moved Grace always tried to get Colton to see the silver lining that at the very least he wouldn't have to deal with them anymore and maybe the next school could be his fresh start. Unfortunately there always seemed to be a fresh crop waiting for him at the next place.

“Look bud I know you aren't exactly thrilled moving all over” Grace said trying to cheer up Colton. “But we are only going to be here for three months and then we'll be off to Tennessee where I'll have a six month contract, and with the money I'll be making with this job and the next we'll have no problem coasting until next summer.” She hoped the promise of a full year in one place would be a positive for Colton.

“Which makes this only more pointless, why couldn't I have stayed with Grandma for the summer while you came out her alone?” Colton asked. Grace let out a sigh. They had been staying with her mother for the last year and a half due to

Grace being sideline by a workplace accident. Between recovery and the months of physical therapy she hadn't been able to work for a year. Not to mention with the hospital and other bills her savings had been pretty much wiped out, to put it bluntly she was broke, which is why she accepted this new job offer overseeing renovations on an old farmstead property as quickly as she could. The work itself was only for three months and she usually only accepted longer contracts in an effort to give Colton some shred of stability, but she needed the money and she needed it fast.

“Oh come on Colton, you were miserable in Minnesota and besides your Grandma is traveling this summer to Greece,” Grace said.

Colton let out a little huff.

“I do have a little good news for you if you promise to try and have a more positive attitude about this whole thing,” Grace said. Colton perked up a little at the idea of a surprise.

“What is it?” Colton asked.

“I already got you in to the local Boy scout troop, we are actually headed their right now,” Grace said happy to deliver the news.

“Really you already got me in?” Colton asked his face showing signs of excitement.

“Yeah I talked to some lady on the phone and she sent over the papers, she said as long as you bring those with you they can get you started right away,” Grace said pulling a manila

envelope from the center console and holding it like a trophy in the air. Colton sat back in his seat a smirk on his face. Maybe things weren't going to be so bad.

Colton had joined up with the Boy scouts in the sixth grade. Given Colton's demeanor he didn't seem the outdoors type and he truly wasn't' but had signed up in an attempt to appear more rugged and manly. It had been difficult for him since he joined up late, and since he had missed out on the whole cub scout experience. He lacked some experience that the other kids had coupling that with his size playing catch up was a slow process, but in a weird way Colton had taken some sort of shine to it. Grace liked it hoping it would instill a zest for the outdoors in Colton that she already possessed. Unfortunately when they had moved to Minnesota plans to get Colton into the local troop had fallen to the wayside with everything else that had been happening.

“Is their something you want to say to your rock star of a mother?” Grace asked.

“Thanks Mom,” Colton said reaching for the envelope. Grace moved the envelope away dangling it higher over Colton.

“Is that all?” she asked.

“Mooom, c'mon,” Colton whined.

“Indulge me,” Grace said making a puppy dog face at her son.

“Fine,” Colton said rolling his eyes. “I love you mommy,” Colton said his voice layered with sarcasm.

Grace smiled and handed Colton the envelope. “I'll take it,” she said. They turned down another street and Colton could see a church at the end of the road.

“Here's the spot,” Grace said as she pulled into the parking lot. The church sat upon a hill it was made of red brick and looked to be an older building. There was a wood playground down one side of the hill complete with a large metal jungle gym structure. To the other side was a black top outfitted with several basketball hoops. There were only a few other cars in the lot but the place looked mostly deserted.

“Ready?” Grace asked shutting off the car. Colton got out of the car getting hit with the warm air of the southern summer. He took a long stretch which felt great after having sat in the car for most of the day. His mom got out and did the same.

“You don't have to come with me, I can do it myself,” Colton said.

“Don't worry,I can't stay even if I wanted to” Grace said checking the time on her phone. “I'll leave as soon as we find someone I just want to make sure this is the right place. Or would you rather me leave you in the middle of nowhere with no way home?” she asked, the question being rhetorical of course.

“Fine,” Colton said making his way towards the church.

“Wait,” Grace called after him. Colton slumped and turned around throwing his hands up.

“What?” he asked clearly impatient.

“I want to talk to you about something first,” she said scanning the area. “Lets go sit over there,” she said spying some benches near the basketball court. Colton followed his mom as they took a seat on the bench. “Look, I want to ask you if you could promise something?” Grace asked.

“Another promise,” Colton groaned.

“Colton, please this is serious” Grace said taking a firm tone. Colton straightened up on the bench it was not often his Mom took that kind of tone with him. “You're getting older, not really a kid anymore ” Grace started. “So its about time I start being more straight up and honest with you. I know you think that you've hidden it pretty well, but I know you've been having trouble making friends for a long time.” Colton's mom wasn't lying. The last time he had anyone he could have even called a friend was about two schools ago when he was in fourth grade. Despite having been in a boy scout troop for a year he had not really forged any kind of relationship with any of the other kids that could be called anything more than a passing acquaintance. School had been even worse once the teasing and bullying had started. All in all it had been a pretty lonely number of years for Colton.

“You've been isolating yourself more and more holing yourself up in your room on your computer,” Grace continued. “I'm worried about you, I can see how its starting to take its toll on you,” she said.

Colton was taken aback by his mothers expression of genuine concern. He could see she had probably been trying to have

this talk with him for awhile.

“I want you to promise me one thing, we're here for only three months,” Grace said. “I want you to try your hardest to make at least one friend in that time.”

Colton was silent. Did she understand how hard it was for him to make friends? Colton had found it very hard to even talk to kids his own age, it scared him in a way, it was just easier to avoid it altogether. Any attempt he had made had only been met with mocking or outright rejection. In Colton's mind what more could he expect. Who would really want to be friends with the weird looking kid who looked like he belonged in the first grade?

“Listen I know you've been having a rough past couple of years,” Grace said talking to fill the silence. “But you haven't been doing yourself any favors either. You cant be a loner all the time.”

“I know,” Colton said his voice barely a whisper.

“Colton, I know you feel like the world is somehow stacked against you, and I'll admit my job hasn't exactly been helping that either. I also found it hard to make friends when I was your age, but I just learned that I needed to roll with the punches.”

“Mom its not that,” Colton began to say.

“Hey look at me,” Grace said cutting him off, as she placed a hand on his shoulder. “You've already been knocked down plenty by life there is no denying that. Just know I will

always be in your corner ready to lift you back up but you need to know to go back out their swinging, okay.”

Colton thought on what his Mom was saying, he wasn't quite sure where the boxing metaphor had come from but it had made its point.

“Okay,” Colton said.

“Okay what?” Grace asked.

“I promise to roll with the punches,” Colton said slightly making fun of his moms words. “And to try and make some friends."

Grace smiled.

“And I have a promise for you. I've been thinking its about time to settle down. So I'm going to start looking for something more permanent job wise,” Grace said.

“Really,” Colton said lighting up.

“Yeah, this hasn't really been a fair arrangement to you, its time for me to be less selfish,” she said.

“Are you sure?” Colton asked.

“For you, I'd do anything, because I just love you so much,” Grace said pulling Colton in close and hugging him. She tousled Colton's hair as he tried to pull away finally planting a kiss on his head before releasing him. Colton shook his head and took a cursory glance around hoping no one from his new scout troop had witnessed the scene.

“Ready?” Grace asked.

“Yep,” Colton said popping up from the bench, filled with a renewed resolve to start his summer.

Chapter 2

Summer of the Tiger Chapter 2: Accidental Tiger - Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Accidental Tiger

Grace's little pep talk though a little inelegant had worked for Colton as he walked towards the church with a pep in his step. He wanted to run but felt like that would be a little much. The entrance to the church was up a steep incline from the parking lot. There were concrete stairs with a ramp next to them with a metal rail in the middle. Colton opted to run up the ramp. As he neared the top his foot caught on a piece of concrete that had chipped away causing him to trip. He hit the concrete hard bouncing off to the side which sent him tumbling down the steep embankment straight into a bunch of bushes. Grace saw the whole thing happen in slow motion and took off into a run to the bushes where Colton now laid. As she began to push the bushes aside she could hear him groaning from within the the thicket.

“Are you alright,” a voice with a heavy southern accent called out as Grace saw another lady making her way down the hill to where she was. Grace didn't have time to answer as she had finally spotted Colton. She grabbed him and pulled him out from the bushes helping him to his feet.

She looked him over and saw that Colton now had a pretty

good scrape on his elbow. The scrape didn't look too bad but what was worse is that his shirt had gotten completely ripped as one half of his torso was now exposed with the ripped fabric hanging by mere threads at his waist.

“Are you hurt?” Grace asked.

“I'm fine,” Colton said still a little dazed and trying to get his bearings.

“Oh my that was quite the tumble,” the lady who had appeared said as she was now standing next to Grace. Colton realizing his exposed torso now try to cover himself with the ripped half of the shirt which he could only drape over himself loosely. He looked at the damage to the shirt and saw the massive tear that went right down the center.

“I think he's fine,” Grace said to the other lady.

“Thank goodness, I've been telling them for years they need to re-do this ramp, definitely not the first fall we've had,” the lady said. Now that Grace was sure Colton was okay for the most part she turned her attention to the lady.

“Thanks for coming to check on us,” she said.

“Oh no problem,” the lady said. “I'm Sandy Hertz.” Grace shook Sandy's hand.

“Grace Hendel We're here for the scouts is this the right spot?” Grace asked.

“Sure is,” Sandy said her face lighting up. “I'm the troop leader for the cub scouts and my husband runs the boy scouts

side but both troops meet here at the same time," she explained. "I'll just need you to fill out some paperwork first."

"Already done," Grace said as Colton handed the envelope over to Sandy. She opened it and looked over the forms.

"So this is Golton?" she said squinting at the paper.

"Colton," Grace corrected. "Sorry my handwriting is terrible." Colton gave a small nod of agreement. His Mom's handwriting could be described as chicken scratch and even that was generous.

"No problem," Sandy laughed. "I'm a nurse so I read doctor handwriting all day, believe me I've seen worse." Sandy continued to look over the paperwork a moment before nodding. "Everything else looks to be in order. We usually have to send away for uniforms but we just started the new sessions not too long ago and we did get new people joining up as well. If my memory serves right I still have some extra uniforms for the group Colton will be joining. So we should be able to slide him right in."

"Yikes," Grace said sucking in some air through her teeth as she checked her phone, "I'm gonna be late."

"Got someplace to be?" Sandy asked.

"Yeah we just got into town today and I have to meet the movers at the new place," Grace explained.

"Well I'd be happy to help him get his uniform and make sure he gets to where he is supposed to be if you want to just leave

him with me," Sandy offered. "You're old enough that you can handle not having Mom here on your first day, right?" Sandy asked looking at Colton.

"Yeah I'm fine," Colton said.

"You sure?" Grace asked giving Colton a concerned look.

"Really, I'm fine," Colton said.

"Thanks so much, you're a lifesaver," Grace said to Sandy. "I'll be back in an hour to pick you up," she said to Colton as she turned and started making her way in a hurry back to the car.

"What about the shirt? Sandy called out.

"Just trash it," Grace said turning around and waving her hand in the air. "Its ruined anyways.

"Let's hurry," Sandy said now talking to Colton. "The meeting is about to start and we don't want anyone to see you in that ripped up shirt."

Colton nodded as he followed Sandy into the church. They walked into an entrance with a set of four doors that lead into the chapel area to their immediate right was a door that Sandy went through. It took them down two flights of stairs into a basement area. As they walked along the hallways there were several rooms on either side. As they passed Colton could see they appeared to be meeting rooms some of them appeared to be classrooms. He guessed this is where they held Sunday school classes. He had never been as his Mom wasn't the

spiritual type as she put it. Finally Sandy turned into another room. It appeared to be room being used for storage. There were some portable whiteboards up against the wall in the front and a large amount of folding chairs stacked against the back wall. There was also a small smattering of cardboard boxes near the center of the room where two round tables stood next to one another. Sandy walked over to the boxes and set the papers on one of the tables.

“Lets see one of these boxes has extras in it.” Sandy said as she begun to dig through the boxes Colton could see that the boxes were mostly filled with other supplies such as guidebooks for the various levels of scouting and lots of merit badges still waiting to be awarded. She opened the last box which appeared empty as Colton could not see any of the contents over the side.

“Lucky you, Sandy exclaimed “I only have one uniform left and its just the one you need,” she said. Colton was grateful wondering what would have happened if they had not had the right uniform for him.

“Okay let me help, arms up,” Sandy said. Before Colton could even react he felt Sandy grab his torn shirt and pull it completely off of him leaving him topless.

“I can do it myself,” Colton stammered as he stumble backwards.

“Oh sorry,” Sandy said apologetically. “I'm helping patients get dressed all the time at the hospital it was a force of habit. Colton nodded accepting the woman's explanation. She

turned her attention back towards the box setting his ripped shirt on the table.

“Here is your new uniform,” Sandy said turning around holding the shirt in front of her like it was a painting. At first Colton was confused which quickly turned to horror as he realized what she was holding. It was not the normal tan boy scout shirt, instead it was a bright orange t-shirt with the image of a tiger printed on the right breast. This was a cub scout uniform more specifically a tiger scout uniform.

“That's not the right uniform,” Colton said. “I'm a boy scout.”

“You must have misunderstood.” Sandy said with a chuckle. “Boy Scouts is for when you are older. Six year olds like you start off in tiger scouts.” Sandy said. Colton couldn't believe what he was hearing. People mistaking him for a little kids was not new in fact it was a daily occurrence. But Sandy had a paper that should have had his real age.

“But the paper,” Colton said meekly.

“Oh yeah, want to see something funny?” Sandy said picking up the paper and showing it to Colton. “Your mommy actually wrote down 5.”

Colton grabbed the paper with shaky hands as he looked over the form. There was a line that asked for his age upon joining and he could see where Sandy's misunderstanding was coming from. With his mom's legendarily bad handwriting he could see that she had started to write a one but the pen must have run dry leaving a mark that looked more like a dot. Next

to the one where there should have been a three to make thirteen there was some strange symbol that looked a whole lot like a five than a three but it was so sloppy that one could have mistaken it for five easily.

“But I noticed your birthday,” Sandy said pointing to another spot on the paper where it asked for date of birth, which Colton had just celebrated last month. but the form only had spots for the month and day, not the year.

“According to this you just had a birthday but your mommy was probably so used to writing five that she forgot you just turned six.” Sandy said. Colton was trying to form some words but due to his panic and confusion was having trouble getting himself to speak. Sandy took the form out of Colton's hand which broke him out of his stupor snapping him back into the moment. It was now that he noticed that the hallways outside had filled with the sound of other people walking and talking.

“You are'nt actually five are you?” Sandy asked.

“No,” Colton said but before he could get out another word he was cut off by Sandy who seemed to be in a hurry.

“Good because you cant be a tiger scout until you are six so you just barely made it. Now its almost meeting time so I have to go but you're a big boy so I know you can handle this on your own. The tiger group is just across the hall so once you get your uniform on go there, I'll make sure Brady the tiger leader knows to expect you. You'll love him he is tons of fun,” Sandy said. Before Colton could even sputter out

another word Sandy left the room his ripped shirt in her hand and his form in the other. Colton was now left standing in the room alone shirtless. Colton took a few deep breaths as he tried to wrap his head around this bizarre situation he had found himself in. He stared at the tiger shirt on the table in front of him. He didn't want to put it on but what choice did he have? He was in a completely new town. Even if every part of him wanted to run he wouldn't even know where to go. Plus he was topless and had nothing else to wear. He took the shirt in hand with some hesitation feeling the soft fabric. He threw it up over his head and worked his arms into the sleeves. For some reason the conversation he had had with his Mom in the parking lot came to the mind.

“Roll with the punches,” he said under his breath. He could fix this still. Its not like anyone knew him around here. He just needed to find Sandy and clear this whole misunderstanding up. He just needed to be firm. Surely if he was insistent enough she would see he was telling the truth but he couldn't begin to look for her if he was still shirtless. Scouts was the one thing he had going for him here, he wasn't going to lose it like this.

Colton walked out into the hallway only to be met by the stares of a line of about ten other kids all dressed in similar tiger uniforms across from him.

“You must be Colton,” he heard a voice say. Colton was approached by a man also dressed in a tan scout uniform that denoted he was a den leader. He looked to be in his twenties. He had long hair that gave off a surfer vibe. He extended a

hand which had a hemp bracelet on the wrist onto Colton's shoulder and began to lead him towards the back of the line.

“You made it just in time, we'll have proper introductions later but we are headed to the chapel for the all troop meeting, so just follow us okay,” Brady said placing Colton at the back of the line of tiger scouts. Before Colton could even utter a single word Brady had made his way up to the front of the line. “All right tigers lets march.” The line started following Brady as he lead them back towards the stairs where Colton had first entered. The other scouts chattered away with their friends the hot topic of conversation being the new kid at the back as some of them stole glances backwards. Colton was on auto-pilot as he just followed along with the line. They made their way up the stairs and entered into the chapel area.

There was a stage up front and pews in front of it. An aisle way down the middle separated the sea of pews into sides. On the left side were boy scouts dressed in the tan uniforms and on the other side were the various cub scouts easily identifiable by their different colored kerchiefs they wore around their necks. Brady lead his group down the center aisle and had them take a seat on the long pew in the very front which given the average size of the kids Colton included fit them all comfortably. The stage in front of them was high up and looked more like a proper theater stage than a church pulpit. On the stage was an impressively tall man. He had neatly trimmed black beard and a shiny bald head. He was decked out in a troop leader uniform like Brady. Colton

was caught up in looking around at his surroundings when he felt a hand on his shoulder he turned to see Sandy knelt down beside him now wearing her own leader shirt.

“Hey I forgot to give you your hat,” she said handing him a baseball hat. Before Colton could even say anything she had already left. She walked up a wooden set of stairs set near the stage and made her way over to the tall man. The man took a step forward and put a hand in the air. The room immediately quieted down.

“We ready to get started,” the man said into a microphone. The audience waited attentively. “So before we get into the all troop meeting we have a bit of fun business to get out of the way. It has come to my attention that we have a new member that joined up with us today. What do you say we bring him up on stage and give him a troop 337 welcome.”

Colton felt the largest pit in his stomach form. He began to tremble from the overwhelming nerves he was feeling.

“Lets welcome Colton Hendell to the stage, come on up Colton,” the tall man said. Colton was frozen in his spot as he was overcome with the feeling that every single pair of eyes in the room was now on him. He looked over and saw Brady near the front of the pew a big smile on his face as he motioned Colton towards the stairs leading up to the stage. He got to his feet his knees shaking. The thought crossed his mind that he should run straight outta there. He looked to the back and saw their were some parents sitting near the back. If he ran what would they do, would someone try to stop him?

They probably would, and even if he was fast enough to get out of there he had no place to go. He was trapped and their was only one place he could go, the one place he under no circumstances wanted to.

Chapter 3

Summer of the Tiger 3: Tiger in the Spotlight - Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Tiger in the Spotlight

Colton walked to the stairs, his hand shaking as he grabbed onto the railing. He had no choice there was no escape. He kept his head down as he walked to the center of the stage where the two troop leaders waited for him. Sandy made room so that he stood in between them. Colton remembered the hat that he was holding in his hand. He immediately put it on and pulled the brim down in an attempt to obscure his face.

“I'm Mr. Darius,” the man said extending his hand towards Colton. The boy took the man's hand which dwarfed his own. “And you've already met my wife Ms. Sandy.” Colton took a cursory look out among the crowd. He saw the entire troop both the cub scouts and the boy scouts sat out in front of him and they were all looking at him.

“Colton just moved here,” Darius said addressing the crowd. “Why don't you tell us where you lived before here?” Darius asked putting the microphone in front of Colton.

“M-Minnesota,” Colton said his voice shaking. He could feel his ears getting hot and sweat was beginning to form on his back.

“Minnesota, eh I hear it gets pretty cold up there, we aren't to used to that down here. So tell us Colton how old are you?” Darius asked. Colton looked directly at the man fear filling his eyes. He went to say something but the words were caught in his throat in truth he didn't know what to say. To say the truth on stage in front of everyone wearing a tiger shirt would be disastrous.

Sandy could see that Colton was wracked with nerves and clearly uncomfortable. In an attempt to throw him a bone as it were she answered for him using her own microphone.

“Colton just turned six a couple weeks ago,” she announced. Some of the other tigers let out a cheer. Colton however now stood on the stage his mouth agape. He couldn't believe what was happening. He almost felt like fainting. Everyone in the whole room now thought he was just a little kid.

“Six!” Darius exclaimed placing a hand on Colton's shoulder. “You'll be in good company over in the tiger den it sounds like.”

Colton's whole body was now trembling this couldn't get any worse for him. Darius was about to continue his impromptu interview before Sandy interjected.

“I think we've tortured Colton enough we should let him go,” she said. Darius chuckled.

“I suppose you're right.” he said. “Lets give Colton a big troop 337 welcome for being so brave as he leaves,” Darius said.

The room erupted into applause. As Colton walked towards the stairs he could feel his cheeks burning, he head was spinning and the applause sounded thunderous as it seemed to surround him. He was in a daze as he took his first step on the stairs and that's when he felt his legs finally give out everything seemed to go in slow motion he felt himself falling forward. He hit the stairs hard and rolled down the rest of the way landing in a heap on the ground. He let out a loud yelp as he felt the pain in his leg. He grabbed his leg as he began to whimper from the shock and pain tears forming in his eyes. He heard a collective gasp from the audience. Brady jumped up from his seat and was by his side.

“You all right?” he asked. Colton could not even respond. Brady immediately scooped him up and carried Colton through a pair of doors to the side of the stage that lead to a backstage area. Brady set Colton down on a metal folding chair and then knelt down so that he was at eye level.

“Where does it hurt?” Brady asked. Colton was beyond where he could even speak. In truth the pain in his leg had been fleeting he was completely fine. The greater injury was the one to his dignity after the humiliating display. The only thing he could be grateful for was the fact that Brady had gotten him out of the auditorium quickly.

“I can take it from here,” Sandy said appearing in the backstage area a small first aid kit in hand.

“Sure,” Brady said standing up. “Well Colton I hope your alright and can join us for the rest of the meeting,” he said

before leaving. Sandy was now kneeling in front of Colton.

“You are having the worst luck today huh?” Sandy said unzipping the first aid kit. “So what hurts?”

Colton was doing everything in his power to hold back his tears, the last thing he wanted to do was cry in front of these people anymore than he already had.

“I saw you holding your leg out their so lets start their,” Sandy said sensing that Colton had clammed up tight. “Is it your ankle?”

Colton nodded that's where it had hurt the most. She took off his shoe and and sock. She took his foot and began to move it around asking if it hurt when she did so. Colton only responded by shaking his head.

“Do you think you could stand on it?” she asked. Colton got to his feet and walked a little to show that he was fine before sitting back down. “You look to be okay, so that's good,” Sandy said as she put his sock and shoe back on even tying the laces for him. “that was quite the fall though, sometimes when we get nervous our legs get a little wobbly.” she said talking to Colton in a comforting tone one would take with a small child. The affect was lost on the thirteen year old in the chair. “I'll have to talk to my husband,” Sandy said. “He is used to working with older kids so he forgets that it can be scary sometime when we are younger to get up in front of a lot of people.”

Colton wasn't really listening to much of what she was

saying. He had finally found Sandy alone, the one thing he had been trying to do, but now their was no way he could bring himself to tell her the truth. Even if he cleared up the initial misunderstanding with Sandy and was moved to the boy scouts group there was no way he could show his face. They had all seen him up on the stage wearing the tiger uniform, they had all heard that he was supposedly only six years old and they had all seen him fall down the stage and have to be carried out. Only thirty minutes into the first meeting and he was finished.

“I want to go home,” he said in a hushed down. Sandy sighed.

“That's understandable, I can call your mom but you know you aren't really hurt and your mom is busy right now with the movers so I don't know how fast she'll be able to get over here, there's only about thirty minutes left,” As Sandy said this the sound of everybody getting up from their seats and beginning to move about could be heard from outside. “It sounds like everyone is breaking off into their dens, you're a really tough kid you barely even cried when you fell. You sure you don't want to try and stick it out? Sandy asked.

There was nothing more that Colton wanted right now than to leave but Sandy was also speaking the truth. He had no idea how far away his mom was or how fast she would even be able to come and pick him up, would there even be a point?

“Fine,” Colton said defeated.

“That's a brave boy,” Sandy said with a smile as she helped him out of the chair and lead him back into the auditorium.

Chapter 4

Summer of the Tiger Part 4: Face of a Tiger - Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Face of a Tiger

Brady had the rest of the tiger scouts already in a line ready to leave when he saw Colton and Sandy emerge from backstage.

“Colton, you coming back?”

Sandy nodded once again answering for him.

“Awesome join up in the line we're going to go to our den meeting now,” Brady instructed. Colton took his place at the back of the line and followed the rest of the tigers back to the room across from where he had first gotten his uniform.

Inside the room looked like a classroom appropriate for younger kids. There were tables with small plastic chairs on one side and a carpeted area in front of a whiteboard attached to the wall on the other. Near the back were cubby holes filled with brightly colored plastic bins.

Sitting at one of the tables was a group of three girls, they appeared to be highschoolers. They each had large canvas bags sitting on the table.

“Alright everyone to the carpet,” Brady said. The rest of the

kids bounded over to the carpet and took a seat on the ground in front of the whiteboard. Colton followed and took a seat in the back. Brady now stood in front of the group.

“Okay so we got one or two announcements and then I got a real fun surprise for you guys,” Brady said. He walked up to the whiteboard and began to write down some dates and then at the top he put in large letters “Tiger Stripes”

“Three weeks from now is the tiger stripe ceremony and what does that mean?”

“Uniforms,” the rest of the group shouted excitedly.

“That's right.” Brady said.

Colton was a little confused, weren't they already in their uniforms? He pushed the the though out. What did he care he had already decided he wasn't coming back.

“But before you can get your stripes you have to earn your first three badges which we will be doing together as a group.”

“Is one of them archery?” a red haired boy with freckles asked. “I really want to shoot a bow.”

“Not quite Dom but I like the enthusiasm,” Brady said with a chuckle as he began to write out three different sets of words on the board. “The first one will be the founders badge, we as a group will need to come up with an oath that is special to our den which you will then need to memorize, we'll also have to make a banner for our den.” Brady said. He then wrote down the name of the next badge. “After that we will

be doing our swimming safety badge, and then finally our road safety badge, which will be tons of fun," Brady said as some of the kids began to chatter excitedly. "Are you all ready for the surprise?" Brady asked talking over the crowd. The kids quieted down and turned their attention back on Brady in anticipation. " Even though we don't have our uniforms yet I though we could get ourselves in the tiger mood. As you can all see we have some special guest with us tonight that's my sister and her friends they have graciously agreed to come and make all of you look like tigers." The kids let out a collective ooh as some of them began to bounce up and down in their chairs unable to contain their energy. Brady walked out of the carpeted area and pulled one of the small plastic chairs from a table and set it in front of the group.

"Who wants to go first and be our display model?" Brady asked. Every kid's hand shot up into the air except for Colton who really wanted no part. Brady looked out over the kids scratching his chin dramatically like he was thinking very hard. "Hmm I know," he said. "I think our new friend Colton should go first I bet he would be a great model since he showed everyone how brave he was before by getting up on stage in front of everybody."

"I don't..." Colton began to say but he was drowned out by the sound of the other kids who had all started to chant his name. He put his hands up to show that he did not want his face painted. Two of the other kids however were already standing on either side of him they grabbed him by the wrist and

pulled him up forcefully from the carpet in their eagerness to help him up they inadvertently flung him towards the chair. Colton stumbled off balance towards the chair as he could see he was about to trip over it not able to stop his forward momentum yet Brady was their to catch before he had suffered his third fall of the night.

“Easy guys,” Brady said as he put Colton into the chair. “All right just sit there and let the girls paint your face.”

Before Colton could even protest the girls were already in front of him using a sponge to cover his face in orange paint.

“You are going to be one cute tiger,” said one of the girls.

“Kari, he doesn't want to be cute,” said one of the other girls. “He wants to be fierce, right squirt,” she said with a wink.

Colton felt his cheeks go red again from the comment fortunately for him his cheeks were fully covered with orange paint already.

“Close your eyes sweetie,” said the last girl. Colton closed his eyes as he felt them put paint on his eyelids. He did not open his eyes again as somehow closing them made the whole experience a little less unbearable. These girls could not have been that much older than him, fifteen maybe sixteen. What would they have thought if they knew they were painting a thirteen year old boys face instead of a six year old? Colton felt brushes now moving across his face to make stripes and a couple of dots on his cheeks for whiskers.

“All done,” one the girls said. Colton opened his eyes to one

of the girls holding a small mirror in front of his face. He saw the image of his face painted up to look like a tiger staring back at him. As she pulled the mirror away he was faced with the other kids all looking at him laughing and cheering with smiles on their faces excited for their own turns.

“You look awesome bud!” Brady exclaimed. “Why don't you give us a big roar to show us what a fierce tiger you are.”

Colton looked in horror at Brady who had a smile on his face.

“I can't,” Colton said.

“You don't know how?” Brady asked. “Maybe we can help you out, whaddya say guys,” Brady said addressing the rest of the group. The kids all put their hands up like claws and scrunched up their faces and let out a loud collective roar. They then fell into giggles and some of them even began to swipe at one another like they were actual big cats.

“See its easy,” Brady said. “Give it try.”

“I can't,” Colton said again, this time loud enough that it caused the rest of the group to stop what they were doing and look at their newest member. Colton got up from the chair fighting back tears as he went to the furthest table in the back and sat in a chair putting his head down on the table. He heard Brady tell the rest of the group they would be called up one by one for their turn but until then they could have free time since the meeting was almost over.

Colton couldn't believe he had reacted like that, how could he have been so immature, maybe he really was six.

“Hey bud,” Brady said. Colton lifted up his head to see Brady kneeling across from him at the table.

“I'm sorry,” Colton said. He truly was after all none of this was Brady's fault in his mind he had only been trying to help a nervous little kid feel welcomed. It probably would have worked to if Colton was actually a little kid and not a teenager who had endured one humiliation after another in the span of the forty or so minutes that had passed since he had arrived.

“You don't need to apologize, you did nothing wrong,” Brady said smiling. Colton felt better seeing Brady's reassuring expression. “I know you've been having kind of a rough night. I also know you just moved here. I used to move around a lot to when I was a kid so I know it can be kind of scary to be in a new place where you don't know anyone. But there's no reason to be scared, everyone is super nice in the tiger den and I know they are all very excited to be your friend. Some of them were even worried about you when you fell.”

Colton averted his eyes, knowing that a bunch of six year olds had been concerned for him didn't really make him feel better.

“I want you know I'm really happy you're here,” Brady continued. “I hope you'll come back next week. We have a lot of really fun things planned and I would hate for you to miss out.”

Colton nodded which seemed to satisfy Brady as he got to his feet and walked away. Fat chance was all Colton could think.

He liked Brady, he thought that he seemed like a genuinely nice and caring guy Colton found himself slightly wishing he was really a six year that way he wouldn't have to disappoint Brady. However he wasn't six and there was no way he was ever coming back.

Colton remained at the table even after Brady had left, content to sit and wait out the rest of the time until his mom came back, he only prayed that she wasn't late. He saw the other kids had spread across the room they had taken out a bucket of blocks and most of them were busy building a large tower some of the other kids had legoes out at another table. More kids started to appear with their faces painted up as the girls made their way through the group.

Another boy approached and took a seat at the table across from Colton. He had olive skin and a mop of black hair which was styled over to one side.

“Hey do you like cars?” the boy asked. Colton didn't respond and kept looking down at the table hoping the kid would take the hint that he wasn't exactly feeling very social at the moment.

“I got this car today,” the boy said taking a matchbox hot-rod out of his pocket and placing it on the table. “I think its pretty fast,” the boy said pushing the car across the table. It stopped when it bumped gently into Colton's elbow on the table. “You can have it if you want,” the boy offered.

Colton reached out and sent the car back towards its owner. The boy grimaced before shrugging and placing the car back

into his pocket.

“Do you play Battle Monster?” the boy asked. Colton recognized what the kid was talking about he had actually been really into it when he was younger but he hadn't looked at the stuff in a long time.

He was sort of surprised to hear it was still a thing.

“I have a ton of cards and I'm hoping to get the new game for my birthday,” the boy said. He continued on talking about his favorite cards uninterrupted for a couple of minutes. Finally he took a breath in what seemed like there first time since he had started. He then fell silent and stared at Colton expecting some sort of reply. Colton continued to stare downwards with his fist's on his cheeks. The boy gave kind of an awkward smile probably realizing he wasn't going to get any kind of response.

“I'm gonna go play legoes now,” the boy said looking behind him. “You should come,” he said standing from his chair. Colton shook his head wearily. The boy began to leave before turning back around quickly.

“Oh yeah, my names Grant, I think it would be cool if we were friends,” Grant said before leaving and going and joining the other kids with the legoes.

Colton watched as Brady leaned down and whispered something in Grant's ear before patting the boy on the shoulder. Colton wondered if Brady had put Grant up to it or if he was merely praising him for trying.

As time passed parents began showing up to pick up their kids. Colton saw Sandy appear at the door and lead his Mom in. She introduced her to Brady. She looked confused as she looked around. That's when she spotted Colton at the back of the room she had to do a double take at first not recognizing her son done up in face paint. Colton came and stood next to her. Grace looked down at him and could tell he was completely sapped of energy.

“Did Sandy tell you?” Brady asked.

“Uh about what?” Grace asked focusing back in on the den leader. As Brady filled her in about Colton's fall in the auditorium she put an arm around his shoulder. To her surprise Colton wrapped his arms around her waist and rested his head against the side of her torso.

Brady continued explaining that Colton was completely unharmed and was checked out by Sandy. He didn't mention anything about Colton's outburst or the fact that he had sat alone in the back of the room for the remainder of the meeting however.

“Oh by the way these are for you,” Brady said handing her a small stack of papers. “The first one is just a copy of the enrollment form for your records.” Grace looked down at the sheet to see her handwriting staring back at her as she looked to the line where she had written Colton's age her stomach dropped as the dots connected in her head at how this mistake had happened and also how it seemed most of the blame rested squarely on her shoulders. Grace focused back in on

Brady.

“So we have two meetings coming up that are going to be offsite so we'll need permission slips for each and then the rest of the stuff is outlining supplies families will need to provide and also some basic information for future meetings,” Brady said.

Grace was unsure of what to do, this wasn't the first time Colton had been mistaken for being much younger than he actually was, it was something she had dealt with a lot. Whenever they went out to eat it was common for Colton to be handed a children's menu. Grace was always quick to correct the mistake. Colton had started out doing it himself but as he got older it seemed he had stopped or rather had become exhausted by it to the point that he no longer tried to fight it and instead let it eat away at him which in turn made him miserable.

Grace was about to explain that a mistake had happened but she felt Colton's grip increase and in that moment decided to not reveal Colton's age. It would probably only serve to embarrass him more and it sounded like he had had enough of that.

“Thank you so much,” she said giving Brady a smile. “I'll be sure to look over everything tonight and have it back to you next week,” she said ending the conversation quickly.

As they turned to leave Colton did not let go.

“See ya next week Colton,” Brady said with a hopeful tone as

they exited the room. Upon getting into the hallway Colton seemed to snap out of whatever daze he had been in and let go of his Mom and began to walk quickly towards the door. Grace had to break into a slow jog just to keep up with him

Upon coming outside she stood at the top of the stairs and watched as Colton made his way to the car in the parking lot opening the front door and getting in before slamming the door shut.

Crap this is bad was all Grace could think. She had been so excited to tell Colton that he was going to be able to join up with the scouts again, since he had to quit when they moved to Minnesota. She was filled with dread for the car ride home as she knew she still had a bombshell of bad news she was going to need to drop on him. A great night at scouts would have helped take the sting out, but that plan had blown up in her face in a spectacular fashion.

Grace made her way to the car and got in the drivers seat to find Colton leaned over in his seat resting his forehead on the dash board. She could tell he was exhausted but not just that he was also mad. Colton wasn't one to yell and scream when he was angry but Grace could tell. When he was really mad he seethed anger that one could feel and right now it was coming right at her. Grace went into her purse and pulled out some make up wipes.

“Here, use this to wipe your face,” she said. Colton lifted his head and took the wipes from his Mom's hand. He pulled down the mirror visor and looked at himself in the mirror as

he began to wipe his face. After he was done he put his head back into the seat.

“Listen,” Grace said. “I messed up bad and I'm really sorry, but why didn't tell them how old you really were?”

“I tried,” Colton grumbled. “Nobody would listen.” Grace reached out and gave Colton a small rub across his back.

“Tell me what happened,” Grace said. Colton recounted the events of the night of how he had tried to set things right only to be drawn further in to the misunderstanding until he had found himself in too deep and unable to tell the truth. By the end of the tale he had begun to sniffle.

“Okay we can fix this,” Grace said. “I'll go in right now and clear up this whole misunderstanding and then you can join in with the boy scout troop next week.”

“No you cant,” Colton shouted. “Everybody saw me up on the stage the boy scouts included, they all know my name and saw me in this dumb uniform. I don't ever want to come back to this place.”

“Okay,” was all Grace said as she started up the car and drove out of the parking lot.

Chapter 5

Summer of the Tiger Part 5: The Bombshell - Chapter 5

Chapter 5

The Bombshell

The car ride home was tense to say the least. Grace looked over several times at Colton to see him staring blankly out the car window, he looked completely zonked out. She wondered what was going through his head. There was also the looming problem of how she was going to tell him the other bad news she had, could he really take much more? However there was no way to put it off even though she wanted to, he was going to find out as soon as they got home there was no getting around that.

They were moving out of the town proper and starting to venture further into the countryside. After another ten minutes of driving Grace pulled off onto a dirt road a sign by the road that read “Clearwater Farm” displayed prominently and lit up by lights. Driving on the dirt road they could see a old style white farmhouse come into view. Further back was a wide open grass area and a little further back from that was an old large gray wooden barn looming on the horizon.

“There it is,” Grace said pointing at the barn. “I'll be doing a complete renovation on that barn. Plus some landscaping. The owner wants to turn this place into an event space, for

weddings and stuff.” Colton didn't respond. They kept driving down the dirt road and then took another left down a path that lead to more secluded area of the property.

“Here we are, home sweet home,” Grace said as they pulled in front of a trailer. All in all it was pretty nice. It was pretty big and appeared to be newer than the other buildings on the property. “Its got two bedroom a full bath, kitchen, and a nice little living room area,” Grace said like she a realtor trying to sell it to her son.

“Its fine,” Colton said wearily. He didn't really have it in him to form much of an opinion. At least it looked bigger than his grandma's apartment. Colton unbuckled his seat belt ready to get out of the car.

“Wait,” Grace said dreading the conversation she was about to have. “I have some bad news.” Colton looked at her with his eyebrows raised. Now what, was all he could think. “The mover's lost one of your boxes,” Grace said bluntly. Colton took a moment to process what she had said.

“Don't tell me they lost my computer,” Colton said with concern.

“No, they lost the box with all your clothes in it,” Grace said biting her lower lip.

“Well lets just go buy some right now,” Colton said reacting far more calm than Grace had imagined.

“I don't think that's possible,” Grace said tapping the clock display on the dashboard that read 8:30.

“By the time we got to a store they would probably be closed.”

Colton was silent for a moment as he considered the situation.

“So we'll just go tomorrow,” Colton said.

“About that,” Grace said cringing at what she was about to say. “There has been a small hiccup with the bank transfer so I'm cut off from the account right now the earliest they said they'll be able to get it restored is the end of the week. I only have about eighty dollars cash on me right now that we'll need to make last.”

“So I don't have any clothes except for what I'm wearing?” Colton asked. Grace slowly nodded. She watched as Colton stared at her in disbelief and then she saw his face instantly crumple and he began to cry.

Not just cry, but full on sob. Loud wailing that was interspersed with huge breaths choked by his crying. She hadn't seen him cry like this since he was little. Without even thinking what she was doing she pulled him from his seat into her lap wrapping him in a hug. Colton instinctively wrapped his arms around her neck as he buried his face into her shoulder. Grace began to sway back and forth rocking him gently as she rubbed his back.

“It's okay, it'll be okay,” she kept saying as gently as she could.

After a few minutes Colton had calmed down and was now sniffling quietly.

“Come on now,” Grace said giving Colton a pat on the back. He separated himself from her so that she could now see his face. His eye's were red and puffy and his face was stained with tears. “It'll be okay I always figure something out don't I?”

Colton grimaced and gave a nod.

“That's my guy,” Grace said. “What do you say we go inside. You can take a shower and then hit the sack, its been a long day for all of us.”

Colton didn't protest, in fact he was utterly exhausted from everything that had happened. A hot shower and a soft bed sounded great at the moment. As they got out of the car an older woman appeared near the trailer. She had curly hair that was somewhere between blonde and white and wore thick glasses on a chain.

“Mrs. Dawes how are you,” Grace said knowing this woman to be the owner of the property and her boss.

“Oh I'm just fine,” Mrs. Dawes said with a twang in her voice. “I just came by to see that you were settling in all right.” She took a look at Colton who was standing behind his mom and could immediately tell the boy had been crying. “Looks like your boy is a little upset, I hope its not with the accommodations,” Mrs. Dawes said with a sympathetic glance.

“Oh no not all, this place is great,” Grace said. “Its the movers they seemed to have lost the box that had all his

clothes in it.” Mrs Dawes brought her hand to her mouth in a gasp.

“Those downright incompetents,” Mrs Dawes said waving her hand in the air. “To lose all the boys clothes like that, its just terrible.”

“Yes it is,” Grace responded somewhat amused at the older woman's reaction. Mrs Dawes gave another look at Colton and then nodded.

“I think I just might be able to help. My daughter just cleaned out her sons closet and brought over a large bag of clothes that I was going to take to a donation drop off tomorrow. Why don't you just take them, they look like they'll fit him just fine they might even be tad big for him.” Mrs. Dawes said.

“I uh mean,” Grace said wary of the idea of accepting such a generous offer.

“Oh hush hun,” Mrs Dawes said with a smile. “Their for people in need and y'all look like you're in need right now. Plus you'll be saving me the trip, I insist.”

“Okay...yeah. That would be great,” Grace said. Mrs. Dawes had heard all she needed and said she would be right back before taking off. “See that's one problem solved.” Grace said patting Colton on the shoulder.

“Whatever,” Colton grumbled as he walked off towards the steps leading up to the trailer door. Grace unlocked the door and they stepped in. Colton took a look around.

Upon entering he could see a kitchen area with wood grain cabinets and black and white laminate flooring there was a small table in the center with space for two. To the right was a small living room complete with a couch facing a TV in the corner and a large coffee table in the middle. To the left was a long hallway with a door at the end and a two doors on the side.

“I'll show you your room,” Grace said taking the lead. She lead him to the closet door and opened motioning him inside. Colton walked in and saw a decently sized room. There was a dresser with a mirror against one wall A desk was in the far corner with a large box labeled “C's Comp” already on top. On the other side was a bed already made up with his sheets and a bookshelf next to a window. Colton stepped out and took a look into his Mom's room which was little bigger than his own. She had a closet near the back and the same mirror dresser combo as well. The last place he looked was the bathroom. It had a small sink with a mirror on the wall a shower bathtub combo and a pale yellow colored toilet. All in all the place wasn't too bad. Colton went and found his mom in the kitchen.

“Here is your other box,” Grace said handing Colton another large box. With some difficulty he managed to get a grip on it. “Take that to your room,” his mom instructed. She watched as he clumsily made his way down the hallway. Just then their was a knock at the door. Grace opened it to find Mrs Dawes standing at her door. A large black trash bag was at her feet.

“Here we are,” Mrs. Dawes said heaving the heavy bag across the threshold.“Should have everything your boy needs shirts, shorts, pants, sock, underwear, I think there is even a swimsuit in their plus some accessories.”

“I can't begin to thank you enough, you've really saved us,” Grace said.

“Like I said before hun, hush,” Mrs Dawes said with a chuckle. “After all kids that age just grow out of their clothes overnight it would be a waste to spend all your money on a new wardrobe.”

Grace was hit by a sinking feeling. “How old is your grandson by the way?”

“He just turned seven,” Mrs Dawes said proudly “Colton looked to be about the same age. I thought, isn't that just perfect”

Grace just nodded and smiled. Crap she thought.

“You just holler if you need anything else now,” Mrs Dawes said.

“I will,” Grace said as she waved goodbye to Mrs Dawes. She closed the door and looked down at the still closed bag at her feet. Maybe it won't be so bad she thought surely there is something in there Colton could wear. She lifted the bag up and waddled down to his room where she finally set the bag down on his bed.

“Clothes,” she said as Colton walked over to the bag. He

opened the bag and she saw his face drop as he pulled out a shirt that had a picture of a cat in sunglasses and hat riding skateboard with the words “Cool Cat” displayed across the top. As he took out more clothes it didn't get better. Most of the shirts and shorts were plastered with juvenile looking designs perfect for a little kid but terribly unappealing for the teenager whom was meant to wear them.

“These are clothes for a little kid,” Colton said upset.

“Don't freak out,” Grace said. “I'm sure there is stuff in here we can make work.”

Grace took over digging through the bag and started pulling clothes out throwing them onto the bed while Colton watched becoming more panicked by the moment. Grace was now pulling out pajama sets by the bunch each one seemingly more kiddie than the last until she finally pulled out several pairs of zip up footed sleepers. Finally sensing the bag was light enough she picked up the whole thing and dumped it out. What came out horrified Colton. There on the bed were several pairs of brief style underwear each one with designs, from dinosaur themed, to little sharks and fish and several with popular cartoon characters from shows for little kids on them. Grace looked at the pile of clothing on the bed. There didn't seem to be single item in the bag that Colton would ever find acceptable. She looked at Colton who was sitting on the bed on the other side of the pile. He was just staring his mouth slightly agape.

“I can't wear any of this none of this is going to work,”

Colton said panicked.

Grace looked at the clothes and scratched her head wincing unsure of how she was going to deal with this. She had not been one hundred percent with Colton about their finances. These clothes had seemed like a blessing. Even if the bank accounts were restored its not like she really had money to buy him a whole new wardrobe, they were flat broke at the moment.

“Its just for the week,” Grace said holding back the tidbit that was now nagging at the back of her mind not wanting to pile on anymore bad news. “Besides I'm the only one who is going to see right? Its not like I'm going to make fun of you.”

“But Mom, their for little kids,” Colton protested.

“I know, and I also know you aren't a little kid. You're just dealing with a really shitty situation,” Grace said.

Colton raised an eyebrow it wasn't often that his Mom swore. He bit his bottom lip as he took another look at the clothing pile.

“Fine,” he said quietly. “Its just till the end of the week.” That was about all he could muster for the moment as the stress from the night was now taking full effect on him.

“Good,” Grace said walking over behind Colton putting her hands on his shoulders. “Why don't you go take a shower and I'll find some pajamas for you to wear for tonight. Colton got off the bed dejected and made his way to the bathroom. Grace heard the shower start up. She went to work putting the

clothes away into the various dresser drawers. As she put away the clothes she tried to makes sense of how they had ended up in such a situation. She put aside a pair of underwear with some race cars on it and a pair of pajamas that had a jungle motif with cute smiling pastel animals on the the shorts and a shirt which had a smiling monkey hanging from a tree. She sat on the bed for a minute holding the clothes. It had just been one crisis after another today all of which would have been avoided if Colton actually was six. She chuckled at the thought, if only he was six, it played across her mind again before she pushed it out. She went into the bathroom.

“I got some stuff for you on the counter,” Grace said putting the pajamas on the sink counter. No response came from behind the shower curtain where steam was rising up. Grace exited and went to work unpacking the rest of the boxes.

Meanwhile Colton had finished up in the shower and got out finding a fresh towel and pajamas on the counter. He dried off before inspecting the clothes he held them up one by one inspecting each piece with some derision. He thought about not wearing them at all and just going to sleep in his boxer's but he knew that wasn't going to fly. He was unable to be comfortable if he wasn't wearing any sort of clothes. His Mom just said it was probably a sensory thing and that lots of people had them. He put on the underwear and then stared down at them for a minute. He then took the rest of the pajamas and put them on. As he stood in the bathroom looking down at the full outfit he felt completely foolish. He

opened the door and walked out in the hallway and saw his Mom leaned up against the wall. Had she been waiting for him? Grace was struck by just how much like a little boy Colton looked like wearing the pajamas. She had never really seen him that way since she knew his real age, but this must be how most other people saw him. She approached him.

“Looks like they fit,” she said fussing with his shirt a little. “Are they comfortable?”

“They're fine,” Colton said stepping away from his mom.

“Okay,” Grace said becoming aware that she had not been helping the situation.

“I'm going to sleep now,” Colton said. Grace gave him a hug and gave him a kiss on the top of the head.

“Tomorrow will be better,” Grace said as Colton walked into his room.

“Whatever,” Colton said before closing the door.

Grace went into the kitchen and continued to unpack after a few hours she had finished and took a seat on the couch putting her feet up on the coffee table. She couldn't help but worry about Colton. She couldn't remember the last time he had been happy. By the time he had reached the fourth grade his appearance and stature had become noticeable and the teasing had started. He had always been a bit of loner but it only seemed like it had gotten worse. Then they had moved at the start of middle school and it had only seemed to magnify making it impossible for him to establish himself among his

classmates. When he joined up with the boy scouts that was supposed to have helped but before that had even had a chance the accident happened and they had to move to Minnesota with Grace's mother to help with recovery. That had only made things worse for Colton as he had been mostly left to his own devices. Without much to help him he had only isolated himself more. This move had been a great opportunity for Colton to start a new leaf.

Grace knew what he needed. Colton needed to get some confidence back, he needed to have some fun instead of hiding away in his room all the time, and he really needed some friends. Joining up with the scouts here for the summer would have hopefully planted those seeds, but now that seemed like an impossibility. Grace began to feel guilty she was aware that a lot of the blame rested at her feet for how things had turned out. She knew she had to do something as three more months of Colton locking himself up in his room completely alone was only going to make things worse for him overall.

Grace leaned forward putting her face in her hands. She had to figure something out. If only he could go back to the scouts. That's when a crazy thought popped into her head. He couldn't join the boy scouts now as things stood, but there wasn't actually anything really stopping him from going back to the tiger scouts. They were only here for the summer and nobody would bat an eye. Seeing him dressed in the pajamas had confirmed this to her. Everyone around them really did think he was six.

Grace shook her head. No, that was a insane notion she couldn't even imagine it, not to mention Colton would never go for it. She got up from the couch with a sigh and turned off the lights making her way to her own room. Her fatigue was starting to kick in and she had to be up early tomorrow where hopefully better things were in store.

Chapter 6

Summer of the Tiger Part 6 - Chapter 6

Chapter 6

Tiger on the Town

The week dragged on. The two days since their arrival had passed without incident. Colton had set up his computer and had spent his time once again in his room in front of the screen. Much to Grace's concern she could already see him isolating himself from the outside world.

She had been swamped with her first days of work making a list of what needed to be done and planning out timelines as well as hiring out contractors. She walked into the trailer Thursday night tired from the work day. She looked down the hall to see the faint glow of the screen coming out of Colton's darkened room. She went and peered into his room. He was sitting in front of his computer with his headphones on. He was wearing a pair of red shorts with a shirt that had a large firetruck on it. There hadn't been any further talk on his wardrobe. Grace knew this was probably because he was under the assumption that he was only going to have to put up with it for a few more days.

“Hey,” Grace said loud enough to get her son's attention. He removed the headphones and looked at her. “I'm going to make dinner finish up and come eat,” she instructed. Colton

gave her a nod and returned his attention to the screen. Grace walked into the kitchen and pulled out some leftover noodles and a jar of sauce. She made up two plates and then proceeded to microwave them. By the time she was putting the plates on the table Colton had made his way to the table. They sat across from one another eating in silence.

“So I was thinking,” Grace said breaking the silence. “Maybe we could look around see if there are any other clubs you could join. Like soccer or something.” Colton was no fan of sports since it was hard for him to keep up with the kids his age.

“No,” Colton said curtly. “There might be kids from scouts there they'll recognize me.” Grace sighed, it was a legitimate worry and one she couldn't argue with. Although she felt like her son had an inflated sense of how much people took notice of him it had certainly been a spectacle at the scout meeting. If even one kid recognized him from that, no good could seemingly follow. They continued eating in silence. Grace had been trying to come up with some idea all week to prevent Colton from spending the whole summer in front of his computer. He hadn't even left the trailer since they had arrived Monday night. He had even refused her offer to take him on a tour of the property. She hadn't really been able to come up with a solid plan. Yet one idea had kept coming back to her. It was a crazy one, she didn't even really believe in it herself but she was getting desperate.

“You know you could go back to scouts,” she said deciding just to throw it out their and see what happened.

“I can't go back to the boy scouts,” Colton said.

“I didn't mean the boy scouts,” Grace said watching Colton's face intently trying to gauge his reaction. “You're already in the tiger scouts.”

Colton was a little taken aback by her suggestion. Was she out of her mind? Or was this her idea of a joke? He smirked a little getting up from the table having finished his meal.

“Oh yeah lets do that,” Colton said with the full force of his teenage sarcasm. Grace watched him put his plate in the sink.

“I think it might be fun,” Grace said. “You were always complaining in your other scout troop that you felt behind because you had joined so late. Maybe this could be a chance for you to play catch up. See what you missed out on.”

“Mom I'm not a little kid,” Colton said the irony of his appearance not being lost on him.

“I know that,” Grace said. “But they don't.” Colton's eyes widened, surely this was a joke.

“You are crazy,” Colton said dismissively before heading back in the direction of his room. He stopped at the entrance to the hall and turned back around.

“You get paid tomorrow right?” Colton asked. Uh oh, this was the conversation that Grace had been dreading.

“Yes,” she said said putting her fork down and bracing herself.

“So on Saturday we can go and get me new clothes right?”

Colton asked.

“Why don't you take a seat,” Grace said. Colton came and retook his seat at the table confused by his mom's sudden change in demeanor. “Listen bud, in the past I've not really discussed these things with you because I didn't think you needed to worry so much about it but since you are getting older now and the fact that this is going to effect you I'm going to level with you,” Grace said. Colton stared at his mom intently unsure of where the conversation was headed.

“We are broke, like flat broke,” Grace said. Colton's mouth dropped at the sudden realization. “Any money I had saved up was pretty much wiped out last year after my accident. I still haven't paid off my medical debt yet and between that and other bills that have been mounting up we don't really have a lot of extra cash to go around. Any money I do have left over is going to be pretty miniscule.” Grace continued to explain not giving Colton a chance to interject. “Now I don't want you to worry we'll have enough to keep our heads above water and we'll have enough for small things here and there, but extra big expenses like a whole bunch of new clothes even if we went to the thrift store is probably not going to be possible at the moment.” Grace finished and watched Colton's reaction. At first he sat back in the chair not being able to process what had just been revealed to him.

“But, my clothes,” Colton stammered. “you said...”

“I know what I said,” Grace replied. “At the time I just didn't know how to tell you or even what to tell you. It was lucky

that Mrs. Dawes happened to have a bunch of clothes that you could wear, otherwise I wasn't sure what we were going to do.”

“So I cant get new clothes,” Colton said not as a question but a realization.

“You'll just have to deal with what you got for the time being, maybe after I saved up little more we can get you a couple of things” Grace said giving him a sympathetic look. “I'm so sorry.”

Neither of them said anything for minute, the silence was deafening.

“I can't I just cant,” Colton said getting to his feet and walking out of the kitchen.

“Colton wait,” Grace said, but Colton was already down the hall way. She heard his door slam loudly as she winced. “Well that went well Grace,” she said to herself out loud.

Friday came and went without incident other than the fact that Colton had made himself a ghost. Grace didn't see much of him and when she did he gave her the cold shoulder. She awoke Saturday morning resolved to get him out of the house. She went into his room surprised to already see him awake and dressed at his computer. She began to pick up the discarded clothing on the floor and throwing it into a mesh bag.

“What are you doing?” Colton asked taking off his headphones seemingly have cooled down enough to speak to

her.

“Its laundry day and since we don't have a washer and dryer here that means we are going to the laundromat,” Grace announced.

“Great, have fun,” Colton said turning his attention back to his monitor. Grace walked over and flipped the kill switch on back of the computer.

“Hey, what was that for?” Colton said shocked.

“You are coming, you haven't left this trailer since Monday a little fresh air will do you good,” she said with a overly large smile. “Plus I need to stop by the hardware store for some things and I might need help carrying.” She didn't say another word as she left. Colton knew there was no use arguing with his mom when she got like this which wasn't often, but when it did happen it was her way or the highway. Colton followed her to the front door as she was putting on her shoes.

“Mom I can't go out dressed like this,” Colton said panic rising in his voice.

“Why not?” Grace said looking him up and down. “You look fine.” Colton was wearing a black t-shirt that had the cutesy looking mascot for the Battle monster tv show displayed prominently on the front, along with a pair of black shorts that had the faces of various other fantastical creatures from the show on it.

“But,” Colton choked out as tears began to form in his eyes. Grace seeing what was happening gave him a reassuring look

as she knelt down in front of him holding his face in her hands.

“Hey, it'll be okay, alright. No one even knows you around here so nobody will even give you a second glance.” She said. Colton was comforted by his mom's words, but he also knew what she meant which filled him with a sense of dread. No one would see a teenager dressed in clothes clearly meant for a little kid. No, what they would see was a little boy dressed perfectly normal.

“You okay?” Grace asked. Colton nodded as she withdrew her hands and he wiped the budding tears from his eyes. “Good,” Grace said with a smile. “Get your shoes on okay.” Colton picked up his sneakers from near the front door.

“Oh Colton,” Grace said grabbing the sneaker from out of his hand. She held the gray shoe up like it was some gross specimen. The shoe was old and the laces were completely loose, what was worse is that the sole was starting to become unattached from the front. Grace turned around and grabbed the other shoe completing the set. It wasn't much better as it had a huge tear beginning to form along the side which was new from when he had taken the tumble down the hill at the church.

“These look like hobo shoes,” Grace remarked. “No wonder you seem to be tripping all the time." Colton didn't really care what his shoes looked like. They were shoes. “You can't wear these, we'll have to get you a new pair while we are out,” she said shaking her head.

“I thought you said we couldn't afford new stuff?” Colton said.

“One pair of shoes won't break the bank. Unless, maybe Mrs. Dawes's grandson has an old pair you can borrow,” Grace said with a mischievous smile.

“No, please no,” Colton pleaded.

“Relax, I was only kidding,” Grace said. “Go get your sandals I think I saw them in your room.

Colton went into his room and found what his Mom had been referring to. They were a pair of black flip flops with a white strap that his grandma had given him before they moved here. The only problem is that they were about two sizes too big for him. He slid them on and walked the best he could as the sandals kept slipping off his feet. As he passed his dresser he saw a floppy bucket hat on his dresser it had been included in the bag of clothing. It was blue with pictures of sea turtles all over but at least they were somewhat realistic looking. He grabbed it and put it on his head. He had remembered how he had used his tiger hat from scouts to hide his face while he had been on stage. It had been a small comfort for him at the time and if he was going to go out today it might be helpful to have something similar. He took a look in the mirror to see his new look. Yep, he looked ridiculous. He shook his head and went back out to meet his mom. She didn't make mention of his hat which he was thankful for.

“Here, carry that,” Grace said tossing him the mesh bag that held his clothes. As they exited the house Colton had some

difficulty walking down the step with his sandals and actually tripped on one of the steps thankfully he was able to grab the railing and steady himself.

They drove into town, as Colton became more nervous by the minute. The laundromat was located in a small strip mall on a city street. Grace pulled into a parking stall and got out. Colton followed closely behind pulling his hat down further as they entered. To his relief the place was empty. Grace got to work getting detergent from the dispenser. Colton helped his mom load the machines and noticed his tiger cub shirt was among his stuff. He could only conclude his Mom was washing so she could return it. The machines were loaded and were beginning to fill with water as Grace took a step back.

“You hungry?” she asked. “I saw a diner two doors down.”

“I'm not hungry,” Colton replied. As he did a loud growl from his stomach sounded out.

“That settles that,” Grace said with a chuckle. She took his hand which he didn't fight and lead him out onto the sidewalk and they began to walk towards the diner. Colton hadn't held his Mom's hand since he had been well... six. The thought of going into a restaurant where there were actual people was starting to work on his nerves though, and holding his Mom's hand was actually helping him feel more calm. They entered the diner which was quite busy. Thankfully they were sat in a booth near the back where no one else was sat close by. A young looking waitress came by the table. She had freckles

across her face and her hair was tied up into a tight bun.

“My names Sheena, I'll be your server this morning,” she said setting down menus. Much to Colton's dismay she did not give him the same plastic fold out menu his mom got. Instead she placed down a paper in front of him that had the words “Kids Menu” written at the top in multicolored bright letters. Below that in smaller letters it read “Children ten and under only” it was now painfully obvious what she thought of Colton. This was not a new occurrence at restaurants. Colton had always been quick to insist on an adult menu but as time went on he had seemed to become adverse to the following exchange made worse when the servers questioned whether he was actually old enough for an adult menu. Grace had noticed this and had taken over making sure that Colton got the proper menu when the situation arose. However at this particular moment she bit her tongue, given the current context she decided to follow her son's lead. Their eyes met and Grace gave him a raised eyebrow, a signal that it was up to him. Colton grimaced before staring back down at the kids menu on the table in front of him.

“Can I start you off with some drinks?” the waitress asked. Grace ordered a coffee. Sheena then turned her attention on Colton.

“A coke please,” Colton said. Sheena gave him a questioning look before looking at Grace.

“Is that okay mom?” she asked. Grace was little taken aback by the question as she realized the waitress was under the

complete assumption that Colton was a younger kid and that most parents probably didn't let their young children drink soda, especially not with breakfast. Grace just smiled and nodded. Colton realizing the implication of the exchange that just played out felt his cheeks go flush and pulled the brim of his hat down further.

“Alright,” Sheena said. “I'll be right back to take the rest of the order.” Sheena walked off leaving the two alone at the table. Grace could tell Colton was now starting to become anxious and she began to wonder if this was starting to become too much for him. Yet she also knew if there was any hope for him not locking himself in his room for the next three months it was necessary for him to try and get over his anxiety of being in public. Sheena returned a moment later and set a coffee mug down in front of Grace. She then placed a small plastic cup with the picture of a pastel puppy on it complete with a cap and a neon orange twisty straw. Colton took one look at the cup and made a scrunched up face.

“So what will we be eating this morning?” Sheena asked oblivious to Colton's less than positive reaction to his cup.

“I think I'll just have the white toast and two fried eggs,” Grace said closing her menu.

“And what about you sweetie?” Sheena asked addressing Colton.

“The super smile pancakes,” Colton said feeling his dignity slipping away with every word.

“Great,” Sheena said with a smile as she put her notepad in her apron pocket. Sheena left to go and put the order in. Grace observed Colton across from her. He had pulled his hat down further so that it was now at the brim of his nose covering his eyes and then had not remove his hands keeping his fist clenched on either side of the brim.

“You doing okay?” Grace asked.

“No,” Colton replied “I feel stupid.”

“And whys that?” Grace asked in a matter of fact way. Colton became annoyed. She knew exactly why, but if she wanted it spelled out for her then he was more than happy to oblige.

“Because of the stupid way I look, because of the stupid clothes I'm wearing, and because of this stupid cup I have to drink out of,” Colton said letting his hands fall to his side hitting the seat with a dull thud.

“Deep breaths, dude” Grace said “I want you to do something for me,” Grace reached across the table pulling the brim of Colton's hat up so she could see his eyes. “Take a look around you,” Grace said motioning with her head. “Really take a good look and tell me what you see.”

Colton looked around he saw people just going about their business as usual eating and chatting away with the others at the table as servers rushed about delivering food and taking orders. Nothing really stuck out to him as interesting.

“So,” Grace said trying to lead him on.

“So what?” Colton asked not really sure what she wanted to hear from him.

“What do you see?” she asked again.

“I don't know,” Colton said confused. “People eating, talking, everything looks normal I guess.”

“Exactly,” Grace said. “As far as anyone in this diner is concerned there is nothing out of the ordinary going on. You seem to have it in your head that everyone is looking at you or something when the truth is not a single person has paid you any mind since we got here.” Colton took another cursory glance around as if to confirm if what his Mom was saying was true. As far as he could see she was telling the truth. He knew that was probably because that if they happened to look over at his table they wouldn't see anything other than some little kid and his Mom out to breakfast.

With Colton's usual manner of dress of wearing clothes that were often too baggy on him and in a style that was out of the ordinary for a teenager much less a teenager that looked like him he had always managed to turn a few heads. It was even worse if people then went on to find out his age which would garner far more stares of disbelief. Colton could not stand being looked at like that. His clothes had always been an attempt in vain to appear older than he was, but it had seemed that it did the opposite of what he wanted. He had all but given up on trying and he had come to the conclusion that it was always going to be like this no matter what, so it was better to avoid being out as much as possible rather than

being looked at like the freak he felt he was. But right here right now not a single person was looking at him. In this moment their was a sense of normalcy that Colton hadn't felt in a long time. In a sense it gave him some relief to just be somewhere and not feel like everyone was staring at him making judgments about him. Maybe he didn't have to worry so much.

Grace could see that Colton had somewhat relaxed. He even took a sip of his drink.

Sheena reappeared with their food in tow. Upon setting Colton's plate in front of him whatever shred of confidence he had just gained was immediately deflated. In front of him were two small pancakes and two strips of bacon arranged on the plate to look like a smiling face. There was a mound of whip cream on each pancake complete with a two cherries to make the eyes.

Colton ate his food without much fuss. Food was food and he had been hungry. Sheena reappeared as they appeared to be done.

“Well look what a good job you did cleaning your plate,” Sheena said praising Colton. “You know what that means right? You are now part of the clean plate club.” Sheena pulled a sucker out of the pocket of her apron and offered it to Colton. He took the sucker with some hesitation.

“Thank you,” he said just a hair above a whisper.

“My and so polite too,” Sheena said addressing Colton's

Mom as she placed the check on the table. Grace gave her an acknowledging smile. She could tell this was a mortifying interaction for the boy. She found herself wishing he could learn to take things like this in stride not let it get to him so much, but that was probably asking a lot of him right now. As they got up to leave the table Sheena called out to them causing them to come to a stop in the middle of the diner.

“Hang on a minute hun,” she said picking up Colton's cup. “You get to keep this,” she said with a smile as she walked over to him. She knelt down and presented the cup to him. Colton looked around and could could see a couple of people smirking at the interaction. He quickly took the cup and returned to his Mom's side at the front counter where she was currently paying the bill. They left the diner and were walking back to the laundromat when they passed a trash can. Colton threw the childish cup into the trash can with some force. They continued walking on.

“It was just a cup,” Grace said trying to relieve some tension.

“And a stupid sucker,” Colton said still clenching the stick in his fist.

“If you don't want it, I'll take it,” Grace said plucking the sucker from his hand and unwrapping before popping it in her mouth. Colton stared at Grace for a moment before looking away but she swore she saw the faintest little smile form on his lips. She felt some relief feeling that she had successfully pulled up his spirits and avoiding another downward spiral. They re-entered the laundromat and quickly

switched the loads over to the dryer.

“Alright,” Grace said wiping her brow. “I need to run to the hardware store and pick up a few things and then we'll need to find a place to buy some shoes.”

Thankfully there was a big box hardware store just across the street so she didn't bother moving the car. Colton was feeling a little apprehensive. There were going to be way more people in the store than their had been in the diner. Walking into the store he felt self conscious as his sandals flopped against the concrete floor making loud slaps with every step almost announcing to everyone in the immediate area to focus in on him. Much to his relief the situation was similar to that of the diner, nobody seemed to be paying any attention to him. Once again there was nothing that anybody could see that would alert them that there was something strange going on. Grace grabbed a shopping cart and they walked up and down several aisle as she looked for the items she needed. They had stopped in an aisle as Grace was looking for a specific type of nail. Colton stood by the cart resting up against it as he waited for his Mom to find what she needed.

“Colton?” a voice said from behind. Colton felt his stomach drop as he spun around coming face to face with Grant the boy from the tiger scouts who had tried to talk to him at the meeting. “I thought it was you,” Grant said flashing a smile. “Cool shirt, I knew you liked BattleMonsters,” Grant said not giving Colton a chance to respond as he pointed at Colton's shirt. It was at that point that Colton became reminded of his BattleMonster's themed outfit. “Oh gugurilla he's my

favorite," Grant said pointing to one of the characters that adorned Colton's shorts. "Whose your favorite?"

"I uh don't know," Colton said completely flustered.

"Yeah, there are a lot cool ones. My favorite changes a lot too." Grant said. "So you're coming on Monday right?" Grant asked.

"Monday?" Colton said not sure what the other boy was referring too.

"Cub Scouts," Grant replied.

"Oh uhh yeah," Colton said not really registering what he was saying only trying to end the interaction as fast a possible. Thankfully another voice from the end of the aisle called out Grants's name. A man the boys father stood waving Grant over.

"I gotta go," Grant said. "I'll see you at the meeting," Grant said excited at the prospect as he went bounding off with his dad disappearing from view. Colton stood frozen for a moment as the full breadth of the situation caught up to him and he realized he had said he would be going to the scout meeting. Idiot, he thought why had he said he was going?

"Who was that," Grace asked curious.

"No one, can we go?" Colton asked as he began hurriedly rushing off not waiting for a reply. Unfortunately for him in his rush the front of his sandal caught the ground causing him to fall hitting the concrete with a loud thud. Grace rushed

over and knelt down. Colton lifted himself off the ground and came to a sitting position on his knees. Grace could not help but feel pity for him as he looked up at her with defeated expression.

“You're okay,” Grace said with a sympathetic look. Colton brought his legs in front of him revealing that in his fall one of the bands on his sandal had completely snapped. Grace gave a sigh as she removed it from his foot. “Oh buddy,” she said looking at the unwearable shoe. “You'll have to ride in the cart,” she said. Before Colton even had a chance to react she picked him up and sat him in the child's seat of the shopping cart. Colton looked shocked at the turn of events.

“Mom, no what are you doing?” he said. Grace saw Colton's absolute panicked expression and it made her pause for a moment. She had switched over into total mom mode that she hadn't even realized what she had done.

“Oh sorry,” she said. She picked him up once again much to his embarrassment and set him down into the basket.

“Mom please I don't want to ride in the cart, I can walk,” Colton said.

“You can't walk around the store without shoes, they kind of frown on that sort of thing,” Grace said, hoping her little joke would ease Colton's panic. “Just relax,” Grace said leaning in close. “I only need a few more things and then once we're back at the car I'll figure something out.” Colton let out a small whimper as he pulled his hat down and then let his head flop down. Grace hadn't said anything that morning

when Colton had appeared in front of her with the hat even though she had found it strange that he had put it on himself. However seeing his reaction now and remembering how he had done the same thing in the diner she now realized its purpose. She gave him a small pat on the back before moving the cart along.

She finished up her shopping as quickly as she could. She elected to use a self checkout lane to spare Colton from any questioning cashiers who might wonder why he was sitting in a cart with no shoes. She was able to bag everything up into a single bag. Upon coming up to the cart return she found herself faced with another problem. Their car was still back across the street. The temperature had been steadily rising and the pavement would be way too hot for Colton to walk barefoot. She bit her bottom lip as she realized there was only one real option and Colton was going to be none too pleased about it. She grabbed her bag slinging it around her arm and then without saying a word picked up Colton and putting him on her hip and began walking across the parking lot.

“Mom what are you doing?” Colton asked.

“Sorry bud, but the pavements real hot right now I don't want you to burn your feet, just bear with it for a little longer,” Grace explained. Colton let out a groan. They made their way back to the car. Grace looked at the laundromat and knew they still had time left on the dryers she didn't really want to go too far away while they still had clothes at the laundromat. She took a look around and noticed a chalkboard sign on the sidewalk with big letters that read “Shoe and footwear sale 50

percent off” her eyes scanned the shops in the strip mall to another sign that hung on a building that read “Big Adventure Clothing” to Grace it seemed like their problem had just been solved. Grace opened the passenger door and threw her shopping bag on the seat. Still carrying Colton she then turned and began to walk to the store.

“Where are we going?” Colton asked confused at the turn of events and none too pleased to still be in his mom's arms.

“I think we might be able to get you shoes at this store,” Grace said.

“I don't want to go in,” Colton said. Grace came to a stop and looked at Colton.

“You have to come in to try on the shoes,” Grace said. “Or If you prefer I could just carry you around everywhere.” Colton didn't respond he only gave his Mom a worried expression. This time it was Grace who pulled the brim of Colton's hat down. “In an out, I promise,” Grace said as she began walking. To her surprise Colton put his head down resting his forehead on her shoulder. It was similar to when she had picked him up from scouts and he had clung to her. She could only conclude that he was reaching some sort of limit. She had to had to be quick, for him. Given Colton's position he did not see what type of store they were about to enter which spared him the dread that that knowledge of surely would have filled him with.

Chapter 7

Summer of the Tiger Part 7 - Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions

The cool rush of air that hit Colton and his mom after walking in the hot summer heat was refreshing as they entered the store. Colton did not lift his head from his mom's shoulder and only listened as they were greeted by a store employee asking if she could help them find what they were looking.

“I saw you were having shoe sale and we are having a bit of shoe emergency this morning,” Grace said.

“Geez,” Colton thought she didn't need to tell this stranger their entire life story.

“Oh sure, we should have something for the little guy,” the store employee said. Her comment stung, but what else was she going to think given how he was dressed not to mention he was being held by his Mom. “Do you know his size?" the employee asked.

“Uhh no I don't,” Grace had to admit, it had been awhile since they had been shoe shopping after all. It wasn't an impossibility that his feet had grown since the last time.

“Okay, follow me and we can do a quick measurement,” the

employee said leading them into another part of the store. Grace sat Colton on a bench and it was then he took his first look around realizing where they were. The store was decorated with all sorts of bright colorful images of animals. Posters of smiling kids were hung all around. The clothing on the racks was all juvenile in design. They weren't in just a clothing store they were in a clothing store meant especially for little kids. The employee reappeared with a measuring device in hand.

“Awww someone's having a tough morning huh,” she said in a overly sweet tone as she put his foot on the measuring device taking note of Colton's rather dour expression. “But getting new shoes is fun don't you think.” Colton just watched as she measured his foot. As she finished she pulled the device away and gave the bottom of his foot a tickle. Colton was always overly sensitive to tickling and he let out an uncontrolled giggle.

“See,” the employee said. “I knew their was a cute little smile in there,” she said getting back up. Colton put his hands over his mouth completely embarrassed at his outburst. He hadn't just laughed, he had giggled just like the little kid the employee took him for. “Everything on clearance in his size is right here,” the employee said pointing to shelf that had display models on top with boxes of various sizes beneath.”

“Thank you so much,” Grace said. “You wouldn't happen to have any sandals would you,”

“I don't think we have any sandals in stock in his size,” the

employee said apologetically. “We might have some Crocs over there,” she said pointing to a different section of the store. With that she took her leave. Colton's Mom motioned him over to the shelf.

“Which one's do you want?” she asked. Colton looked at the options in front of him. The shoes all had designs on them of dinosaurs and popular cartoon characters each one giving him pangs of embarrassment as he thought about wearing them.

“Can't we go somewhere else?” Colton asked whining.

“We're here now,” Grace said. “Plus these shoes are on sale, remember we are pinching our pennies.” Colton looked back at the shoes and spied a pair of green and blue ones with a red line going around the sole, they looked fine except for the fact that instead of laces they had velcro tabs. He pointed to this pair feeling it was the only real option before retreating back to the bench. His mom found a box with his size and came back to the bench. The store employee from before reappeared carrying something in her hands.

“Noticed he didn't have any socks,” she said addressing Grace. “We have complimentary pairs here,” she said as she handed them to Colton. His Mom thanked the employee once again. Colton unfolded the socks to see that they were blue with a red trim at the top and a picture of some superhero on them. He put them on begrudgingly pushing the tops down so the image of the superhero was obscured.

His mom unpacked the shoes and handed them to Colton who started to put them on. His mom then did up the Velcro tabs

on the right shoe as he put the left one on. She was about to start doing the tabs on the left shoe before Colton pulled his foot away.

“I can do it myself,” Colton said annoyed. His Mom put her hands up and let him do it himself. He then got off the bench and took a couple of steps.

“Do you like them?” she asked.

“No, I hate them,” Colton replied.

“Well of course you hate them,” Grace said putting emphasis on the word you. “What I mean is do they fit?”

“Yeah they fit,” Colton mumbled. He hated to admit it but they fit him perfectly and were pretty comfortable to boot.

“Okay, you can wear them out,” Grace said. “Lets go look at the Crocs,” she said.

“Why do I need more shoes?” Colton said wanting to do nothing more than leave.

“It gets hot down here, and you might want something different to wear if you go to a beach or a pool you know,” Grace said walking towards the section that had been pointed out to her earlier.

Colton rolled his eyes. When did she expect him to do any of those things? They came into the aisle to see various Crocs hung up on a display. Colton looked at the ones that were his size. They were all brightly colored and plastered with kiddie looking designs. He finally found a pair of lime green ones

that didn't have any special designs on them. He took them off the hook and handed them to his mom. They walked up to the register to pay as Grace set the Crocs on the counter it was only then that Colton discovered that they lights on them. He made a sour expression as he watched them be placed in a bag still flashing.

Colton was relieved when they finally left the store, happy that he no longer needed to be carried by his mom. They went back to the laundromat and collected their clothing packing it away in the car.

Upon arriving home Colton went straight to his room collapsing face first onto his bed utterly drained from the days events. As they replayed in his head he felt more and more humiliated by each event. The worst one by far was that he had run into Grant and had told him he would be going to the cub scout meeting tomorrow. Why had he said that? He really had no intention of ever setting foot back there. He couldn't get over the fact that everybody had though he was a little kid, could nobody really tell that he wasn't? He went over to his computer and started up a game to try and get his mind off of everything that had happened. But no matter what he did he couldn't stop thinking about how everyone had just so wholeheartedly accepted the fact that he was a six year old.

Dinnertime came and Grace could tell Colton was thinking about something that was bothering him. She decided against questioning him. If he wanted to talk about it he would. She also had her suspicions that she already knew what it was about. It hadn't been the smoothest morning. There had been

some small victories here and there but there had been some pretty major defeats. Colton took a shower later on and donned another pair of pajamas, this particular set had some cartoon bears on it from some kids show on them. He looked at himself in the mirror wearing the pajamas. Even he had to admit he looked like a little kid no older than six or seven. He trudged into his room and got under the covers. He looked over at his clock which read 9:30. He usually didn't go to bed this early but he was feeling particularly tired. He found though that even if he was tired his brain wouldn't calm down enough to let him fall asleep. He just couldn't stop thinking about the day. He was conflicted. On one hand he had been completely humiliated throughout, but on the other hand he had to wrestle with the fact that he had been the only one to feel that way. No one else had seemed to care what was happening to him, it had all seemed normal to them. He found some comfort in that which seemed just to bother him more. How could he take comfort in everyone else thinking he was a little boy? Why did he take comfort in that?

Colton kept replaying the conversation with Grant in his head. On the whole Colton felt that Grant was a pretty friendly kid and he had seemed genuine in his excitement when Colton had told him he would be returning to the tiger scouts. Someone wanting Colton to be part of their group was new and it actually felt good to be wanted somewhere. But that was impossible. Colton found himself almost wishing that he was six if it meant he could join with the tigers scouts.

That's when he remembered the conversation with his mom at

the dinner table when she suggested he return to the scouts. He had laughed it off as a joke but now he saw that she had been somewhat serious about it. That was a ridiculous notion however, there was no way he would do that. He had enjoyed his previous experience with scouts and he desperately wanted to join back in, the thought of spending another summer in front of his computer didn't exactly fill him with joy. It more or less made him sad. He did want to get out and do things with other people lord knows he had tried in the past and it had just not worked out. Either he was ignored since no one wanted to be friends with the freak kid or he was teased and bullied. He remembered how nice everyone had been to him at the meeting. Brady had even told him some of them had been worried about him. Colton thought of how great it would be if he could actually join the tiger scouts, but alas it just wasn't meant to be. He eventually fell asleep with these thoughts laying heavily on his mind.

The next morning Grace came out into the living to find Colton on the couch eating a bowl of cereal. He was dressed in a shirt and shorts combo. They were blue with thin white stripes. On the shirt was a blocky picture of a pirate ship on the front with the words “Set Sail” written in a childish scrawl.

“Morning,” Grace said.

“Morning,” he replied not taking his eyes off the television. Grace sat down on the couch and saw he was watching some sort of morning show. This made her suspicious he had never watched anything like this before.

“Any plans today?” she asked. Colton stopped eating and looked at her he started to say something before stopping and just replying no. As she watched him she could tell what had ever been bothering him last night was gone and was now instead of replaced by something else. Was their something he wanted to tell her?

“Hey want to help me out at work today?” Grace asked.

“No not really,” Colton said. Grace nodded that had been long shot.

“You should at least come see the barn,” Grace said. “And then you can come back and do whatever it is you do all day.” Colton swayed his head from side to side seemingly trying to decide on something.

“Ok,” he said rather subdued. Grace wasn't quite sure what was going on with him, but perhaps if she kept him talking it would come out. They got into the car and drove out to the barn which was across the large property. Grace lead the way entering into the lower level. Colton looked around seeing tools and workstations spread out across the empty space that had been gutted.

“I have a crew coming by today to start putting up new walls on the inside, next we'll be putting in a whole new floor for the second level,” Grace said pointing up. She took him all around the barn listing off all the renovations she was going to be doing. Colton stayed quite. Grace was'nt sure if he was even listening. As they were leaving the barn Grace decided it was now or never.

“Okay out with it,” she said.

“With what,” Colton said confused.

“Whatever it is that you've been keeping bottled up inside of you,” Grace said.

“Its nothing,” Colton said.

“Please, I'm your mother I can tell when you got something you want to say,” she said putting a a hand on his head. “I can't help you if you don't tell me.”

“I just... don't want you to make fun of me,” Colton said putting his head down and giving a little kick at the ground.

“I would never do that,” Grace said kneeling down and putting her hands on his shoulders. “So just give it to me straight.”

Colton looked at his mom making movements with his mouth as if he were trying to form the words. He then took a big breath.

“I think I want to go to the meeting tonight,” Colton said averting his eyes as if he were ashamed.

“The boy scouts?” Grace asked.

“No, I mean the tiger scouts,” Colton said looking at her with a worried look. Grace couldn't believe what she was hearing. It was true that she had suggested it but never in a million years did she think Colton would agree. Grace gave Colton a questioning look.

“Yeah you're right it was a dumb idea,” Colton said breaking away and beginning to walk off interpreting his mom's expression to mean that he was talking crazy.

“Hey just wait a minute,” Grace said grabbing his arm and pulling him back close to her and giving him a hug. “I'm just curious as to what made you change your mind?” Colton had his faced buried in his mom's stomach.

“I don't know,” he said muffled. “Its just that everyone was really nice there.” Colton lifted his head up to look at his mom. “It was nice to not be the freak for once.” Grace gave Colton a reassuring smile and brushed some hair out of his eyes. It hurt her to hear that he felt like a freak. She knew all too well that other kids had treated him cruelly in the past. She gave him one last squeeze and let him go.

“You know they won't let you stay if I tell them the truth, right?” she asked. “I want you to think about what that means, okay? If you still want to go when I get off work tonight then I'll take you.”

Colton nodded he understood what she was saying. If he went back he would have to be okay with people thinking he was six years old.

They got back in the car and drove back to the trailer. Neither one said a word. Grace returned to the barn after dropping Colton off to wait for the work crew. She couldn't stop thinking about the conversation. It made her sad and angry at the same time. She could only conclude that Colton was desperate to be a part of some group where he could feel

welcomed and that he saw this as his only option to get what he was in clear need of. But was it really ok to go through with it? She resolved that if this is want he wanted than she would have to support it and in the end it might actually be good for him. She finished work up for the day and returned to the trailer walking in she found Colton sitting at the kitchen table. He was wearing the uniform complete with the hat.

“Ready?” Grace asked. Colton looked up at her with big brown eyes filled with anxiety and nodded. “Lets hit the road then,” she said.

Chapter 8

Summer of the Tiger Part 8 - Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Roar like a Tiger

Grace and Colton walked into the church where the scout meeting was to take place. As they made their way down to the basement Grace kept watching Colton. From the way he walked and the slight shake that ran through him she could see he was becoming more nervous by the second. She was fully expecting that by the time they made it down the hallway he was probably going to chicken out and want to turn back. The hallway was filled with other scouts and parents going to their meeting spots. Colton came to a stop a few feet away from the door where the tiger group was meeting.

Grace knelt down and turned Colton around so that he was facing her.

“You going in?” Grace asked. Colton looked around before closing his eyes and nodding his head. Grace gave him a small smile. “Okay I'm behind you one hundred percent whatever you decide.” she said.

“Okay,” Colton whispered.

“I'm proud of you,” Grace said. Colton furrowed his brow in

confusion.

“Proud of me?” he asked as if he had misunderstood what she had said.

“Of course,” Grace said. “You're putting yourself out there. For you that's huge.”

Colton wasn't sure exactly how to feel about the comment given the situation. Grace got to her feet.

“You lead,” she said. Colton turned back around taking one final big breath he walked towards the door and entered the room.

“Colton!” a familiar voice exclaimed. Grant came running up, a huge smile on his face. “You're here,” he said.

“Yeah guess I am,” Colton said.

“You should come over there, we're building a space station you can join us,” Grant said. Colton didn't even have a chance to respond before Grant had grabbed onto his wrist and lead him off into the room. Grace watched as the other boy lead Colton to a table where two other boys were digging into a large bin of Lego.

“Mrs. Hendell,” Brady said stepping in front of Grace.

“Brady, right?” Grace asked.

“That's me,” Brady said. “I see Colton has decided to join us. Hopefully you didn't have to convince him.”

“Not at all,” Grace said. “Although he was adamant about not

coming and then just this morning he decided to give it another go."

"That's great to hear," Brady said with a nod. "To be honest I was worried he might not return. So its great to see him back."

"Oh yeah," Grace said as she dug through her purse a moment before pulling out some papers and handing them to Brady. "Permission slips."

"Awesome," Brady said taking the papers. "Will you be staying for the meeting?"

"No, I don't think Colton would like that, he's a real independent type," Grace said with a chuckle. "Do a lot of parents stay?" Grace asked looking around the room.

"Not really," Brady said. "Most of them just drop their kids off and then go socialize in the parking lot or something. But we always welcome parent volunteers."

"I'll think about for another time but for tonight I think its best to go," Grace said.

"Sure, of course," Brady said. Another parent walked into the room and Brady moved to greet them. Grace took one last look at Colton at the table which he was now seated at as Grant was pointing at some Lego creation sat upon the table. She gave a nod and left the room hoping that when she came back Colton would be no worse for wear.

Colton meanwhile was still listening to Grant as he was pointing out all the parts of this lego creation made of multi

color bricks and what each add on was and what it did. The other two boys hadn't seem to even notice that Colton was at the table as they had been busy digging through the large bin of pieces pulling out what they thought they needed for further expansion.

“Colton joining us?” the red haired boy that Colton remembered from the first meeting asked looking up from the bin.

“Yep, that's Dom,” Grant said to Colton. “And that's Tristan,” Grant said pointing to the other boy.

Tristan lifted up his head and smiled he was missing one of his front teeth. He had short blond hair that was styled into a faux hawk along his head.

“We're trying to decide what to add next,” Dom explained.

“What about a laser,” Colton blurted out. The three boys all fell silent and looked at each other. “You know to protect against aliens or whatever,” Colton said getting quieter as he finished his sentence. For a moment he though he may have said something wrong.

“Why didn't we think of that?” Tristan said breaking the awkward pause.

“Yeah we definitely need a laser there are a lot of aliens in space,” Dom said as if it were the most practical suggestion.

“Aliens aren't real,” Tristan said.

“Yes they are,” Dom said. “My brother has a whole book

about it,”

“That doesn't make it true,” Tristan scoffed. “What, you also believe there's really a Superman?”

“Its not that kind of book,” Dom retorted. “It's non-fiction which means its true facts.”

“Wait, I have the perfect piece,” Grant said interrupting the boys argument as he went digging through the bin for a moment before pulling out a piece that looked like the top to some sort of missile launcher.

“Lets put it here, next to the watchtower,” Tristan said pointing to a spot on the space station. Colton took some of the bricks and put together a stand and placed it on the spot Tristan had pointed out. Grant then dutifully placed the missile launcher on top. Colton was surprised by what just had happened. He hadn't really meant to say anything it had just kind of spilled out of him and the others had listened to him. Not only that they had seemed to like it as well.

“Okay next we should build a ship we can launch,” Dom suggested.

Before they could get to work on their next task they were interrupted by an announcement from Brady to put stuff away and get ready to start the meeting. The boys put the loose bricks back in the bin and then carefully set their creation on the top as to not break it. Colton followed the others over to the carpeted area where the rest of the group was standing looking at Brady.

“Alright, looks like everyone is here,” Brady said with a clap. “Alright tigers lets start our meeting with the tiger roar!” Brady put three fingers in the air and started a countdown when he reached zero the rest of the group all put their hands up like claws and let a loud roar. Colton put his hands up halfhearted but couldn't bring himself to actually make sound.

“Very good,” Brady said with a nod. “Please take a seat,” he instructed. The kids all sat upon the carpet. “So tonight we will be earning our first badge you need for the tiger stripe ceremony.”

Colton was still wondering exactly what this ceremony entailed.

“Over there at that table I have supplies laid out for our den banner which you all need to decorate tonight.” Brady said pointing over to the wall. Hanging up was a red felt banner with a wooden rod at the top. There were yellow felt letters spelling out troop 237 on it.

“I've already started it,” Brady said. “There is also a picture of a tiger face that we can put on it. What you guys are responsible for is coming up with our den motto which we will also put on the banner. This motto should show everybody what it means to be a tiger scout. Any ideas?”

“Tiger scouts should be good at soccer,” Dom said.

“Okay,” Brady said with a chuckle before writing the suggestion up on the board. The rest of the group joined in rattling off suggestions until they had a big list written up on

the whiteboard. Everything from be polite to eat pizza.

“I think its time to narrow our list down to the two most important things,” Brady said. The group began to to eliminate some of the options while keeping others until they had finally settled on “be brave” and “be kind”. Brady looked at what was left and then turned to the group. “These are good but we still need something to tie it all together,” Brady said. He then locked eyes with Colton who had remained silent throughout the discussion. “Colton, haven't heard much from you, any ideas?” Brady asked. “What is something that every tiger scout should be able to do?”

Colton sat frozen on the carpet, he looked at the rest of the group and noticed they were now staring at him intently.

“I uh don't know,” Colton stammered. “Roar like a Tiger,” he said feeling that it was a stupid suggestion but he had just said the first thing that popped into his mind. Whatever it took to draw attention away from himself. Brady stared at him for moment before nodding his head.

“I love it,” Brady declared with a smile. “What about the rest of you?”

The rest of the boys agreed enthusiastically.

“Great, so whenever I say what do tiger scouts do? You all respond with,” Brady said extending his hands out.

“Be brave, be kind, and roar like a tiger,” the rest of the group responded back.

“Alright lets get to work,” Brady said. The group got off the carpet and surrounded the table nearest the banner where supplies had been laid out. Brady showed them how to write out the letters on the fabric sheets and then how to cut them out and attach them with glue to the banner. The group divvied up their task. Some of the boys had taken charge of coloring in the tiger face decal while Colton, Grant, Dom, Tristan, and another boy named Chris were put in charge of the letters spelling out the motto. Chris was tall for his age, even taller than Colton which made Colton all the more self-conscious about his height. He had blond curly hair and wore a necklace around his neck that had a small eagle hanging from it.

“Whose going to draw out the letters?” Chris asked.

“I can't,” Dom said. “My handwriting sucks.”

None of the other boys seemed eager to volunteer as they all stood around awkwardly.

“I can probably do it,” Colton said piping up. He took one of the sheets of yellow fabric and with a black marker drew the outline of the next letter they needed.

“Woah,” Tristan exclaimed. “T hats really good.”

As the rest of the boys examined Colton's handwork it was decided he was in charge of writing out the letters. Even Colton smirked a little at the fact that the others were so impressed, if only they knew truth. Tristan and Chris were then put in charge of cutting out the letters while Grant and

Dom would apply the glue and then stick them to the banner.

Colton finished quickly with his task and soon the first letters were ready to go on. Dom took the first letter and placed it upon the banner. Grant took the second letter after applying the glue and went to place it next to the others. As he was about to place it he fumbled the letter and accidentally stuck it so it was slightly out of line. He pulled back his hands seeing his mistake.

“You messed it up,” Dom said.

“Sorry, sorry,” Grant said panicked.

“Pull it off,” Tristan said. He grabbed onto the letter but stopped when he realized it was stuck fast and trying to pull it off would make it worse. “I don't think its coming off,” Tristan said. Chris threw up his hands with a huff.

“Great, so now we're going to have one letter messed up,” Dom said. “It's going to look dumb. Why'd you do that?” he asked turning towards Grant with an angry look. Grant took a step back he tried to say something but he was noticeably intimidated by the situation and couldn't utter a word. The other boys kept going on getting angrier by the minute at Grant. Colton stood up and walked around to the other side of the table he didn't like seeing the group pile on to Grant for something so small.

“It's not a big deal,” Colton said, plucking the next letter out of Dom's hand. “We'll just put the next one here.” Colton placed the next letter so that it was a little further down than

the one that Grant had placed. “We can make the words go down like this,” Colton said tracing a descending line with finger. “Then for the second part we start the letters down here and go upwards.” Colton said pointing and explaining the plan to the rest of the group.

“Hmmm, yeah that could work,” Tristan said.

“We can put the last part across the bottom,” Chris suggested. The rest of the group seemed to agree with the changes and went back to work.

Colton noticed that Grant had moved behind the rest of the group. He was fidgeting with the bottom of his shirt. His concerned expression showing that he was still bothered by situation.

“It'll look better this way,” Colton said trying to give the other boy some reassurance.

“Yeah,” Grant said quietly. Colton helped the other kids put the letters on the banner directing them where to place them. Brady appeared and knelt down whispering into Grant's ear. Colton then noticed them disappear into the hallway together. A couple minutes later they re-appeared. Grant jumped right back in helping with the task at hand, seemingly back to his regular cheery self. They finished applying the letters and stood back to admire their work. The words “Be Brave” were on the right side of the banner in a descending line while the words “Be Kind” were on the left side in a ascending line with the final words “Roar Like a Tiger” having been placed in a straight line across the bottom. Colton had to admit that

it did look pretty good, maybe he had inherited his Mom's eye for design.

The other group re-appeared having finished coloring in the tiger face. Tristan dutifully applied the glue and they stuck it in the center of the banner.

“Now that is one good looking banner,” Brady said. “Whose idea was it to place the letter's like this?”

“It was Colton's idea,” Tristan announced.

“Only after Grant messed it up,” Dom said casting an accusatory look at the boy. Colton saw Grant grimace before bowing his head slightly.

“Dominic,” Brady said with an authoritative tone causing the red haired boy to stand up straight.

“What does the second part of the motto say?” he asked.

“Be kind,” Dom grumbled.

“That's right,” Brady said. “I want you all to understand this. Our motto isn't just a saying it is something that we follow to show everybody that we are true tiger scouts. It is kind of like a rule and if you cant follow it then you cannot be in this den, okay,” Brady said. The rest of the group nodded in agreement.

“Okay,” Brady said clapping his hands. “With this you have all earned your first badge that you'll need for the ceremony. Give yourselves a hand.” The group all clapped together. “Now that we are done with out work I thought we could all have a little fun,” Brady said producing a basketball. “What

do you say we go shoot some hoops?" The group erupted into cheers as Brady lead the group out of the room to the outside basketball hoops.

Colton was not at all enthusiastic about this turn of events. He wasn't much for sports. It had been hard for him to play with kids his age since he simply couldn't keep up them. Not that he was ever invited to play and when he was placed on teams during gym class he was treated as more of a hindrance than a teammate by the others.

On the basketball courts Brady separated the group into teams placing Colton on a team with Grant, Dom, Tristan, and Chris. As the game got under way Colton found that any pretense of positions, or plans was out the window as if devolved into every kid making a mad dash for the ball. He noticed that he wasn't having much of an issue keeping up with the group he also noticed that what the kids had in energy to run they severely lacked in ability to actually shoot the ball into the basket as when given the chance they would heave the ball with all their strength up towards the basket and it would inevitably be off the mark by a wide margin.

As the game continued a wild pass by Chris over to Colton put him into range to take a shot. He steadied himself and using one hand as a guide and the other to propel the ball up the group watched the ball hit the rim and bounce up before coming back down through the hoop. Coltons teammates cheered and surrounded him jumping up and down in celebration around him while they patted him on the back. The game resumed as the opposing team took control of the

ball. Colton stayed back a moment to catch his breath.

“How'd you do that?” Chris asked standing next to him.

“Do what?” Colton asked.

“Every time I shoot I can barely reach the rim,” Chris said.

“It would help if you shot properly,” Colton said.

“Proper?” Chris asked not understanding.

“Yeah like this,” Colton said as he showed the other boy the proper form for shooting. “You use one hand to aim and the other to push the ball up from the bottom.

“I see,” Chris said studying Colton's example. The other team had missed their attempt at the basket and now Dom was coming back their way with the ball.

“Chris,” he yelled out passing the ball to the boy. Chris caught the ball and turned to face the basket he did just as Colton had showed him and both boys watched the ball sail up over the hoop and into the basket. Chris was filled with elation as he jumped high the air and the rest of the team came in for a celebration.

“Did you see that? I made it,” Chris said turning to Colton.

“Yeah, it was good,” Colton said with the smirk at the younger boys excitement. When Colton had scored his basket it had felt great especially when everyone had been so excited for him, he had never had such an experience. But upon seeing Chris so excited Colton was met with a feeling of

accomplishment. Not only was he an asset to his team he was helping them be better as well.

The game continued on until parents started showing up to collect their kids. Colton stood around with the remaining kids as Chris demonstrated his newfound ability to the others.

“Hey Colton,” Brady called out waving the boy over to the side of the court. Colton walked over wondering what the den leader wanted with him. “I wanted to talk to you for a minute, so how was the second meeting, you having fun?” Brady asked.

“Um sure I guess it was kind of fun,” Colton said.

“Good good,” Brady said with a nod. “I want to let you know I've been keeping a close eye on you tonight.” Colton raised an eyebrow unaware whether that was a good or bad thing. “I want to give you this,” Brady said holding a small patch out to Colton. He took it and examined the patch. There were two disembodied arms engage in a handshake against a yellow background.

“What's this for?” Colton asked.

“Its the young leaders badge. Its given to scouts who demonstrate good leadership potential,” Brady explained.

“I still don't understand,” Colton said looking at Brady quizzically.

“I saw you out there,” Brady said pointing over to the basketball court. “You were being a real leader for your team.”

“I just showed Chris how to shoot properly I don't think that is really worth a badge,” Colton said, not really seeing what the big deal was.

“Like I said I've been keeping an eye on you,” Brady repeated. “I saw what you did when you guys were making the banner. Not only did you step in and fix the problem you even tried to help Grant feel better. Whats our motto?”

“Be Brave, Be Kind, and roar like a tiger,” Colton dutifully recited feeling a little childish after the fact that he hadn't even hesitated at Brady's command.

“That's right. It was brave of you to stand up for Grant even though everyone else was picking on him and it was a kind when you tried to help him feel better.”

“I don't think it really helped, he was still pretty upset,” Colton said thinking back on the event how Grant had moved away from the group.

“No it did,” Brady said giving him a serious look. “Grant can be a little sensitive when it comes to stuff like that, which is totally understandable, no one likes to be made to feel like their being pushed out of a group.” Colton nodded knowing that feeling all too well. “But having you there backing him up when no one else would gave him the courage to get back in. That was you no one else,” Brady said.

Colton was still unsure if it had really been all that significant. He felt that whatever Brady had said to Grant out in the hallway had been more important.

“Listen,” Brady said seeing that Colton wasn't convinced. “You were brave, you were kind you showed what it meant to be a part of this den, as far as I am concerned you earned that badge. Now we just need to work on your roar and you'll be a true tiger scout.”

“Thanks,” Colton said feeling some pride from within at being praised, even if it was for something he felt was really small.

“Oh and one more thing,” Brady said. “Grant is new to the den just like you so he has'nt made too many friends yet,” Brady said. “Keep an eye out for him and stick by his side, for me. He seems to really have taken a liking to you. I think you guys could become good friends,” Brady said. Colton nodded as he began to walk back to the group. Was what Brady said true? Colton couldn't imaging these always chipper Grant not being surrounded by friends. Then again the rest of the kids had been so quick to turn on him, but wasn't that just how little kids were? Colton didn't really know. Even before his appearance had started to cause issues for him he had been somewhat of a loner. He had certainly never really forged any sort of close friendships with anyone. To actually really be friends with any of the kids in the tiger den though wasn't really something he thought possible. Sure they were nice and he could hang around with them at meetings and stuff but most these kids were entering into the first or second grade at most. There was no way he could actually be friends with kids so much younger than him.

Colton stood for a moment watching the others kids as they

continued to shoot hoops. He was playing with the badge in his hand. He looked down at it and examined it closely. He hadn't really earned too many badges in his brief previous stint with the scouts. He thought it might be fun too see how many he could earn before the summer was up. Even thought it would probably be easy since the task were made for little kids It would still give him something to do during the week other than play on his computer. He had already earned two in one night, which wasn't a bad start at all.

Chapter 9

Summer of the Tiger Part 9 - Chapter 9

As a former Aquatics Director for a Scout Camp... from a while ago.

There are things I could say. The kind of program depicted here would be something more appropriate for Webelos & AOLs, not Tigers. Maybe Bears, but definitely not Tigers.

At the Tiger level the requirements were more about getting the kids comfortable with jumping into water over their head (always a big deal at that age--I am surprised there weren't mini-meltdowns and kids crying about doing that--there were always kids crying about water going over their head, or up their noses, or stinging their eyes), and maybe swimming across the pool once (that was a Wolf requirement). Very simple basic stuff, mostly about getting comfortable in the water.

It would be realistic that you'd have a division of skill levels, with the majority being non-swimmers, and a tiny handful being beginners (aka your intermediate). I would only expect a swim team kid at 1st grade level to be a swimmer--and even them to have difficulty with the endurance of being one (swim 100 yds w/o stopping, and turning around on your own momentum w/o pushing off the wall - aka can you swim 100 yds to safety if you fell out of a boat, which being a swimmer

gives you access to). But in order to qualify for these levels they would have to take a swim test.

Actually the majority of Swimming requirements in Scouting revolve around rescues & survival strokes. Not racing strokes, but resting strokes done to conserve energy & promote endurance in case you have to swim a long distance to safety. And like Charley mentioned here, proper form is VERY important to survival strokes. As messing up can cause more drag and tire you out quicker.

Apologies for the info dump. Ø=Þ

Chapter 10

Summer of the Tiger Part 10 - Chapter 10

Chapter 10

The Tiger's new ride.

Grace stood in the yard at the front of the trailer as she looked at the bike Mrs. Dawes had just dropped off. She looked at Colton standing next to her in a pair of red shorts and a baseball themed t-shirt. She could sense his impending meltdown incoming.

“Nope, not doing it,” Colton said. “I'm not riding on that,” he said his voice shaking. The bike they were both staring at was themed after a character named “Hunny Bear” from a popular preschooler program. The bike itself was blue and yellow with the image of the titular hunny bear himself plastered all over the bike. Colton couldn't decide which was worse the paint job or the training wheels.

“I don't think its that bad,” Grace said.

“Not bad!?” Colton exclaimed. “If I show up riding this, I'll be the laughing stock even with the tiger scouts.” Colton knelt down pulling his knees to his chest.

“Oh for goodness sakes Colton,” Grace said throwing her arms up. “I think you're old enough now to know that complaining about every little problem isn't going to fix it.

Okay so you don't like the bike what are you going to do about it?”

“I don't know,” Colton grumbled.

“Honestly,” Grace said with sigh as she lifted Colton to his feet as she wasn't going to let him shut down about this, he needed to deal with it. “What don't you like about the bike?

Colton stared at the bike for a moment. What was she expecting him to say? He hated everything about it.

“For starters it has training wheels,” Colton said.

“You can take those off easily with a wrench,” Grace said. “What else?”

“Its got a dumb looking bear all over it,” Colton said.

“Well lucky for you I have a spray gun and some paint I can show you how to use it. I'll go get the wrench so you can start” Grace said as she disappeared into the trailer. Colton stood outside waiting for her to come back. He was feeling a little childish with how he had reacted. The solution to his problems had been simple enough and yet he gone straight to complaining. He began to worry that he was actually beginning to act more like a helpless six year old. Grace came back with a wrench in her hand and gave it to Colton.

“I'll be back with the spray gun,” she said as she walked to the car. Colton watched her leave before approaching the bike and beginning to work on unscrewing the bolt of the first training wheel. It took him a little time to get a good clasp

with the wrench but by the time his Mom returned about five minutes later he had it off and began to work on the remaining one while his Mom got the spray gun and hooked up to an air compressor. When she was ready she came over and showed him how to use the sprayer.

“Don't go too fast,” she said spraying a coat of black paint onto the bike. “You need to make sure you get a good even layer.”

“I got it,” Colton said excited to be let loose upon the bike. Grace handed him the sprayer and watched as he began to spray the paint on the bike.

“Oh almost forgot,” Grace said going back to the car and returning with a face mask which she handed to Colton. “Wear this while you're spraying.” Colton dutifully donned the mask and went right back to work spraying. Grace went back in the trailer to do some work on her laptop. She sat near a window where she could keep an eye on Colton while he worked.

Colton was enjoying his task. He took satisfaction in covering up all traces of the sweetly smiling bear all over the bike. He thought it was great that his Mom had the necessary stuff just lying around for him to use. For once it seemed like he had some control over the situation.

After putting on two coats he took a step back to look over his work. He was overall pleased with the final result. As the day turned to night Colton found himself actually looking forward to the next day, so much so that his eagerness made it

hard for him to fall asleep that night.

The next day as Grace was driving him over to the scout meeting she could see that Colton was brimming with excitement, she was happy to seem him actually looking forward to something. They pulled into the parking lot. The tiger scouts were meeting over the by the basketball court where some of them had already gathered with their own bikes in tow. Grace pulled Colton's bike out from the trunk setting it down onto the pavement. Colton grabbed onto the handlebars still pleased with his handiwork and began to wheel it over.

“One second,” Grace said pulling a bag out from the back and setting it on the ground.

“What's that?” Colton asked.

“Pads and stuff,” Grace replied.

“I have to wear pads?” Colton said with his face scrunched up.

“'Fraid so,” Grace said unzipping the bag. “The permission slip was pretty clear.” Grace pulled out the first knee pad and much to Colton's displeasure found that it was once again something meant for a little kid.

“I should have known,” Colton groaned knowing these were yet another hand me down from Mrs. Dawes's grandson. Colton picked up another pad from the bag looking at it with some derision. There was a black hard plastic piece surrounded by red fabric with shapes of various dinosaurs

colored yellow, blue, and green.

“Its just for tonight, Let me help you,” Grace said beginning to strap one of the knee pads onto Colton.

“I can do it myself,” Colton grumbled.

“I know you can, I'm just helping you, the meeting is starting soon,” Grace said as she handed Colton one of the elbow pads. Colton began to put on the elbow pad feeling bad once he realized his Mom hadn't been trying to be condescending towards him. When they were finished Colton looked at the elbow and knee pads he was now wearing still feeling a little embarrassed with their aesthetics.

“And finally your helmet,” Grace said pulling a bike helmet out of the bag. To Colton's displeasure he saw the helmet matched the pads.

“Even the helmet,” Colton whined.

“A helmet is a helmet,” Grace said placing it on Coltons head and snapping the straps under his chin. “Its there so you don't crack your head and have your brains leak out on the side of the road.”

Colton smiled weakly at his Mom's colorful comment. “I'll walk you over,” Grace said giving a light knock to the helmet.

As they walked Grace realized how much Colton had changed over the past couple of weeks. Before something like this would have sent him into a meltdown but now even wearing the pads he still had some confidence in his walk.

She knew he wasn't happy about it but he seemed to be taking it in stride now. As they reached the group, Chris was the first to greet him.

“Nice helmet,” the boy commented. Colton's face went slightly red as he saw that the boy's own set of pads and helmet were plain black.

“It's stupid I know,” Colton stammered.

“What's stupid about it,” Chris replied, clueless as to what Colton could mean.

“I mean the dinosaurs and everything,” Colton said.

“You don't like dinosaurs?” Chris asked quizzically. “I love dinosaurs I have a bunch of models at home.”

“No thats not what I meant,” Colton said a little flustered forgetting for a moment that Chris was still only six years old. “Never mind, forget it.”

Chris just shrugged. Grace just grinned as she watched the interaction play out. She was happy to see that Colton had nothing to be worried about among the tiger scouts.

“I'm going to leave now,” Grace said patting the top of Colton's helmet. “Have fun,” she said giving a wave as Colton waved back before resuming his conversation with Chris. Grace walked back to the car thinking about how well things had been going given the rough start to the summer. There had been some big bumps in the road but now it seemed like things were actually working out better than either one of

them could have imagined. Grace knew they had found themselves in a bizarre situation and she had had her own reservations in the beginning. It wasn't as if she was expecting Colton to start acting like a six year old, she had only wanted him to loosen up a little. To her surprise it seemed to be working out. She could tell he was happier and more relaxed than he had been for years. It was only till the end of the summer and hopefully when they moved on Colton would still retain some of the confidence he had gained.

Grace got to her car and was about to open the door when Sandy approached her from behind.

“Hey there Grace,” the woman said with her bubbly twang.

“Sandy, nice to see you again,” Grace said with a grin.

“Just wanted to check in with you and see that you are all settled now,” Sandy said.

“Oh yeah, every things going great,” Grace said with a nod.

“I had a chance to talk to Colton last week, seems he is fitting right in,” Sandy said.

“It does appear that way,” Grace said with a knowing chuckle.

“I'm glad I got you here though,” Sandy said changing the topic. “There was something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Grace raised her eyebrows wondering if this had anything to do with the strange look Sandy had given her last week when she picked up Colton from the pool.

“I couldn't help but notice that Colton was sitting in the front seat when you picked him up last week. I was wondering if you ever had him in a car seat?” she asked.

“Car seat?” Grace asked taken off guard by the question. Why would she need a car seat, Colton was after all too old for one of those.

“I don't really want to pry,” Sandy said apparently feeling a little awkward. “God knows I don't want you to think I'm some kind of busy body and I don't know what the rules were like in the previous place you lived, but you should know that here it is state law that kids Colton's age, not to mention his weight and size need to be sitting in car seats.”

“You know it must have just slipped my mind,” Grace said nervously.

“Completely understandable,” Sandy said with a wave. “You all just moved here and everything after all. I feel real awkward even bringing it up but speaking as a nurse I've seen what happens when kids like Colton get into car accidents without being in a car seat and its just horrific, I just don't want anything like that to happen.”

“Thank you for that,” Grace said. “I'll definitely take that into consideration.”

“You know if you have the time now, there is a store that sells them not too far from here,” Sandy said taking out her phone and putting in an address and showing Grace a map on her phone.

“I'll check it out,” Grace said with a smile.

“That's great, oh and one more thing,” Sandy said. “I'm actually going around tonight and reminding parents about the zoo sleepover the scouts are doing in august. I'm just going around and seeing if there are any parents who want to volunteer to chaperon.”

“I'll have to check my schedule but that sounds like a ton a fun,” Grace said not really sure how Colton would react to her coming along on a trip.

“It always is, we still have some time, I'm just putting out feelers. I'll let you go now though,” Sandy said with laugh as she waved and made her way to another group of parents.

Grace got into the car. The conversation she had just had replaying in her mind. The thought of a car seat had never crossed her mind. But she knew that all the other kids definitely had them. She looked across the parking lot at Colton who was now surrounded by some other boys. She watched as he talked with a smile on his face before laughing. She let out a groan. A car seat was not going to go over well with him, to be honest it didn't really sit right with her either. She had made a point not to treat him like a little kid. Everything else like the clothes, the swim suit, and the bike had been because of circumstances out of their control, but as she thought more about this new problem she had the sinking realization that it wasn't that much different. People were beginning to notice, and the law was the law. Grace started the car and made the decision to go to the store. She hadn't

made a decision yet about what she was going to do, but it wouldn't hurt to look.

As Grace entered into the store she made her way to the baby section, somewhere she hadn't been in many years. She eventually found herself in an aisle with different models of car seats on display. She found some pamphlets filled with information. She looked over and found charts that would tell her what she needed. After she matched up Colton's height and weight on the chart she saw what models would be appropriate for someone like him. Grace could see that the store had three models in stock that were what she would need. The first one was themed after a kids tv show. That one was immediately taken out of the running.. The other two were plain black and gray seats. Grace's eyes wandered down to the price tags which caused her to balk. They were expensive and it would definitely put a strain on their finances. Grace grimaced. She couldn't believe that she was actually considering this. Maybe it was time to admit that things had gone too far? Perhaps she would have to tell Colton that he couldn't do scouts anymore.She had hoped that since it was only for a short time that they would be able to fly under the radar. But now it was apparent that people were starting to take notice.

As she grappled with the choice in front of her, she could only come to one conclusion. She couldn't allow Colton to be barred from the scouts, it was too important. The scouts was making him happy, it was giving him the confidence and the stability he needed right now. They were too deep now to

stop, the only thing to do was plunge deeper.

She grabbed a ticket for the most grown up looking model she could find and took it up to the check out. The clerk asked her if she wanted help installing the booster seat in the car which she gratefully accepted. After everything was said and done she began to drive back to the church as it would soon be time for the meeting to end. Grace looked in her rear-view mirror to see the booster seat sitting empty in the back seat. She bit her lower lip, anxious with how Colton was going to react. She could only hope that she would find Colton in a good mood.

The tiger scouts were returning back to the parking lot having rode on the streets for a good forty minutes. Brady had started off the meeting by instructing them on safe riding practices and proper symbols for street riding. As they had rode around Colton remembered how much he enjoyed riding a bike. He loved feeling the wind in his face as he sped along the rode. He had even forgotten all about the anxiety that his helmet and pads had caused him. He could only think about how great it was that he had a bike now and the possibilities that were now available to him. He could spend some time now riding around town exploring now that he had a means of transportation. As they came to a stop back at the meeting spot Brady congratulated everyone on completing their final badge. As the group cheered he put a hand up.

“I think we need to give a big roar,” Brady announced. The group put their hands up like claws and let out an enthusiastic roar, even Colton joined in wholeheartedly. “Alright, I'm sure

you guys are thirsty after that workout," Brady said as he walked over to a cooler sitting on the sidewalk. He opened it and started passing out juice boxes to the group. Colton took his and stabbed the straw through the top and took a big gulp sating the thirst that he had built up.

Colton was seated on the edge of the sidewalk with Grant and Tristan on each side. They were talking about how fun the bike ride had been and how now the only thing left to do was the tiger stripe ceremony.

"So what is the tiger stripe ceremony anyways?" Colton asked.

"Its when we get our real uniforms," Grant answered.

"Yeah but first they make us drink real tiger blood," Tristan said with a gleeful expression as if he were pleased with the prospect of drinking actual blood.

"Tiger blood?" Colton said skeptically, not for a minute buying it.

"Its probably not real," Grant said. "Probably."

"Its definitely not," Colton said reassuring Grant.

"Awww the baby's having some juice?" A voice said from behind. Colton turned around to see another boy standing behind them. He was bigger and as his uniform denoted, he was a bear scout. He was surrounded by another bear scout and two other wolf scouts. He had a sneer on his face as he snickered. Colton rolled his eyes and turned back around not

wanting to give this kid any attention. Colton found his attempt at insulting them to be lacking he had certainly been through worse, if anything this kid was an amateur. However the lackluster insult seemed to work on Tristan.

“What did you call us?” Tristan said standing up to face the other boy.

“You heard me baby. Did you enjoy your little tricycle ride?” the boy said receiving snickers from the others around him.

“Why don't you shut your mouth,” Tristan said gritting his teeth as he stood up to face the bigger boy.

“Tristan stop,” Grant said now getting up and stepping in front of Tristan.

“I'm not going to let this piss drinker call me a baby,” Tristan said pushing Grant aside.

“What did you call me?” The boy said taking a step towards Tristan. Colton could see things were getting heated. He saw from the way that Tristan stood with his fist clenched he was ready to fight. Colton got up and held Tristan back before he could take another step forward.

“Calm down,” Colton said. “He isn't worth it.”

“Listen to your friend twerp,” the other boy said with a smirk before walking off, his group of cronies following close behind.

After they had left Tristan pushed off Colton's hold on him before turning back to the sidewalk and sitting down in a

huff. Colton and Grant exchanged looks before going back and sitting next to Tristan.

“I could have knocked his lights out,” Tristan grumbled as he crushed the empty juice box in his hand.

“He was way bigger than you,” Grant said.

“So what, I fight with my brothers all the time and their older than that asshole,” Tristan said. Colton smirked at hearing Tristan swear.

“You definitely could have,” Colton said playing to Tristan's ego. “But you were also outnumbered, it wouldn't have been a fair fight.” Colton's comment seemed to calm Tristan down a little.

The boys resumed talking getting into a fairly long conversation around which BattleMonster would win in a fight before Tristan's ride showed up and he left leaving Grant and Colton alone. Grant brought his knees to his chest as he put his head down.

“Whats up with you?” Colton asked noticing the shift in Grant's mood.

“That was scary,” Grant remarked.

“What that kid?” Colton asked.

“Yeah,” Grant replied. “What if Tristan had actually hit him?”

“Then their would have been a fight,” Colton said non-chalantly. He noticed his reply only seemed to make Grant

tense up more. “But there wasn't, so everything is ok,” he quickly added.

“I don't know what I would have done,” Grant said. “I'm such a wimp.”

“No you aren't,” Colton said. “You stepped in first to try and stop it. That was pretty brave.” Grant looked at Colton. “That's what we're supposed to do after all, be brave, its in our motto,” Colton said. Grant smirked and let his legs flop down seemingly reassured. Colton felt glad that he had been able to help Grant feel better. In some ways it helped him feel grown up. Colton then looked up to see his Mom walking towards them.

“Looks like I gotta go,” he said standing up and grabbing his bike and equipment bag. “See ya next week?” he asked.

“Yeah, next week,” Grant said with a wave. Colton went and met his Mom.

“Hey Mom,” he said greeting her.

“Ready to go?” she asked as she put her arm around him and they began walking back to the car. “Did you have fun?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was okay,” Colton said picking up on the fact that she seemed somewhat distracted.

“Good,” she said as they made their way to the car.

Grace opened the trunk and put Colton's bike and bag in the back before quickly closing the door.

“There's something I need to talk to you about,” Grace said. Colton braced himself, this was never a good sign. “I was talking to Sandy a little after I dropped you off,” Grace began hesitantly at first as if she wasn't quite sure how to say what she had to say. “Maybe its better if I just show you,” she said. “Just promise me your not going to freak out.”

Colton grimaced a little, not liking how his Mom was acting. She lead him over to the door of the backseat of the car and opened it revealing the booster seat that was now there. At first Colton was confused by what he was seeing but it then dawned on him what he was looking at and what his Mom had been trying to say.

“You're not serious?” Colton asked staring in disbelief at the booster seat and then at his Mom. How could she possibly think that he was going to sit in that thing? Why was she even suggesting it?

“Like I said I was talking to Sandy and she started questioning why you weren't sitting in a booster seat” Grace said. “Its a state law that all kids under the age of eight have to sit in a booster seat.”

“But I'm thirteen,” Colton said exasperated.

“I know that,” Grace said as she put a hand on his back and tried to guide him into the car. Colton didn't budge.

“I I can't” Colton stammered. Everything was happening so fast he couldn't muster a response. He began to sniffle a little as tears came to his eyes. Grace knelt down and pulled him

into a hug as she rubbed his back.

“Shhs shh, I know, I know,” she said. “Just sit in it for now and I'll explain everything when we get home. We don't want to make a scene in the parking lot do we?” she asked looking at Colton. He wiped away his tears and shook his head. Grace once again lead him into the car where he sat down in the booster seat. She grabbed the seat belt and buckled it in for him before closing the door and getting into the drivers seat. Grace began to drive back. She expected Colton to demand answers as to why he was having to sit in a booster seat but for the last couple of minutes there had been nothing but dead silence. Grace looked in her rear-view mirror and saw Colton his head down and arms crossed. She could tell he was angry. She decided now was not a good time to try and start a conversation.

Chapter 11

Summer of the Tiger Part 11 - Chapter 11

Chapter 11

The Tiger's Friend

Grace pulled the car in front of the trailer. Before she could even turn off the car Colton had already unbuckled himself and exited the car. He stomped up the stairs and walked into the trailer slamming the door behind him. Grace followed him in. As she walked in she could hear the shower already running. She opted to wait until he was out to try and talk to him.

As Colton let the water hit his face he tried his best to calm down. He was absolutely mortified by the fact that his Mom had put him into a booster seat of all things. He knew he was small enough that he was probably well within the range of kids who sat in them normally but he hadn't sat in one since he was seven or eight. So why all of sudden now had she decided it was somehow necessary? He had grown used to others around him treating him like a little kid, but she never had. That was the source of his anger now. The though of his own mother treating him like that was nothing short of a betrayal in his mind. He shut off the shower and dried himself off. He put on a pair of underwear he had grabbed from his dresser. As he went to grab the pajamas he caught a sight of himself in the mirror. He stood for a moment looking at his

image reflected back at him. His scrawny reflection stood looking back at himself wearing a pair of dinosaur undies. He had gotten so used to the clothes that he didn't even really think about it anymore, they had become his normal clothes. But in this moment, right now it seemed his reflection was standing their mocking him telling him he was never going to be anything more than a little kid so he just needed to accept that. He slammed his fist onto the counter. He muttered some curses under his breath before grabbing the rest of the pajamas and putting them on.

He walked out of the bathroom to find his Mom waiting for him in the hallway. She looked at Colton giving her a cold stare as he stood in a pair of blue pajamas with star shapes on it.

“You want to talk?” she asked.

“No,” Colton said before pushing past her into his room. Grace followed him in.

“I get that you're mad. If you don't want to talk to me that's fine just listen then,” she said. “I did have my reasons, and I think you should hear them.”

Colton spun around to face her. He didn't want to hear her reasons. He wasn't even mad about the booster seat anymore. He was well past that, his anger ran deeper.

“I'M NOT SIX,” he yelled unable to contain himself any longer. Grace was taken aback by his sudden outburst as she stayed silent watching as Colton's face morphed from rage

into a sad, hurt look.

“Why are you treating me like I am,” he said as his voice quivered and tears came to his eyes. “Why would you do that?” Colton asked as he began to quietly cry. Grace rushed over to him and pulled him into a hug.

“I'm not, I promise you,” she said.

“Yes you are,” Colton replied.

“Shhh shh,” Grace said as she gently rubbed his back. “Is that what you think? I would never do that. C'mon sit down for a moment,” she said leading him over to the side of the bed and sitting down next to him with an arm around his shoulder. “I know it was probably quite a shock when I showed up with a booster seat in the car,” Grace started. “ As I told you before the only reason I bought it was because Sandy cornered me in the parking lot and started questioning why you didn't have one.”

“You should have just told her I didn't need one and butt out,” Colton said with some resentment for the woman who clearly had it out for him.

“Colton, its state law, and I know it doesn't actually apply to you, but Sandy is a nurse she would have been compelled to report me to CPS for child endangerment, and then what?”

Colton could see the situation his Mom had been put in. Its true they would only have to tell the authorities what Colton's real age was to avoid any trouble. But word would have gotten back to the scouts. She had only done what she needed

to do to protect his secret.

“I'm sorry I yelled,” Colton said wiping the tears from his eyes.

“You don't need to apologize,” Grace said giving him a reassuring squeeze. Colton sat thinking about everything he was going through. He was beginning to wonder what it was all for.

“I've been thinking, maybe I should quit the scouts,” Colton said with some hesitancy.

“And why's that?” Grace asked.

“I don't know, its just I don't know,” Colton said as he couldn't really describe the conflicting feelings that were whirling inside of him.

“Well its certainly your choice to make. But I can tell your really unsure, so I think we should make a pro's and con's list, that always help's me when I'm not sure of what to do,” Grace said grabbing a pencil and notebook from Colton's desk. She opened it to a blank page and drew a line down the middle and put the word “Pro” on one side and the word “Con” on the other.

“Okay lets start off with a positive, why should you stay in scouts?” she asked. Colton remained quiet. “C'mon, you've been going to the meetings for weeks now, there has to be some reason.” Grace said trying to coax an answer from him. Colton puckered his lips still hesitant to say anything.

“Okay I'll do the first one,” Grace said. “Because it makes you happy,” she said writing it in the pro column.

“I don't think...” Colton began to say before Grace held up her hand.

“Don't even try to deny it,” Grace said. “Even if you don't realize it, I can see it. Now whats something you don't like about it?”

“I don't like being treated like a little kid,” Colton said almost immediately. It seemed the negatives were easy for him to say.

“Okay,” Grace said. “Now something good.”

There was so much Colton could say. Things he genuinely liked about the scouts but he was too embarrassed to actually admit them in front of his Mom.

“Do you think I could do this by myself?” Colton asked.

“Sure, go ahead,” Grace said getting up from the bed. She opened the door to leave before turning back around. “Just remember to be honest with yourself,” she said before closing the door behind her. Colton wasn't exactly sure by what she meant by that, why wouldn't he be honest?

Colton put the pencil to paper and wrote out a few good things first. It gave him something to do, It was fun and people were nice there. Feeling he had a good start with the positives he decided to fill in the negatives. He twiddled the pencil in his hand finding he couldn't think of anything that wasn't already covered by not wanting to be treated like a

little kid. He went back to the pro column and wrote”I like my friends” he looked at it for a moment before erasing it. Could he really consider the other's his friends? They were half his age after all. He just hung out with them because they were around. They weren't friends. Colton closed the notebook feeling tired. He would pick it back up in the morning as he tossed the notebook back on his desk before getting under the covers of his bed and shutting off the lamp on his bedside table. Within a few minutes he was completely passed out.

The week dragged on. Colton had looked at his list a lot. He had re-written the friends line about half a dozen times, each time erasing it again. He just couldn't admit, not even to himself that he had friends in the tiger den. As Sunday rolled around, he once again found himself on a laundry run with his Mom. She hadn't asked him anything about the scouts during the week figuring he would tell her his decision when he was ready. They finished with the laundry with no incident as Grace was loading up the car with the bags she looked over to the park that wasn't far away. She could see a small food truck advertising shaved ice.

“Its hot today, want to get some shaved ice?” Grace asked pointing the truck out to her son. Colton saw what his Mom was talking about. He was feeling pretty hot himself. The green and gray striped polo shirt with the t-rex patch on the right breast pocket wasn't exactly the best shirt to pick to wear in the sweltering summer heat.

“Sure,” Colton said with a grin. They made their way over to

the park and picked out their preferred flavor and then took a seat on a nearby bench to eat the frozen treat. The park was pretty peaceful at that moment. There were people milling about enjoying the lazy Sunday morning as a smattering of kids played on the large play structure that was near the back. As Colton scraped the bottom of his cup to get at the last bite of his strawberry flavored refreshment he heard a familiar voice call out his name.

“Hey Colton,” Grant said as he bounded up to the pair at the bench.

“Oh um hi,” Colton said a little surprised by Grant's sudden appearance.

“Mom look Colton's here,” Grant said turning to a lady who had just now caught up with him.

“So this is the famous Colton,” she said just a little out of breath. Colton could see the resemblance between the two immediately as they had the same black wavy hair and similar facial features. “You must be his mother,” the woman said turning to Grace.

“Grace Hendell,” Colton's Mom said extending her hand out to the other lady.

“I'm Valerie, Valerie Santos,” she said shaking Grace's hand. “The boys are friends from cub scouts it seems.”

“Yes, I think I've seen you around before.” Grace answered.

“Its such a nice morning we came to play at the park,” Valerie

said continuing to exchange pleasantries.

“You should come too,” Grant said to Colton giving him an excited grin.

“Um sure I guess,” Colton said still a feeling a little awkward with the sudden exchange.

“Grant, he needs to ask his Mom first to make sure it's okay,” Valerie tutted placing a hand on Grants head as if to somehow cap off the enthusiasm that the boy was radiating.

“Ask her,” Grant said with an expectant look. Colton looked to his Mom. She gave him a small smile. Grace wasn't sure what to do. She didn't want to tell just tell him it was fine since that would be her committing him to go with Grant, for all she knew he was hoping that she would come up with an excuse to get him out of it.

“Can I go play?” Colton said shyly, feeling somewhat embarrassed at having to ask his Mom's permission to go to a playground.

“Sure,” Grace said. “Go have fun with your friend,” she said. Colton was a little taken aback with her referring to Grant as his friend but didn't have much time to dwell on it as Grant already had pulled him off the bench by his arm and was now dragging him across the park to the playground.

As the two boys stepped onto the wood chips Grant finally let go of his arm. The play structure was made out of wood. It had two levels. The lower level had monkey bars and twin slides. Across a bridge and up some stairs lead up into a

tower with a large spiral tube slide.

“What should we play?” Grant asked looking at Colton.

“Play?” Colton questioned not really sure what Grant meant.

“Yeah, we are at a playground,” Grant said with a smirk.

“I don't know,” Colton said. “Tag,”

“Hmmm, tags not really fun with just two people,” Grant mused. “I know lets play BattleMonsters. I'll be AquaDrago since he's my favorite, who do you want to be?”

Colton smirked a little realizing Grant's favorite had changed from the previous one he had told him only a few weeks ago, but he quickly grew a little anxious as he noticed Grant was now looking at him expecting an answer.

“I'm not sure,” Colton said trying to remember a single name of one of the titular monsters. “It's been years since I've watched the show,”

“Years?” Grant said giving Colton a quizzical look.

“I mean, I just can't decide,” Colton said quickly noticing his slip. “I have a lot of favorites, you decide.”

“Ok,” Grant said seemingly not giving Colton's slip a second thought. “How about Fuegofree, he's pretty cool.”

“Sounds good,” Colton said having a vague memory of what the character looked like.

“I'll start at the top then we'll meet and fight at the bridge,”

Grant said as he ran up the stairs. Colton walked up the stairs with some apprehensive still not fully onboard with the idea of playing a game of pretend. As he took a step onto the bridge Grant jumped down from the tower.

“Aqua Cutter,” he yelled swiping his hand through the air with a sound effect to accompany. Colton dodged the imaginary projectile.

“Smoke bomb,” he said making a motion towards Grant as he frantically tried to remember the names of the attacks. The boys continued to play as they ran and leapt all over the play structure lobbing imaginary attacks at one another. Colton was finding that he remembered more than he had originally thought. After some time he had even forgotten his apprehensions and had become completely engrossed in the game as the two dodged between other kids who had started to populate the playground. Through the course of the game they had become allies but then Colton had betrayed Grant sending the two to face each other in one final showdown at the bottom of the slide. It had been a battle of epic proportions but Grant sent out one last attack that fatally wounded Colton. He fell to his knees holding his stomach before keeling over dead. Grant stood over him with a laugh at the melodrama of Colton's death.

“You want to do something different?” Grant asked.

“Sure I guess,” Colton said as he got to his feet brushing a few stray wood chips from his shirt. “Its getting kind of crowded here anyways.” Colton said as he took a look around

noticing that more kids had shown up at the playground.

“Lets go swing,” Grant suggested pointing out a swing set near where they were. Colton nodded in agreement. There was nothing wrong with swinging, even at his age. They took the two normal swings next to one another. Further down was a father swinging his younger daughter in a baby swing.

“Hey you have BattleMonster cards right?” Grant asked as he swung back and forth in unison with Colton.

“Yeah I do,” Colton said fairly certain he had a binder full of them from when he had been younger.

“You should bring them tomorrow to cub scouts. I'll bring some of mine too, then we can trade,” Grant said.

“Oh yeah,” Colton said less of a response to Grant and more of him realizing that he still hadn't made a choice as to whether he was going to return or not.

“Check this out,” Grant said swinger higher than Colton now. Grant came to the crest of his swing and then leapt off of the swing from the air landing on the ground.

“Think you can get higher?” Grant asked beaming proudly at his accomplishment.

“Watch this,” Colton said with a smirk. He got himself swinging as high as the swing would allow. He was not about to let himself be outdone by a six year old. As he came to the height of his swing he leapt off launching forward landing some distance away from Grant. As he got up he turned

around to see Grant staring at him with his mouth slightly agape.

“That was really cool,” Grant said running up to him. “I've never seen anyone go that high before, well except for some older kids.” Grant said.

“Really,” Colton said feeling just a tinge of pride at the other boy's admiration.

“Hey you two,” the man pushing his daughter in a swing called out. “Be careful with that kind of stuff, there are other kids running around, wouldn't want an accident would we?”

“S-Sorry,” Colton said feeling a little embarrassed to be reprimanded.

“I'm thirsty,” Grant said apparently not taking much notice. “I'm gonna see if my Mom has a water bottle.” As Colton followed Grant back to the bench he could see the two mothers still sat next to one another. He wondered what they had been talking about.

“Mom do you have water?” Grant asked.

“Sure hun,” Mrs. Santos said as he reached into her purse and pulled out a water bottle. As Grant chugged water she took a look at her phone. “Oh my gosh, has it really been an hour an half?” she said with some surprise. Colton was shocked to hear that that much time had passed.

“Grant we have to go,” Mrs Santos said getting up from the bench,

“But I want to keep playing,” Grant whined.

“Sorry, dear but we're visiting Grandma today so we have to get going,” Mrs. Santos said. Upon hearing this Grants expression became a little sad.

“Oh,” he said as his shoulders slumped.

“It was really nice to meet both of you,” Mrs. Santos said as she lead Grant away in a hurry. Grace and Colton watched them walk off.

“You ready to go?” Grace asked. Colton nodded as they began to walk back to the car. On the drive back Colton was quiet. “How was the park?” Grace asked. Colton felt some shame well up inside of himself.

“Did you see me... playing?” Colton asked the last word dribbling out of his mouth as if he didn't want to admit what he had been doing.

“Not really,” Grace said picking up on Colton's apprehension. “You guys were really far away so,”

“Yeah, we kind of just hung out on the swings,” Colton said relieved to find out his Mom had not witnessed the full scope of his activities. The truth was that Grace had pretty much seen everything. She didn't know the particulars but she had seen Colton running around the playground engaged in some game of make believe with Grant. She had been surprised to see Colton playing so freely almost as if he and Grant really were the same age, but she didn't want to put a damper on what seemed to have been a good time for Colton.

“I think it was really nice of you to play with Grant like that,” Grace said trying to frame it like Colton had only put up with Grant's wishes to be nice, like an older brother humoring a little brother. “From the way his Mom talked Grant seems to think you're pretty cool, so it probably just made his day.”

“Oh really,” Colton said once again feeling a small sense of pride pang inside of him.

“You know I didn't really want to bother you about it, but have you given any thought about what you are going to do about scouts,” Grace asked.

“I think I'm going to keep going,” Colton said. “I mean I already got the badges so I might as well see what this tiger stripe ceremony is all about.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Grace said with nod. “You did put in the work after all.”

Upon returning home Colton went to his room and dug through his closet finding his binder of cards in a box. He pulled a bunch of them out of the plastic sleeves and set the pile on his desk for tomorrow. They were older but he knew Grant probably wouldn't give much thought to it. Colton then spotted the notebook on his desk. He opened it up, looking over his pro's and con's list. He picked up the pencil and wrote at the bottom of the list where he had erased and rewritten repeatedly. He put the pencil down and looked at what he had written, it read “I like my friend”. He closed the notebook with a smile.

Chapter 12

Summer of the Tiger: Part 12 - Chapter 12

The Tiger Bares its Fangs

Colton was walking down the hall of the church making his way to the meeting room. He had a stack of BattleMonster cards in his hand, since he had promised Grant to bring them. As he walked into the room he saw that most of the troop had not arrived yet. Colton saw that Grant and Dom were sat at a table. He walked up to the table and put his deck down.

“I brought them,” Colton said pushing the cards to the middle of the table.

“Awesome, can I look?” Grant asked, to which Colton nodded as he took a seat at the table. Grant and Dom looked through the cards with some enthusiasm. “No way, you have this one,” Grant said pulling a shiny card out of the pile. Colton looked on with a blank stare. “I'd never thought I'd actually see it, where did you get it?” Grant asked holding the card in his hand as if it were a valuable relic.

“I don't know, out of a pack I guess,” Colton said. “Why, is it rare?”

“Yeah dude, its really rare,” Grant said with a shocked look realizing that Colton didn't seem to know.

“You can have it if you want,” Colton said with a shrug. He

didn't really have any attachment to the cards. They had only been gathering dust in his closet. He could see that Grant was quite taken with it though, so it wasn't really a big deal to give it away to someone who would appreciate it. Grant and Dom looked at Colton with eyes that were practically bugging out of their skulls.

“You serious?” Grant asked.

“Yeah if you want it,” Colton said with a smile.

“Th-thanks,” Grant stammered as he stared intently at the gift that had just been bequeathed to him.

“If I had that card I would never give it away, I wouldn't even take it out of my house,” Dom mused. Colton could only shrug. If it made Grant happy than that was enough for him.

If it hadn't been for Grant's insistence Colton probably would have never come back to the cub scouts. At every moment that Colton had thought about quitting Grant had always popped up to make him reconsider by asking him if he was coming to the meeting. At those times Colton had always felt like he had been cornered into agreeing. Maybe it was because he had never been in a situation where someone actually wanted him somewhere, that made it so he found it hard to refuse. It felt good to be wanted. Grant had no way of knowing any of this, he had only been asking a completely innocent and innocuous question at those times. However Colton was in some way grateful to him. Even if he wouldn't ever admit it out loud, due to embarrassment, the scouts did make him happy. He did'nt need to worry about things here,

they accepted him just as he was, though he did wonder if that would change if the other kids knew the truth?

“Lets have a match,” Grant said.

“I'm sorry what?” Colton asked shaking himself from his thoughts.

“A match,” Grant repeated.

“I don't know how to play,” Colton admitted. He had never had anyone to actually play with back when he had been into collecting the cards so he had never bothered to learn.

“What's going on here?” Tristan said having just arrived and was now standing next to the table with Chris at his side.

“Grant and Colton are going to have a duel,” Dom said. “But Colton doesn't know how to play.”

“Cool, I'll be on Colton's team and help him,” Chris said taking a seat next to Colton.

“I'm on Grant's team then,” Dom declared. Tristan took a seat at the head of the table. “Whose team are you on?” Dom asked.

“I don't really know BattleMonsters,” Tristan said putting his hands up. “So I'll just watch.”

The game started as Chris began to explain the rules to Colton as he helped him draw his hand and began explaining the different things he could do with his cards. Colton felt a little awkward at the fact that a six year old was having to

explain a game to him, but at the same time he was glad to have the help. Nobody had offered to be on a team with him before. Chris was a pretty good teacher too. Instead of telling him what to do, he was just explaining all his options to him and letting him choose.

As the match went on, Colton had pretty much gotten the gist of the rules and didn't really need much input from Chris on what to do, it was a pretty simple game after all. Colton had Grant pretty much cornered at one point. Grant didn't seem to have much grasp on strategy and Colton felt a little bad given their age difference Grant was at a disadvantage in that department. However Colton was not just going to let him win as he felt that might be a little patronizing.

By this time most of the other tiger scouts had arrived and were now huddled around the table watching the game play out.

“You might as well just give up,” Chris mused at Grant as examined the play field.

“Oh don't worry,” Dom said with a smirk as he looked at Grant's hand.

“Take this,” Grant said laying the card Colton had given him earlier. There were some surprised reactions from the crowd at the sudden dramatic reveal.

“That's a problem,” Chris said sucking some air through his teeth.

“Colton gave it to him,” Dom said.

“You gave that to him?” Chris asked in surprise.

“Yeah,” Colton said. “Why is it really good or something?

“Its pretty strong,” Chris replied. As the game went on Colton watched as Grant was able to pretty much steamroll his own monsters handily with his former card.

“That cards pretty O.P” said one of the other scouts from the crowd which was met with some agreement and some boisterous claims from others that they had cards that could beat it. The game drew to end when Colton had to admit defeat as he put down his own cards.

“I lost,” Colton said “I guess I should have held onto that card.”

“You obviously didn't know how good it was,” Dom said.

“No, guess I didn't,” Colton said.

“Maybe you should take it back,” Grant said holding the card out to Colton. “Since now you know how good it is.”

“Keep it,” Colton said as he pushed the card back towards Grant.

“You're sure,” Grant said with a unsure expression.

“Positive,” Colton said with a grin. Grant gave a smile as he put the card back into his own deck.

“It was really good for your first time though,” Grant said as if to offer some sort of consolation to Colton. “I probably would have lost without it.”

“I'll win next time,” Colton said.

Just then the group heard a clap as Brady stood by the carpet area.

“All right boys clean up its time for the meeting to start. The kids got their things together and made their way to sit on the carpet. A couple of weeks ago Colton would have found himself embarrassed to be sitting on a carpet criss cross applesauce style like a little kid. But as he took his seat now he didn't feel any sort of shame. This was just his new normal.

“Okay so tonight we are going to talk about the tiger stripe ceremony which will be taking place here Saturday afternoon. This is a special event for just the tiger scouts so be sure to invite your friends and families,” Brady said addressing the group. Colton thought about his own family, none of them actually lived nearby, not that he would ever invite any of them out for something like this, yet the question about his Mom remained. She had never tried to come to any of the meetings like some of the other parents did occasionally. She had been pretty good about giving him his space. This was something Colton was thankful for, the thought of her being there to witness him acting just like the other kids made butterflies flutter in his stomach. As far as he knew the only time she had seen anything like that had been when he had been playing basketball. That wasn't even something he would consider embarrassing yet it had been enough to make him feel incredibly self-conscious at running around with a bunch of other little kids as if he were another of their number.

Grants hand shot up into the air.

“Yes Grant, question?” Brady asked.

“Can I go to the bathroom?” he asked.

“Yeah but hurry back,” Brady said motioning towards the door. Brady got back to talking about what would happen during the ceremony but Colton found himself zoning out as he was still thinking about his Mom. As easy as it would be to tell her not to come he wondered if she would insist on being there. Colton realized that it would probably be weird if she wasn't, all the other parents would be there no doubt, how would it look if she wasn't? Colton half wondered why this was even bothering him. If there was one person he shouldn't have a problem with being there it should be her. She was the only one who knew the truth and she had seen him in his most humiliating moments. He remembered back to a couple of weeks of her carrying him in her arms down the street into a children's clothing store. His face went a little red even recalling the events of that day. As Colton continued to wrestle with what to do he heard Brady calling his name.

“Earth to Colton,” Brady said.

“Uh yeah what” Colton asked.

“It's time to get with your partner for brainstorming,” Brady said. Colton looked around and noticed the rest of the scouts had all gotten up and were heading towards the tables with a piece of paper in their hands.

“Okay,” Colton said getting up and grabbing the two pieces

of paper that Brady was holding out towards him.

“You had your listening ears on,right?” Brady asked. Colton squirmed a little. The truth was he hadn't heard a word Brady had said.

“Yeah,” Colton said not wanting to admit that he had no idea what was going on.

“Suure,” Brady said with a knowing look. “Your partner is Grant, okay, any questions just come talk to me.”

Colton looked at the paper as he walked back to an open seat. The paper had a little tiger in a boy scout uniform at the top. The words “My Plan” were written in big letters. According to the directions it seemed they were supposed to work with a partner to brainstorm the next three badges they wanted to earn. Colton looked up to see some tiger scout handbooks were set out at the tables. He flipped it open perusing through the pages. He had one of these at home but this was the first time he had looked in it. He closed the book opting to wait for Grant to get back since they were supposed to do this as partners. He looked around the room to see the others working with some parent volunteers hovering around helping some of the kids with writing and reading. It was the first time Colton had thought about how old some of these kids were. He began to wonder what grade his new group of friends were even in. First grade? Maybe even kindergarten?

“Hey buddy need some help?” A lady said approaching the table. “I can read out some of the options for you if you're having trouble.

“I'm okay,” Colton said with a wave of his hand. “I'm waiting for my partner.”

“Okay, don't hesitate to ask,” the lady said with a smile as she went to help another group. Colton felt just a tad bit off put by the question as it confirmed his worries. As he thought about it more he started to feel a little mortified by the idea that he was so ingratiated in a group of little kids as if this was where he was supposed to be, as if he had been demoted from his previous standing. He had always tried to maintain a certain level of composure that hopefully people around him would see that he was more capable and in control than people may have assumed, and in some way he had been successful. But with these new thoughts racing through his head he was starting to feel like he wasn't in as much control as he thought. Colton stood up from the table. He needed to get his mind off of these thoughts. He walked up to Brady who was nearby another group.

“Whats up Colton?” the leader asked noticing his approach.

“Umm Grants been gone awhile,” Colton said. Brady shot a quick look up at the clock on the wall.

“Yeah he has,” Brady said with some concern. “Tell you what, do you think you could go and check to make sure he's okay?

Colton agreed with some enthusiasm as he made his way out into the hallway with some pep in his step, a welcome reprieve from the feelings he was beginning to have from being in the room.

He knew somewhat where the bathrooms were located, he just hoped that Grant was okay and was just being slow on coming back. As Colton turned a corner he saw a sight that made his stomach drop as he came to a standstill.

Down the hall he could see Grant being held up against a wall by the kid Colton immediately recognized as the bear scout who had teased them the previous week. Grants BattleMonster cards were strewn about the ground at his feet. The other kid had Grant against the wall with one hand and with his other he held a card, the card that Colton had given to Grant that night.

“I'm going to take this card,” the kid said releasing Grant from his hold. “A little kid like you wouldn't even know what to do with it.”

“Give it back,” Grant said with a quiver in his voice as he took a step towards the other boy to try and grab the card back. “My friend gave it to me.”

The other boy responded by giving Grant a hard shove back into the wall, the shock of which caused Grant to slump down onto the ground as he began to start to whimper.

“And now you're giving it to me,” the other boy said with a satisfied grin. “Don't even think of tattling either or I'll pound you next time.”

Grant looked up at the boy with a face filled with fear. No doubt feeling completely defeated and powerless. This was a feeling Colton was all too familiar with as it was one he had

felt too many times at the hands of his own bullies. It was in that moment that something snapped within him. He charged down the hall, thoughts of getting help or trying to talk the other kid down never even crossed his mind. Maybe it was because of seeing a fear stricken Grant or maybe it was more out of a built up anger at his own frustrations at not being able to fight back when he had been in the same situation, whatever the reason Colton saw red.

He leapt upon the other kids back wrapping his arms around the younger yet bigger kids neck.

“Give it back,” Colton yelled as he held fast to the other boy who had begun twisting around in an attempt to grab his surprise attacker. The other boy moved backwards slamming Colton into the wall causing him to release his grip. He spun around to face Colton who gave him no chance to even get his bearings as he barreled into him headfirst swinging his arms wildly. He knew his blows were probably not having much of an effect but did if ever feel good. The other boy tried fruitlessly to push Colton off of him with little success. Colton wasn't going to stop no matter what. Just then Colton felt a hand grab him from the back and pull him away.

“That's enough,” a voice yelled as Colton looked up to see himself being held by a man.

“What in the world is going on here,” the familiar voice of Sandy said as she came jogging up to the scene. Colton was speechless as he looked from the man to Sandy and then to Grant. None of the kids seemed willing or able to offer an

explanation to the adults who were trying their best to piece together the scene. Sandy noticed a bleary eyed Grant still on the ground.

“Grant, dear are you okay?” she asked kneeling down next to him and placing a hand on his shoulder. Grant looked up at her and gave a nod. Sandy stood with a sigh before clapping her hands coming to a decision. “Tim can you make sure he gets back to his meeting okay,” she said addressing the man before turning to Colton and the other boy. “I'll handle these two.”

She told Colton and the other kid to follow her. As Colton began to follow he turned to give one last look at Grant who looked back with a worried expression. Sandy lead the two of them into another room that appeared to be some sort of office.

“Sit there,” she said pointing to two chairs in front of the desk as she leaned up against the front of the desk facing them. “Now I want an explanation and I want one now, why were you two fighting?”

“He was picking on Grant,” Colton said still high on adrenaline.

“Robbie is that true?” Sandy asked turning the other boy.

“I was not,” Robbie said defensively. “I was just asking him about his cards and then this kid jumped on me.” Colton felt his fist clench up hearing the brazen lie.

“That's not true,” Colton yelped.

“It is so,” Robbie retorted. Colton went back and forth with the other boy for a few moments.

“Enough,” Sandy said bringing the boys bickering to an end. “Fighting is not allowed here under any circumstances. At this point I'm going to have to call both of your parents in,” she said. Colton clenched his teeth, he was still too angry to have any other reaction.

“Robbie your Dad is at the bear den meeting right?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Robbie grumbled.

“Great, so I'll get him down here first, Colton you go wait in the hall while I call your Mom,”

Colton got up from the chair and went and sat in the hall. He could tell this was not a situation that Sandy had a lot of experience dealing with. He was pissed that she had barely even seemed to listen to him. It was clear as day that Robbie was lying. A few minutes passed before Colton saw another man approach. He was barrel chested and sporting a big beard. Colton could clearly see the resemblance between this man and Robbie. He gave Colton a curious look before entering into the office and closing the door behind him. He could hear some talking from within the office but couldn't make out what was being said. He guessed it was only a matter of time before his Mom showed up. He wondered how she would react. It wasn't the first time she had been called because he had been in fight thought this was a little different. This was the first fight he had willingly stepped

into. Colton put his knees into his chest and rested his head against them. The adrenaline leaving his body left him feeling zonked and dazed. It was ten minutes before he heard his Mom's voice.

“Oh dear, what have you gotten into this time?” Grace said. Colton looked up to see her standing over him. He tried to speak but the words stuck in throat as let out a croak. The only thing he really wanted to to do was jump up and hug her but he relented not wanting to act like a little boy in need of his Mom's comfort. Grace knelt down and mussed his hair up a little. “It'll be okay,” she said with a comforting smile. He guessed she didn't know the full details yet. It was the truth that he hadn't started it, but he had escalated it into a full on brawl. “Guess I better get in there,” Grace said glancing at the door. “You want to come?” she asked. Colton shook his head, there was no way he wanted to go back in there. “Don't worry, I'll handle this,” she said getting to her feet and walking into the office alone.

Colton was left alone in the hall way. If anything he was going to have to trust his Mom on this. He half regretted not going in wondering what sort of lies Robbie would tell with him not there. A few minutes later the door opened and Robbie walked out with his Dad, an arm on his shoulder leading him away. As Colton watched them leave he saw Robbie shoot him a glare. His Mom then walked out with Sandy standing in the doorway a stressed look on her face.

“Lets go,” Grace said as Colton got to his feet and followed her out of the church. They were silent on the walk to the car.

Colton couldn't gather how she was feeling from her demeanor. They got to the car and Colton got into his booster seat and buckled in without a word. If he wasn't so detached at the moment he might have realized how naturally he had sat in the seat without a second thought. As they drove towards home Colton could no longer bear the silence.

“Are you mad?” he asked meekly from the backseat. Grace looked up meeting his gaze in the rearview mirror.

“I...don't know how to feel right now,” Grace said with some hesitancy. Colton looked down, at least she didn't sound angry. “I mean Colton from what I hear you attacked him.”

“He was beating up Grant,” Colton protested immediately.

“A charge he denies,” Grace said.

“You believe him?” Colton said incredulously. She couldn't possibly believe that, exactly whose side was she even on?

“No, I don't,” Grace stated calmly. “And given how Sandy was acting I don't think she does either, but its your word against his.”

“Then she should just ask Grant, he'll tell her,” Colton said with some frustration as he sat back into his seat crossing his arms looking more like a pouting six year old rather than an angry thirteen year old.

“I imagine she will, but at the end of the day you did attack that boy, that's the real problem here. There was some serious talk about having you kicked out,” Grace said. Colton

felt his stomach drop at the mention of being barred from the scouts. How could they even consider such a thing. He had done the only thing he could have at the time.

“So what I should have just let him do it?” Colton asked less of a question and more of vent of anger. Grace pulled the car over and turned around to face him.

“Colton you attacked another kid, a kid who is younger than you. He's what nine or ten? You can't be acting like this, you're thirteen.” she said. Colton looked away, he hadn't considered that fact, but it shouldn't have mattered anyways. Even if he was older, Robbie was bigger.

“They don't know that” Colton grumbled using the excuse his Mom had used in the past to wave away his own concerns about how he was treated.

“But you do,” Grace said. She put her head down with a sigh for a moment before looking back up and placing a sympathetic hand on Colton's knee. “Listen, I know you were only doing what you thought you had to, I know I shouldn't be but I'm proud that you stood up for your friend. But you know there were better ways to handle this, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” Colton said feeling ashamed at how easily he had lost his composure. He had always tried to maintain a level headed attitude, something he felt was a mark of maturity. But it seemed he had completely lost that tonight.

“Are they really going to kick me out?” Colton asked looking at his Mom with eyes full of worry.

“I don't know,” Grace said. “Sandy said she'd call later with her decision.”

“I hope they don't” Colton said. Grace was a little surprised. In the past when she had asked Colton about going to scouts he usually gave some sort of indecisive answer but here he was now freely admitting his wish to be a part of the group and not wanting to leave. Grace turned back around not being able to offer any further reassurance. They got back to the house without another word said between them. Colton went to his room and collapsed onto his bed completely fatigued. Colton could hear his Mom rummaging through the kitchen looking for something quick and easy to whip up for dinner. Colton took off his hat and flung it across his room with a lazy throw of his hand. He was convinced that his time in the cub scouts had come to an end. As he thought more about everything that had happened he started to feel it was all for the best in the end. He remembered how he had felt so out of place that night as he had been waiting for Grant to return. Yet even with those emotions he couldn't help but feel a deep sadness set in. He didn't want it to end.

Colton heard the phone ring from outside his room he could hear his Mom answer but her voice was muffled through the walls. A few moment later Grace came into his room. Colton sat up in his bed.

“That was Brady on the phone,” Grace said.

“So am I out?” Colton asked.

“Nope,” Grace said with a smirk. “Apparently Grant made

quite a ruckus about what happened and it was decided that they were going to let this one slide given the circumstances.”

“I see,” Colton said with a slump of his shoulders.

“I thought you'd be happier,” Grace said with a quizzical look. Colton wasn't sure how he felt as he was a mix of emotions at the moment. Happiness, sadness, and fatigue all mixed together into a strange swirl of uncertainty. He could only guess they were treating him like any other little kid. He was being given a pass chalking his behavior up to the immaturity of a six year old boy who didn't know any better. That wasn't the truth of the situation and Colton knew it which was causing the conflict of emotion inside of him.

“Brady said they'll see you Saturday for the tiger stripe ceremony but you'll need to fill out the worksheet on your own before that,” Grace continued.

“Oh yeah, the ceremony,” Colton said with dazed tone. “Are you coming to that?”

“Do you want me too?” Grace asked with some curiosity as if he wanted her to be there.

“Yes,” Colton said shyly. “I mean it would be weird if you weren't since all the other parents are going to be there,” he quickly added. Grace was a little surprised to hear Colton was actually giving her permission to come.

“Well I do have a quick appointment on Saturday, but I'll try to get their in time,” Grace said with a smirk.

“Thanks,” Colton said. Grace began to turn away.

“Mom,” Colton said stopping her as she turned to look at him. “I'm sorry,” he said.

“Don't be,” Grace said as she walked over to him. “Like I said in the car, I'm proud of you for standing up for a friend.” she said as she gave him a quick kiss on the top of his head. “No more fights though, you hear.” she said.

“I won't,” Colton said with a weak smile. Grace left the room and Colton dragged himself off the bed. He figured he might as well finish up the worksheet while his Mom made dinner. He looked around realizing he didn't have the sheet. He ripped out a piece of notebook paper reasoning that it probably didn't make much of a difference. He found the tiger scout handbook on his desk having been untouched since that first night. He opened it up and began to look through his options. He didn't really have any preferences at the moment for what he was going to do. All that seemed to matter right now was that he was still in. He was still a tiger.

Chapter 13

Summer of the Tiger: Chapter 13 - Chapter 13

The Tiger gets its Stripes

It was Saturday as Colton paced around his room with a sort of manic nervous energy. He had woken up that morning abuzz with anticipation. The day of the Tiger Stripe Ceremony had finally arrived. But as the day progressed his excitement had turned being invaded by a sense of anxiety. Colton had spent the week in a fight between his emotions. On one hand he shouldn't be excited about this. The whole thing seemed to reek of the theatrics of a kindergarten graduation ceremony, something to make little kids feel as if they had really accomplished something big when in reality they had only taken the first step in a much longer journey. Yet at least to Colton he felt like he had been through a lot already, perhaps because his journey up until this point had been accompanied by a huge shakeup to his day to day life. He felt like he had traversed a bomb field and had come out the other side a little banged up but still standing on his own two feet. There was also a certain anxiety that accompanied the idea of going through with this. It would almost be like confirming that he had come to accept everything that had happened as the proper order of things. He would be a tiger scout through and through because he belonged in the world of little kids, a tacit acceptance that he couldn't hack it in the world of the teenagers where he had been living only a month

prior.

He sat down at his desk the tiger handbook and piece of paper he had meant to fill in with his choices of the next three badges he wanted to earn were still set in front. He hadn't been able to fill it out yet and the deadline was fast approaching. Colton opened up the tiger scout handbook and began once again to look over his options. It was not as straightforward a task as he had imagined. He wanted to find some badges that would actually be of some challenge to him. Some of the badges seemed to have very easy requirements which were perfectly acceptable for a younger crowd, such as the show and tell badge. All he had to do to earn that badge would be to bring an item to a meeting and give a small presentation of said item. The drawing of the tiger at the bottom of the page suggested a favorite toy.

Colton had balked at the option thinking he could not possibly bring himself to go through with such a childish endeavor, the last time he had participated in such an activity had actually been in kindergarten. There were other such option like the nutrition badge which asked him to track his daily meals which sounded boring and things like the bookworm badge which asked him to track his reading habits over the week. He wondered what the tiger scouts would think if he brought in a reading log full of long fantasy books instead of the smaller picture books and the thin little chap books that most of the other tiger scouts were more accustomed to reading.

There were then badges that Colton couldn't do for obvious

reasons since they would reveal things about his real life which he knew would just invite questions he'd rather not answer. After about thirty minutes of really looking hard he had written down three answers that would at least fulfill this requirement, its not as if he was contractually obligated to do them and as the time approached that he would need to be leaving soon he thought it best just to have something. He heard a knock at his door before it opened revealing his Mom.

“Hey its almost time to go, you ready?” she asked walking into the room.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Colton said. Grace came behind where he was sitting and put her hands onto his shoulders.

“You nervous?” she asked peering down at his desk to see what he was working on.

“No, why would I be nervous?” Colton asked not knowing his Mom had noticed at the breakfast table that morning that there had been a certain nerve tinged inflection in his voice.

“I don't know, its a big day is all,” Grace said not letting on that she knew that Colton was excited all the same for it.

“Not really,” Colton said. “Its just some little ceremony not like its a big deal or anything,”

“Well just don't say that to the other tiger scouts,” Grace tutted. "Wouldn't want to rain on there parade. So at least try to look like your excited while you're there.”

“I will,” Colton said agreeing to playing his part. Grace left

the room as Colton got up folding up his paper and slipping it into his pocket. He stopped and looked at himself in the mirror. They had been told to not wear their tiger shirts since they would be getting new uniforms anyways. Colton had spent a good amount of time that morning rifling through his clothes trying to find something that wasn't too kiddie to wear a task easier said than done. He had finally settled on a shirt that had three stars on it that were wearing shades that had the words “Cool Star” on it. Something he surely would have been made fun of for wearing as a middle-schooler. To his surprise he had found a pair of blue track pants as well that didn't seem to have any offending quality to them, the only problem being they were a little loose on him but not to the point where they were sagging. He put his tiger scout hat on his head completing his outfit. He definitely still looked like a little kid but he knew no one was going to make fun of him.

Grace and Colton drove to the church as they let the radio play. Grace pulled up the front steps upon arriving.

“Okay I gotta run to my meeting but it won't take long, I'll be back in time for the ceremony. Maybe I'll even get a few good pictures” Grace said.

“Mom, no” Colton said with an alarmed look.

“Oh come on, just one I promise,” Grace said with a pleading expression.

“Mom, please,” Colton said a worried look painted on his face not exactly pleased with the idea of their being photographic evidence.

“Okay, fine,” Grace said with a bit of sad smile, just letting her be present was a big step for Colton and she didn't want to push it, especially if it was going to upset him. Colton got out of the car and began to make his way to the tiger den meeting room. He was still a little anxious about his Mom attending. He just hoped there wouldn't be anything to embarrassing for her to witness.

Colton walked into the room and was met with a flurry of activity. Kids and parents were all around. An excited chatter seemed to fill the air. He looked around to see that there were a mix of kids and parents in the room, some of the boys already had their new shirts on. They were blue button ups just like the other cub scouts uniforms the only things they were missing were the kerchiefs that they wore around their necks to signify what level they belonged to.

“Colton,” the boy heard his name as he saw Brady approaching him. “Good to see you made it,” the den leader said with some good cheer. “Today's the big day, you excited?” he asked. Colton remembered what his Mom had said about playing his part. Colton didn't really find a problem with it especially since she wasn't there yet. Colton felt a little more free to be honest with his feeling.

“Yeah, I'm excited,” Colton said with a grin.

“Good to hear,” Brady said. “But listen before I send you off to get ready we do need to have a talk about last week.”

“Oh,” Colton said with a gulp as his happy expression faded. Brady placed a reassuring hand atop Colton's head.

“Hey don't worry I'm not here to yell at you or nothing,” Brady said with an understanding tone.

“I'm really sorry about that,” Colton said. “It was a bad idea, I'm just glad they didn't kick me out.”

“You didn't really think I was going to let them kick out my junior leader did you?” Brady said with a chuckle.

“Junior wha?” Colton asked looking lost as to what Brady meant.

“The badge I gave you,” Brady said reminding Colton of the junior leadership badge he had earned a few weeks back. “I can only give that badge out to one scout in the den and it makes you the junior leader, did I not explain that to you?” Brady asked. Colton shook his head. This was the first time he had been hearing anything about this. “Oh sorry, guess I forgot,” Brady said with a frown. “Anyways there does come some responsibility with that position, being that you need to conduct yourself in a way that will set a good example for the rest of the den, okay? That means no getting into fights.”

“I won't,” Colton said with some assurance. “It's not like I like getting into fights or anything,” Colton said knowing from his overwhelming experience that it was not a situation he ever hoped to find himself in.

“That's good to hear,” Brady said. “Here's your uniform take off your shirt and put this one on, Okay?” Brady said handing Colton his own blue button up. “Is your Mom here?” Brady said taking a cursory look around the room.

“Not yet,” Colton said. “She had a quick errand to run but she'll be here in time for the start of the ceremony,” he added quickly dispelling any thoughts of his Mom being absent from Brady's mind.

“Alright, well if you need help getting that on let me know, those buttons can be tricky,” Brady said.

“I can do it myself,” Colton spurted out.

“I have full confidence in you,” Brady said with a thumbs up.

“Oh I have this too,” Colton said remembering the paper in his pocket and wanting to move as far away from the talk about his ability to dress himself. “I didn't have the worksheet so I just used some notebook paper, hope that's okay,” Colton said as pulled out the folded up piece of paper from his pocket and extended it to Brady.

“That should be fine,” Brady said as he unfolded the paper and looked it over. “Insect badge, junior archaeology and woodworking,” Brady said with raised eyebrows. “These are some pretty involved projects, you sure you're up to it?

“I can do it,” Colton said with some confidence. Looking over the requirements for the badges Colton had seen the first two were more like school projects that would take some work at least enough to keep him busy. He had decided to go for something easier as his third option. There had been a mathematics badge he had looked at that required him to finish a worksheet in the book within a certain amount of time. It was pretty simple arithmetic that would have been a

breeze for him but he had to abandon the idea when one of the requirement had been to bring a math test from a teacher that he had scored an A on. He had decided on a woodworking badge as he knew his Mom would probably have everything he needed to do it.

“All right if you think you're up to it,” Brady said with some skepticism as he folded up the piece of paper. “Why don't you go ahead and get your shirt on the ceremony is going to start soon.”

Colton turned around with the shirt in his hand. He looked around the room and saw some of the other scouts with their shirts off as they, with the help of parents were donning their own uniforms. Colton wanted to head to the bathrooms if he was going to take off his shirt but realized that would probably just seem strange. No one else seemed to have an ounce of shame with taking off their own shirts. Colton found a secluded corner of the room. He took of his shirt feeling incredibly self conscious as he now stood with his scrawny frame exposed. He quickly put the new shirt on and with some urgency did up the buttons hoping nobody had seen him with his shirt off.

“Oh Colton,” a voice said. Colton spun around a tad bit frazzled to see Valerie, Grant's Mom standing behind him. “Is your Mom around?” she asked.

“She's coming,” Colton said becoming aware that the question seemed to be a popular one, no doubt everyone thinking it was strange that she wasn't here to help him.

Valerie seemed to take his answer in stride as she looked down at him a little smile appearing on her face.

“Oh honey it looks like you missed some,” she said kneeling down and unbuttoning a few of the buttons that Colton in his haste had put into the wrong holes. Colton felt himself freeze up as she re-did the offending buttons.

“Um thanks,” Colton said tilting his face down a little hoping to hide the flush of his cheeks. How could he have done that? Surely any doubts that about his ability to dress himself adequately had just been solidified.

“You know I'm glad I ran into you,” Valerie said. Colton looked up a little surprised at her comment.

“Hopefully you didn't get into too much trouble for that little incident last week.”

“No, not really,” Colton said with some apprehension not sure how to react.

“Well that's good,” Valerie said. “A lot of people around here are probably telling you that what you did was wrong, but I think they aren't really understanding what was happening.”

Coltons eyebrow raised a little. What was she saying to him?

“Now I'm not saying that you should go around picking fights,” Valerie said to make sure she wasn't advocating for violence. “But lets just say that I'm happy Grant has a friend who will stick by him when things get tough.”

Colton blinked a little in disbelief. Was she actually praising

him?

“Good luck,” she said before getting to her feet and greeting some other parents nearby. Colton felt a little happy to hear that. At least one person seemed to understand.

Colton looked around the room seeing Grant and the rest of the guys who had become his friend group near the carpet area. He walked over and joined up with them. There was some excited chatter among them about becoming real tiger scouts and some discussion about what the mythical tiger blood would taste like. There conversation was interrupted by Sandy the troop leader at the front of the room announcing that it was time for all the parents to go to the chapel to take their seats. The room emptied out leaving Brady and the tiger den alone.

“All right boys this is the moment we've been working towards,” Brady said. A wave of anticipation spread through the room. “I think before we go out there, we need to do one last thing, lets roar,” Brady said. The boys let out a loud enthusiastic roar, Colton included, before they devolved into laughter.

“All right,” Brady said bringing the room back under control. “Colton you'll be our line leader,” Colton stepped forward as Brady organized the rest of the tiger's behind him. The line made their way to the chapel where the audience was assembled. As they made their way through the chapel to the pew in the front row Colton looked through the crowd to see if he could see his Mom, wondering if she had made it in

time. He didn't see her anywhere. He thought he would feel somewhat relieved as he still hadn't come to terms yet with her being there but all he felt was some worry. He knew she wanted to be here and would be disappointed if she missed it. It didn't really matter to Colton whether or not she was there, or at least that's what he kept telling himself.

Sitting in the pew Colton looked up at the stage. He spotted the stairs that had caused him so many problems his first night. It looked a little foreboding to him as if daring him to just try and take a step on it. He looked at the other things that had appeared. He could see a wooden bridge was placed in the center and a table on the other side with orange neckerchiefs placed on it.

Sandy took the stage and welcomed everybody. She then talked about all the things the scouts had done in preparation for this day. Colton could see the banner they had made hung up on an easel on the stage.

“I think I've talked enough though,” Sandy said winding down her introduction. “Whaddya say we get these tigers up here to get their stripes.” Her suggestion was met with applause and some hoots and hollers from the crowd for good measure. Brady lead the line up the stairs. Colton was hesitant at first as he gripped the railings before taking his first step. He made it up with no incident, he glanced backwards at the stairs as if to mock his old nemesis. The tiger's were lined up on one side of the bridge while Sandy was on the other side with an orange neckerchief in her hands. Brady and another man Colton recognized as the

leader of the boy scouts Mr. Darius were stood near the front on the side with the tiger scouts. Brady was holding a leather canteen which no doubt contained the tiger blood each boy would have to drink.

“Our first scout is the junior leader of the den,” Sandy said. “Lets hear it for Colton Hendell.” There was another round of applause as Colton heard his name. His heart began to beat a little faster. He walked forward.

“Let us know if its gross,” Tristan whispered as Colton passed him. Colton stood in the middle of Brady and Mr. Darius.

“Ready?” Brady asked as Colton nodded. The two men grabbed his ankles as they swept him off his feet holding him upside down. He felt his shirt fall upwards exposing his stomach, but what Colton hadn't foreseen was that with their grip on his ankles the waistband of his paints fell a little giving the entire audience a view of the red waistband of his underwear as well as some of the top of the fabric which was white and decorated with trains. As he realized what was happening he felt himself begin to panic a little. He had gone through great lengths to find a somewhat respectable outfit but he had never even given second thought to his underwear and had grabbed the first pair he had seen never thinking that he would be in a situation where they would be exposed.

Colton didn't have a lot of time to think on this as the spout of the canteen was placed near his open mouth and a stream of liquid squirted into it. He swallowed it with a grimace. As he had known it wasn't real blood, just warm fruit punch. The

two men then flipped him up right side up setting him back on his feet. Colton pulled his pants up a little his face red with humiliation, though anyone in the crowd would have just guessed it was from the blood rushing to his head. Brady then directed him to walk across the bridge which he did albeit still a little woozy as he came to stand in front of Sandy. She put the orange kerchief around his neck and threaded the ends through the gold metal clasp with the tiger emblem on it.

“How did it taste?” Sandy asked.

“Warm,” Colton said as he waggled his tongue a little. Sandy chuckled as she showed him where to stand to wait for the rest of the tigers.

“And here is our first full fledged tiger,” Sandy announced into the microphone. The audience applauded again. The ceremony proceeded as the rest of the tigers went through the same process before all of them were now stood on the other side of the stage from where they had begun their own orange neckerchiefs around their necks.

“Lets give one last round of applause for our tigers,” Sandy said as the audience once again applauded louder and more enthusiastic than they had done before. The tigers were then released as each of them made their way into the crowd to their respective families. Colton walked into the crowd looking around for his mother. He didn't see her anywhere and he began to wonder if she had made it. He finally spotted her near the back as she waved to him with a smile.

Grace wasn't really sure what to expect out of him, but she hadn't expected him to come barreling into her before wrapping his arms around her torso in a hug.

“Did you see?” he asked.

“Yeah I got here just as you guys were walking onto the stage,” she said. Grace was once again shocked to see Colton look up at her with a big smile on his face. Was he actually happy that she was here and that she had made it in time to watch him go through the ceremony?

“So what does tiger blood taste like?” she asked.

“Its just fruit punch,” Colton said as he released her from his hug. She gave him a once over as he stood in his uniform.

“You look pretty spiffy,” Grace commented. “What do you think?”

“I like it,” Colton said looking down at his new duds. “Its better than the t-shirt.”

Grant then came over with his Mom followed closely behind.

“We're real tigers now,” Grant said as he Colton high fived. The two women exchanged a friendly greeting before Valerie turned to the two boys.

“You boys look great, lets get a photo,” Valerie said pulling out her phone. Grace panicked a moment trying to think of a good excuse to get Colton out of it, but to her surprise Colton made no such reaction to indicate that he was against the suggestion. He just stood there with a smile on his face as

Grant put his arm around him. Grace had stopped herself numerous times during the ceremony from taking out her own phone and taking some pictures wanting to respect Colton's wishes but she didn't want to pass up this opportunity as she took out her own phone and snapped a photo. After all it didn't seem to matter to Colton at the moment and she expected that he would just make her delete the photo later.

Pizza was then served as Colton found himself sitting on the floor with his friend group munching on some slices as they hotly debated what would happen if aliens decided to invade the earth which seemed to be a favorite topic of Dominic's as he flexed his superior knowledge all things extra-terrestial. Grace on the other hand was being taken around by Valerie to be introduced to some of the other parents but not before Valerie had made it known to Grace how much she appreciated what Colton had done for Grant the previous week. She had even issued a warning that if she ever saw that Robbie kid's parent she would be giving them a piece of her mind.

After some time the group of boys was approached by a girl who looked to be around twelve years old, Colton could instantly see the resemblance between her and Grant.

“C'mon Grant we're leaving,” she said as she mussed up the boy's hair.

“Stop it,” Grant mumbled as he shook his head, before getting up with a huff and walking off. The girl looked over

the rest of the boys still sat on the ground. “You guys look cute in your little uniforms,” she cooed before walking away herself. The boys felt a little miffed at the comment. The general feeling being that they were official, not cute.

Colton and Grace left soon after. The rest of the day had been quiet as Colton seemed to be absorbed in something on his computer. Grace was sat on the couch looking at the photo on her phone. Colton had made no such demand for her to delete it much to her pleasure. It was very different from most of the photo's she had of him, it was so different in fact that it almost seemed like it wasn't him in the photo at all. In most of her other photos he was either staring back nonchalantly or had a dour expression caused by the fact that he was getting his photo taken. The boy in the photo was smiling, and looked genuinely happy. Grace couldn't help but sigh looking at how adorable he looked in his new uniform. To her it seemed to confirm that this crazy plan of theirs was working. Colton was having fun, he had some friends, and he seemed to just be able to drop his guard and be himself for once. Grace gave a pause at the last part of her thought. Maybe that wasn't true. As she continued to look at the photo a troubling thought seemed to dawn on her. Was he actually being himself? Was this truly how he really was or was it more of performance. Colton was thirteen after all but was more or less being forced to be regarded as a six year old. As Grace though more on this she wondered if perhaps this wasn't the best thing to be doing. If Colton was ever going to gain true confidence he would have to see that being his true authentic self was okay, and with things as they were now he wasn't

able to do that, he was playing a part in a sense.

Grace dismissed this thought. It wasn't as if there weren't positives to this arrangement. Colton had seemed to become comfortable with how things were and it seemed to be doing wonders for his mood and general outlook. Grace reasoned that it was only till the end of the summer and then they would be moving on. As long as Colton was onboard what harm could there be in letting him live like this for a little longer? Grace knew things would work themselves out as they always had and with Colton's new sense of confidence he would be able to adjust back to normalcy with little issue. If Colton was happy then so was she, and thats all that really mattered. The summer was halfway over and she knew there was no way he'd go back to being the same closed-off sad kid by the end.

Chapter 14

Summer of the Tiger: Chapter 14 - Chapter 14

Chapter 14

The Tiger Slumbers

Grace was walking up the steps into the church to pick Colton up from the cub scout meeting, being that it was Monday night. She opened the doors and felt the huge blast of AC hit her as she shivered. Even though it was the middle of summer it seemed that in the south the days were unbearably hot while the nights cooled down significantly.

“Hey Grace,” a voice called out from behind her. Grace turned around to see Valerie behind her.

“Val, hey,” Grace said with a smile upon seeing the other mother she had become fast friends with.

“I don't know why they insist on having these things on Mondays,” Valerie said with annoyance. Grace could see that Valerie was still dressed in her office attire. “If they had them on any other day of the week my husband could do drop off and pick up since he only works nights on Monday,” she said explaining.

“Oh, what does your husband do?” Grace asked.

“He works at a plant,” Valerie said with a wave of her hand. “Though I suppose things have worked out because I was

hoping to run into you."

"Me?" Grace asked.

"Yeah, first of all you should give me your number so I can call you instead of hoping that I see you out and about plus we should talk more, second I did need to ask you a question. You see tomorrow is Grant's birthday and we are letting him have a sleepover with some of the other boys at our house, so of course Colton is invited."

"Oh tomorrow," Grace said a little hesitantly seeing what was being proposed.

"Please say you're not busy, Grant really has his heart set on Colton being there, it would really upset him if he couldn't make it," Valerie said with a worried look on her face. Grace was unsure of how to proceed. She didn't know how okay Colton would be with the idea. As far as she could remember he had never even had a sleepover before. Then again given how he had acted at the tiger stripe ceremony she was beginning to think it would be okay. He had certainly acted very different that day. He had been actually excited that she had been there. She had also spied him later on with the group of boys eating pizza talking animatedly with a smile on his face as if he was just another one of their group. She also couldn't forget seeing him play at the park with Grant, being just as carefree as any other kid on the playground. There was no denying that when he got around the others his inhibitions went out the door and his more guarded nature crumbled like an old castle wall. If it was just going to be a night around his

new friends, he would surely jump at the chance. It seemed like the perfect scenario for him to experience his first sleepover.

“Actually tomorrow would be fine, I'm sure Colton would love it,” Grace said.

“That's great,” Valerie said breathing sigh of relief. “And don't even worry about a present I told all the other parents that they don't need them. That boy has enough as it is. I guess I should also ask if there is anything I should know, you know dietary restrictions, or nighttime issues?” Valerie asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Oh no nothing like that,” Grace said with a chuckle at having been asked such a question about her son. She hadn't needed to worry about that in years.

“Well even if he did he wouldn't be the only one,” Valerie said as the two woman had made their way down to the tiger room.

Colton was standing with Grant outside of the room as the two of them saw their Mom's approaching. They both ran up to their respective parents.

“I'll text you the details later,” Valerie said to Grace as she hurried off with Grant in tow.

“Everything go all right?” Grace asked looking down at Colton in his new cub scout uniform which Grace still couldn't help herself at thinking how cute he looked in it.

“Yep,” Colton said with a grin. “Here, we made these,” Colton said handing Grace a lizard key chain constructed out of pearler beads.

“Crafty,” Grace said holing it up in front of her. As she and Colton made their way back to the car she was pleased to see that Colon's new demeanor had not seemed to diminish. If this had been a couple of weeks ago he would have no doubt tried to hide the craft from her, but now he had not only given it to her voluntarily he seemed to hold no qualms about having made it in the first place.

“And you said yes,” Colton exclaimed standing from his seat with his hands on the kitchen table.

“I thought you would want to go,” Grace said a little taken aback by his reaction. They were in the kitchen eating dinner. Colton had already taken a shower and was dressed in a pair of blue pajamas with otters swimming along on it.

“I can't go to a sleepover at Grant's house,” Colton said. He was shocked that his Mom had even entertained the idea. Didn't she realize what kind of situation she had signed him up for?

“I don't see what the big deal is. Its just going to be you and your friends, plus from the way Valerie sounded it seems Grant really wants you to come,” Grace said trying to get Colton to see that this wasn't something to get all up in arms about. Colton felt a little awkward to hear his Mom refer to

the others as his friends. He didn't really want to admit, even to himself that he saw them that way. Then again Colton felt their was a difference between being social at the meetings and actually going to a sleepover, this was a whole other level.

“They're little kids,” Colton stammered pointing out the elephant in the room that they had both been skirting around. Grace shrugged, she supposed she was going to have to address this.

“What do you think you are going to do at this sleepover? What play some video games, watch some movies, eat some cake? Is that really any different than you would do at a sleepover with kids your own age?” she asked. Colton could offer no response. He didn't really have a leg to stand on since he had never been to a sleepover before. He didn't actually know what kids his age did at these things. But still Colton knew that even if the activity of six year old boys and thirteen year old boys wasn't that much different his Mom's point was still disingenuous, there was the context to consider.

Grace watched as Colton fell back into his seat a far off look in his face. This wasn't going how she expected and she began to feel that perhaps she had pushed it too far.

“Look if you don't want to go its okay, I'll text Valerie and tell her you're sick or something came up,” Grace said. Colton was silent for a moment in thought.

“Grant will be sad,” Colton said quietly. The image of a crying Grant popping into his mind.

“He probably will be. With the way his Mom talks he seems to think the world of you.” Grace said. “But if you aren't comfortable with going then I'm not going to force you. Its really my fault I shouldn't have assumed without talking to you first.”

Colton gave his Mom a weak smile grateful that she was not dismissive of his feelings. Yet Colton was still bothered by the thought of disappointing Grant. It had become clear to Colton that he had trouble refusing the boy. In some ways Colton felt protective of him. Perhaps it was because Grant reminded him of himself. Grant was certainly a ball of enthusiasm but there were times when Colton could see he also had some difficulties with social interactions a sort of anxiety that Colton knew all too well. Maybe that's why Colton had found himself drawn to him. Maybe Colton was trying to be the friend to Grant that he himself had wished he had when he had been that age. If that had happened then perhaps things would have turned out differently for Colton.

“I'll go,” Colton said as he cast his eyes downward.

“You're sure?” Grace asked “Its you're decision, only go if you want to.”

Colton shook his head. Its not that he wanted to go, only that he felt like he should.

“Its fine, I'll go,” Colton said. Grace knelt down by his chair and gave him a hug. Colton reached up with one arm and wrapped it around Grace's arm.

“You'll do just fine,” Grace said. “I know it.”

The car pulled up to a nice house with an exposed brick front. Flowers lined the front in full bloom.

“Alright lets get your stuff,” Grace said shutting off the car. Colton got out of the and car and shuffled towards the back. Grace opened the trunk and grabbed his backpack that she had packed for Colton while he had taken a quick shower when she saw that he had not done it himself.

“I packed your bag,” Grace said handing it to him. Pretty slim pickings, but I guess its been about two weeks since we did laundry,” Grace said more or less to herself as Colton did not reply only slipping the backpack onto his back. Grace then grabbed a sleeping bag and placed it into his hands. She looked at Colton who seemed to have blank less expression on his face. “You nervous?” she asked knowing full well that nervous didn't even begin to describe what he was feeling.

“No,” Colton said. “I'll be fine.”

Grace knelt down and placed a hand on Colton's shoulder.

“I know you'd rather not be here but I think its a very nice thing you're doing.” Grace said.

Colton nodded. The only way he could feel any sort of good way about this was to keep telling himself he was doing this for Grant.

“I'll be back early tomorrow but if you start to feel like its getting too be too much, just tell Valerie to call me and I'll come pick you up, kay?” Grace said.

They walked up to the front door and rang the door bell and were welcomed in by Valerie.

“Lovely home,” Grace commented.

“Oh thanks, please don't mind the mess,” Valerie said with a wave. As Colton looked around the house looked pretty tidy, a far cry from the clutter of his own home. “The boys are upstairs in Grant's room,” Valerie said addressing Colton. “Its at the end of the hall.”

“Okay,” Colton said taking a step towards the stairs.

“Hang on a minute,” Grace said wrapping Colton up into a hug. “Try to at least look like you're having fun,” Grace whispered into his ear before releasing him with a kiss to his forehead. Colton gave her a nod. He understood that he had to once again play his part. He walked up the stairs seeing a door slightly open at the end of the hall. He could hear some talking and the sound of a tv. He walked down the hall and entered the room.

Grant's room was moderately sized. The outer wall slanted downwards and had a skylight in it. There was a bed on the opposite wall. The walls were green and some poster's adorning the wall showcasing the taste of its young inhabitant. There was a desk with a computer and at the front of the room was a tv with a beanbag sat in front. Colton saw

Grant and Dom sat on the floor, some lego's spread out between them. Chris was sat in the beanbag chair next to them watching the cartoon that was playing on the tv. All of the boys had sucker's in their mouths.

“Colton you're here,” Grant said jumping up obviously beyond pleased that he had arrived.

“Yeah, happy birthday by the way,” Colton said.

“Thanks, you can set your stuff over there,” Grant said pointing to a spot near the door where the rest of the boys had stashed there stuff. Colton put his stuff down and then took a seat next to Dom on the carpet.

“You want some?” Chris asked from the bean bag chair extending a large bag of assorted candy towards Colton.

“Uh sure,” Colton said picking out his own sucker figuring that he should try to fit in.

“Now we just need to wait for Tristan and then everybody will be here,” Grant said. That seemed to calm Colton a little hearing that it was just going to be the same group of boys he was accustomed to hanging out with at the meetings.

“Pretty cool that your parents let us have all this candy,” Dom said removing the sucker from his mouth which was just a stick before digging into the bag and grabbing another.

“They're pretty strict about it usually,” Grant said. “But it is my birthday, I can do whatever I want tonight.”

The door opened as Tristan sauntered in with his own

backpack and sleeping bag in his arms. The boys greeted him before turning back to their activities. Colton watched as Tristan moved the other's stuff so he could set his own backpack at the back and put his sleeping bag on top of it. Tristan then sat down near the legoes getting offered some candy just as Colton had. As the time went on Colton started playing with the legoes with the others. He started to relax a little more. Even though he hadn't seen the whole house he hadn't noticed any party games set up or anything in fact there didn't seem to be decorations of any sort. Maybe this was it, they were just going to hang out like this. If that was all it was going to be Colton felt like it wasn't going to be that bad. Perhaps he had been worried for nothing.

“Looks like there is a party going on in here,” a voice said as Colton turned to see the girl from the ceremony open the door and walk in.

“What are you doing, Maya?” Grant asked as his face scrunched up seeing the presence of his sister.

“Just checking on you and your little friends,” Maya said with a false sense of innocence putting a hand onto Colton's head. Colton pulled his head away as he looked up at her smiling down at him. Colton could tell this girl was definitely a few years younger than himself. Maybe eleven or twelve?

“We don't need you to check in on us,” Grant said with some ire.

“Oh but I do, there is no telling what you rascals will get up

to if someone's not keeping an eye on you for instance...” Maya said as she plucked the bag of candy out of Chris's lap and holding it up between two fingers. “Eating a whole bag of candy? You'll spoil your dinner.”

“Get out,” Grant said shooting to his feet and rushing over to snatch the bag of candy out of his sister's hand. “You are not in charge of us,” Grant said as he began to push his sister towards the door giving her one last hard shove into the hallway.

“You can't just push me out,” Maya said in protest. Grant didn't respond as he stepped out into the hallway.

“MOM,” Grant yelled out. “Maya is bothering me and my friends.”

“Maya leave your brother alone,” Valerie said from downstairs. Maya started to say something in response but Colton nor the others could hear as Grant shut the door victoriously returning to his spot on the ground.

“Annoying,” Grant said with a huff. Colton smirked a little. It seemed he wasn't going to have to worry about Maya. Grant was more than capable of keeping her out of their hair. The boys went back to their activities as the conversation turned to what Grant's presents might be that night. The one thing that Grant seemed to want was a copy of BattleMonster 3 for his pc.

“I saw the boxes,” Grant said. “There is one that definitely feels like a game.”

“My brother has that one,” Dom said. “It looks pretty cool.”

Before long Grant's Dad who Colton recognized from the hardware store came into the room. He was a broad shouldered man with a black mustache and a balding head.

“Pizza is here,” he announced. The boys got up and raced towards the kitchen as Colton lagged behind the group a little. Coming into the kitchen Colton could see a large table set by a group of bay windows overlooking a deck. On the counter were several pizza boxes with their tops open. Mr. Santos was manning the station serving up the slices. Colton grabbed a plate and stood in line with the other boys.

“What looks good squirt?” Mr. Santos asked as Colton had made his way to the front. Colton was plenty used to the nicknames like buddy and kiddo by now and he had learned to not let it bother him too much. But for some reason they seemed to be hitting harder tonight.

“Pepperoni please,” Colton said meekly feeling a tinge of warmth hit the tops of his ears.

“One or two?” Mr. Santos asked.

“One's fine,” Colton said not feeling that hungry at the moment. Mr. Santos used a spatuala to splat the greasy slice onto Colton's plate. Colton made his way to the table where the rest of the boys and Maya were already sitting. Grant was at the head of the table. Dom, Tristan and Maya were on the other side, while Chris was down at the end. Colton took the nearest open seat that happened to be right next to Grant.

Colton nibbled at his piece of pizza while being quiet as he listened to the rest of the table talk among themselves. Mr. Santos came and sat down next to him, his plate piled high with at least five different slices for himself. Valerie came around with a two liter bottle of root beer and offered it to everyone at the table.

“Sweetie do you want something to drink,” Valerie said as Colton blinked a moment before looking up at her not even realizing she had been standing next to him. “Do you want some root beer?” she asked with a pleasant smile.

“Oh um sure, I mean yes please,” Colton said as he grabbed the red plastic cup and held it up. Valerie poured him cup. “Thank you,” he said before taking a sip.

“Look at that Colton was the only person to say please and thank you,” Valerie said casting a expectant look to the rest of the table as she walked away.

“Wait this is Colton?” Mr. Santos said in a surprised tone. “I thought that was Colton,” he said looking at Chris.

“I'm Chris,” the boy said with a smirk.

“This is Colton,” Valerie confirmed placing hand on top of Colton's head as she walked by before taking a seat on the other side of her husband. “He's Grace's boy, you met her at the ceremony.”

“Oh,” Mr. Santos said looking at the kid next to him. Colton glanced upwards at him for a moment. With the way Mr.

Santos was looking at him Colton felt as if the man was sizing him up.

“Your Mom is an interesting lady,” Mr. Santos said with a grin breaking his intense stare.

“Interesting?” Valerie tutted with a hint of indignation.

“I mean its not everyday I get to have a discussion about power drills with a lady,” Mr. Santos said with a chuckle.

“Mhmm” Valerie sounded with some sarcasm.

“So this is Colton,” Maya said from across the table staring directly at him. “Grant talks about you all the time.” she said with a cheeky smile.

“Maya, shut up,” Grant grumbled with some embarrassment.

Colton wasn't paying much attention however as the dots were connecting in his head. There was no doubt Mr. Santos had heard about the fight, it was only natural for him to assume that Chris who was bigger than Colton had been the one to charge at the bully. Colton could feel the pit in his stomach grow at the implication. After all who would think that a small little kid like him would do something like that.

Dinner came to an end as Colton had not even been able to finish the one piece of pizza on his plate. The lights then were turned off the only light source being from the singular candle on top of the cake that Mr. Santos was walking towards the table to the sound of an overly loud and obnoxious rendition of Happy Birthday was being practically

shouted out by the boys at the table. As the cake was set in front of Grant Colton saw the candle that was formed into the shape of a number six sat atop. The pit in his stomach that had been steadily growing burst as he looked at the candle.

It isn't like he hadn't already known the ages of his new friends but it was something he had pushed to the far back of his mind. If he didn't think about it that made things easier for him as if he were deluding himself. Seeing the candle lit atop the cake now though was nothing short of cold hard truth. There was no way to not confront the fact that this is what people truly thought of him. Colton felt like he had just been punched in the stomach and winced in pain as Grant blew out the candle making the room completely dark for a moment. The lights were flipped on as Mr. Santos started to distribute slices of cake to the table. Colton got up abruptly from the table and made his way to the bathroom not able to stand another moment in the room around the others. He locked the door behind him and sat on the toilet putting his head back against the wall. His breathing was haggard as thoughts went through his mind. Why did it have to be like this? Why couldn't he be normal? Why did it seem like the whole world was against him and was solely intent on rubbing his height and looks in his face? It was almost as if it was telling him he was nothing more than a little kid and that's all he would ever be.

Maybe that was true, even Colton had to admit it to himself. The more time he spent around these kids the more he was beginning to act like them. It had felt so natural to do he

hadn't even realized it was happening. Things that seemed so complicated before like going out, making friends and just being happy for once had just gotten so easy. How could he have let things get like this?

Colton stood up from the toilet and walked over to the sink. He ran the faucet and splashed some water on his face before looking up at the mirror. A stony expression stared back at him. It was clear to him that he couldn't keep doing this, he couldn't keep running away. That's what he was doing after all. Before he had hidden himself away in his room only coming out when necessary but now he was using this new situation almost like a mask to hide himself away even further after all there was no better way to hide yourself than becoming a different person. He needed a change but he wasn't exactly sure how he was going to do that. The hole was just too deep.

Colton wiped his face with the hand towel. He thought about asking Valerie to call his Mom to come pick him up, he could just say he wasn't feeling well. In the end though he decided against it, that would be just another form of running away, right? Colton was resolved to stick it out just for tonight. He was already feeling more calm after getting a moment to himself. He opened the door to the bathroom to see Valerie standing in the hallway looking at her phone, had she been waiting for him?

“Oh Colton, just checking my messages” she said with a nod towards her phone. She gave him a once over as some concern showed on her face. Her excuse had, after all been a

lie, she had really come to check on him. She had noticed how withdrawn he had been at dinner not to mention the fact that he hadn't even managed to finish one slice of pizza. “You okay? You've been gone awhile,” she asked. Colton just nodded his head not even knowing how long he had been in the bathroom.

“Does your tummy hurt?” Valerie asked. Colton reeled a little at having the question posed to him in such a childish manner.

“I'm fine really,” he said meekly his head bowed slightly.

“Really?” Valerie asked clearly not buying it. She knelt down putting a hand on his shoulder. Colton jerked back a little out of instinct.

“It's okay dear, you can tell me. Maybe you're feeling a little homesick? We could call your Mom if you want to talk to her.”

Colton looked up with an alarmed look.

“No, I mean its fine, I'm fine really. I just had a little stomach ache is all, but I feel much better now,” he said.

“Okay,” Valerie said with an unconvinced look. “You better get back out there though or the others are gonna eat your cake.”

“Thanks,” Colton said thankful to leave the embarrassing conversation behind.

He sat back at the table picking up the plastic fork in his hand

as he took a look at the chocolate cake in front of him. He caught sight of Maya across from him. She seemed to be staring at him with a small smile on her face. Colton looked down for a moment thinking it was all in his head. It was like his Mom said, he always thought everyone was looking at him when it wasn't really true. Colton took another glance upwards and found that he hadn't been mistaken, she was definitely looking at him. Colton focused in on his cake as he took big bites to avoid meeting eyes with her. He had finished his piece as she got up and stood by him for a moment. He looked up at her wondering what her deal was. She picked up the napkin off the table and wiped the corner of his mouth.

“Got a little on your face,” she said as Colton moved his face away, completely mortified that a girl younger than him had done that. “Cute,” he heard Maya say under her breath as she walked away. Colton wondered if he really was going to be able to make it through the night.

It was then time for Grant to open presents. He tore into them with a manic sort of glee. By the time he was done he had netted himself some matchbox cars along with some tracks, several packs of BattleMonster cards, some movies and the the grand finale a copy of BattleMonsters 3 for his computer. Colton was a little shocked to see that they even still sold physical copies of computer games. Grant tore off the plastic and opened the case to reveal a paper that had instructions on how to redeem a digital copy of course.

“Can we install it tonight, please?” Grant said waving the

paper in front of his Mom.

“Sure I'll do it right now,” she said. The boys all got up and followed Grant eagerly to his room excited by the prospect of the seeing the game in action. Valerie had the game installing in a short amount of time. The shortcut icon appeared on the screen as Grant excitedly clicked on it to fire up the game but much to his dismay he was met with an error screen. Grant looked positively crestfallen.

“Let me go get my phone downstairs and we'll see if we can fix this,” Valerie said with some reassurance to the now gloomy birthday boy as she left the room.

“Why can't it just work,” Grant whined a little.

“This is why you should play on console,” Dom said. “You don't have these problems.”

Colton smirked a little the word pleb coming to his mind. He took a step forward to get a closer look at the screen. He knew exactly what was wrong and found it would be no problem to fix.

“Let me help,” Colton said as he took the mouse in his hand.

“Maybe we should wait for Grant's Mom,” Chris said with some apprehension.

“I know what I'm doing,” Colton said with some confidence. All they needed was to update a driver. Colton navigated to the website that had what they needed. In two minutes he had everything configured and hit the executable file for the

game. The title screen popped up as the theme music began to play.

“It works,” Grant said with a squeal as he took the mouse and began to play.

“How did you know how to do that?” Chris asked seeing Colton do something that seemed so complicated.

“I know computers,” Colton said with a smirk. In some ways he was feeling just a bit proud of himself as if he had finally made some show that he wasn't just a little kid like everyone thought. Valerie walked back into the room her phone in hand.

“Its working?” she asked seeing Grant clicking away.

“Colton fixed it,” Grant said not taking his eyes off the screen.

“He did, did he?” Valerie said looking a little impressed. “Well thanks Colton, looks like you saved the night.”

“It was nothing, really,” Colton said with a nervous inflection.

“Whatever you say,” she said with a grin as she patted him on the head before leaving the room. The rest of the boys were now huddled around the screen. Colton took on the task of guiding Grant through the tutorials while the others shouted out things for Grant to try as they gorged themselves on more candy. They stayed like this for the next two hours before Valerie appeared once again.

“Okay Grant that's enough video game time for tonight,” she said coming and standing next to the desk.

“But we just beat the first boss,” Grant mewled a little.

“You can play more tomorrow, but now I think its time for everyone to get on their pajamas,” Valerie said.

“You're making us go to bed?” Grant asked with an exasperated moan.

“I didn't say that,” Valerie clarified. “I only want you guys to get ready, get your sleeping bags out and situated, once that's done you boys can watch a movie together.”

“Fine,” Grant mumbled shutting down the computer. Valerie left again to go grab some movie options as the boys got their bags and began to undress. Colton noticed Tristan leave the room with his own bag. He figured he was shy about changing in front of the others, a feeling that Colton very much shared and he considered doing the same thing but didn't really want to draw attention to himself. Colton looked around seeing that none of the others seemed to take much notice and he decided that it wasn't that big of deal.

Colton grabbed his own bag and unzipped it to pull out his sleepwear but much to his surprise what he pulled out was the last thing he would want to be seen in. He let the garment unfold out in front of him as he looked on in horror. His Mom had packed a pair of red fleece footie pajamas. He had a couple of these among his wardrobe and had avoided wearing them like the plague. He was incensed that she had packed this for him before remembering her comment about it being slim pickings since they hadn't done laundry in a while.

He shoved the offending garment back in his bag hoping the others hadn't seen it. As he looked around he saw that Chris had on a plain white shirt with some bottoms that had images of basketballs and soccer balls on it. Grant was wearing a BattleMonsters themed pajama set and Dom was pulling on his own pair of footed sleepers that had a superhero theme. Colton pulled the sleeper back out somewhat relieved that he wouldn't be the only one with this type. He pulled off his shirt and shorts quickly putting his arms in before putting a leg in, just as he was putting in his other leg the door swung opent as Maya walked in. Colton looked up shocked by the sudden intrusion as he tripped over his leg and fell backwards onto his butt.

“Maya get out,” Grant shouted wasting no time in stopping his sister.

“Relax,” she said. “I'm just here to make sure you all get your jammies on.” She spied Colton on the ground as he struggled to get his foot in trying to work as fast as possible. “Let me help,” Maya said in a sweet cooing tone as she knelt down in front of the now frozen Colton. She worked his stuck leg down into the foot. She then grabbed the zipper and pulled it up to his neck before snapping the little tab at the top covering the zipper. “There all nice and cozy,” she said with an adoring smile.

Colton could almost feel his brain short circuiting at what had just happened. Just then he saw a pillow swing from behind hitting Maya in the back of the head.

“I said get out,” Grant growled, his face scowling as he held a pillow clenched in his hands.

“Grant you little...” Maya began to say before being cut off by Dom.

“Pillow fight,” the red haired boy declared swinging his own pillow at Grant. Chris joined into the fray as the three caught Maya in the crossfire causing her to retreat.

Colton was still frazzled as he got to his legs shakily unable to believe what had just happened. Tristan then entered the room causing the boys to stop. He was wearing a white long sleeve shirt that had a small hole in the shoulder and a pair of baggy flannel pajama pants.

“What are you looking at?” he asked defensively.

“Nothing,” Dom said with a shrug of his shoulders. Tristan looked down at the pillows as a mischievous smile formed on his face grabbing his own pillow.

“Take a look at this,” Tristan said swinging his pillow at Dom which reignited the pillow fight. Colton stayed off to the side not wanting to get involved. He kept getting pelted by the others however and he was forced to grab his own pillow if only for defense. The boys continued their raucous pillow war as alliances were made and then broken and then re-forged.

The war however was brought to an end when Valerie entered the room. A mis-swing by Tristan hitting her in the stomach.

“I, I'm sorry,” Tristan stuttered with a wide eyed look.

“It's okay,” Valerie said through a forced pleasant smile. “I do hope you boys have burned off some energy. But now its time to settle down.” she said as the boys retreated to their sleeping bags arranged in front of the tv. Valerie then held up three choices of movies as the boys discussed what to watch. Colton wasn't familiar with any of them so he kept quiet as the others came to a consensus. Valerie started the movie they had chosen.

“Enjoy,” she said flipping off the lights. Colton didn't mind the choice the others had made. It was an animated movie that he knew was one of those that most people would watch without much thought, even adults could enjoy it, plus there were some parts even he found funny. Grant's Mom and Dad returned just as the movie was ending.

“Looks like you lost the bet,” Mr. Santos said looking out over the boys who were all sat up.

“What bet?” Chris asked with some curiosity.

“Oh well Mrs. Santos thought that at least three of you would have fallen asleep by now, but I knew you would all still be awake,” Mr. Santos said with a chuckle.

“They'll crash soon enough, they all had a ton of sugar” Valerie said with a sense of certainty.

“Who did you think was still going to be awake?” Dom asked. Valerie put a finger to her chin examining the boys.

“Tristan and Colton, probably,” she announced. Colton and Tristan glanced at one another. He was happy that for once he hadn't been thought of as a total little kid.

“I wouldn't fall asleep,” Grant announced.

“She thought you'd be first,” Mr. Santos said with a hearty laugh.

“What!” Grant said indignantly.

“It doesn't matter what I thought,” Valerie said cutting off the boys protest before it even started. “Its late, which means its time for everybody to go to sleep, I don't want to be getting angry calls from your parents tomorrow because you all stayed up until the crack of dawn.”

The boys all got in their sleeping bags as Grant got into his bed. Colton felt just a bit awkward that at his age he was actually being put to bed, he wasn't quite sure what time it was but it couldn't be any later than ten o'clock, much earlier than he would be going to sleep on a Tuesday night.

“Good night boys,” Valerie said as she closed the door leaving it just a crack open. It was then that Mr. Santos walked back into the room. He went into the closet and pulled out a canvas bag which he set on the ground.

“Keep it down,” he said putting a finger to his lips and giving them a wink before leaving himself and closing the door shut. The boys scurried out of their sleeping bags and peered into the mysterious bag to find a bunch of flashlights. The boys each took one holding it under their chins and making faces.

“We should tell ghost stories,” Tristan suggested as they sat in a circle facing one another.

“Anybody know any good ones?” Chris asked. Nobody spoke.

“I could I guess,” Colton piped up.

“It better be scary,” Dom said almost as if it was a threat.

“It will be,” Colton said with a smirk. He began to tell a story about an escaped serial killer following a couple on the beach at night lying in wait for the perfect moment to strike. As he reached the climax of the story right before the killer was about to kill them he noticed the expressions on the other's faces. Grant looked worried almost as if he was about to cry. Dom's eyes were wide and he was covering his mouth with his hand. Chris looked a little uncomfortable. The only person who seemed to be enjoying the story was Tristan who was leaned forward with big wide eyes of anticipation.

“Then what,” Tristan said as Colton had paused.

“Uh well then a cop came and arrested the killer and everybody was okay,” Colton said quickly. The rest of the boys seemed to breathe a sigh of relief as Tristan sat back disappointment painting his face.

“That ending sucked,” Tristan glowered.

“That's how it ends,” Colton said with a shrug. He wasn't about to get in trouble for causing everybody to have nightmares.

“Anybody else got one?” Tristan asked.

“Maybe that's enough scary stories,” Grant said. “Check this out.”

Grant placed his flashlight on the ground letting the light hit the wall as he made a shadow hand puppet of a dog.

“Watch this,” Chris said putting his own flashlight on the ground and made a spider appear on the wall. Pretty soon all the boys were now making their own shadow figures, all except for Colton who found it more preferable just to sit back and watch. The boys were getting louder as they laughed and made their figures fight one another. The door opened as Valerie stuck her head in.

“Boys,” she said with a raised eyebrow as the group looked back at her with guilty expression. “Bed,” she said with some sternness.

“Okay Mom,” Grant said turning off his flashlight and putting it back in the bag as the others followed suit before getting into their sleeping bags. Valerie smiled as she departed. Colton put his head on his pillow and closed his eyes. He found that he was tired no doubt, exhausted from his anxiety that had been running through him all through the night. He let out a deep yawn. He knew he had to make a change but was unsure of how exactly to do that. Its not like he could flip a switch and just start going around telling everybody the truth, that would be disastrous but he couldn't keep up like this. Before long he was asleep.

Colton awoke with a sunbeam across his face coming in from inbetween the blinds on the skylight. He sat up at first not recognizing where he was before his brain fully turned on a moment later. It was a strange feeling not to wake up in his own room for once. He looked around to see the rest of the boys were still asleep noticing that only Tristan's sleeping bag was empty. As if he had been summoned by the discovery Tristan appeared walking through the doorway fully dressed as he set his bag by the door.

“Oh,” he said startled to see Colton awake. “I was awake so I got dressed. But I didn't want to wake anyone so I went into the bathroom,” he said as if Colton had been interrogating him.

“Not a bad idea,” Colton said as he stood up and grabbed his own bag eager to take off the footie pajamas he had slept in. He got into the bathroom and quickly undressed happy to be free of the fleecy material. They were certainly not going to make it into his regular rotation of clothing. He had found them a little constricting and his feet had gotten far too warm for comfort. He took a deep breath to see what else his Mom had packed hoping it wasn't something as equally bad or worse than the pajamas. He was relieved to see a white shirt with a basketball hoop and ball on it with the words “Get in the game” on it along with a pair of blue sweatpants with a small race car patch on it and a checkered pattern going up the sides. As he looked himself over it was undeniable he still looked like a little kid but at least the outfit wasn't too bad.

Colton walked back to the room to see the rest of the boys had woken up and were chatting way with one another. Colton rolled up his sleeping bag and set it next to his stuff, his Mom had said she would pick him up early and he found himself hoping that it would be sooner rather than later. The boys wandered downstairs into the kitchen to find Mr. Santos a the stove cooking. The sound and smell of bacon sizzling emanated through the air.

“You monster's hungry?” he asked. The boys took a seat at the table as they were served some scrambled eggs and bacon. Colton wolfed his down quickly as he had eaten much the night before and was exceedingly hungry. The doorbell then rang.

“Colton your Mom is here,” Valerie called out.

“Guess I gotta go,” Colton said getting up from the table.

“But we were going to go down in the woods after,” Grant said. “You should ask your Mom if you can stay longer.”

“She said we have stuff to do today so I can't,” Colton said.

“Oh,” Grant said with a disappointed look. “Well you should ask her if we can have another sleepover soon. Maybe this weekend?” Grant asked.

“Uhh sure I'll ask,” Colton said. He felt bad about lying knowing full well he had not intention of doing that. If last night had proved anything this wasn't an experience he wanted to repeat. Not to mention coming back here meant another night around Maya who had taken some strange

interest in him, or at least that how it felt to him. Colton walked out into the front hallway to see his Mom talking with Valerie.

“Hey bud, have fun?” Grace asked.

“Yeah,” Colton said somewhat reserved. “I gotta get my stuff,” he said making his way up the stairs. He grabbed his stuff quickly from the room before walking into the hall.

“Leaving so soon?” Maya asked as Colton saw her walking down the hallway towards him.

“Umm yeah,” Colton said unhappy that he hadn't been able to slip away without seeing her.

“That's a shame,” Maya said with a frown. “You'll miss out on the woods.”

“Yeah that's too bad, but I gotta go,” Colton said walking away quickly as Maya followed him down the stairs. Colton went and stood by his Mom as she finished talking to Valerie hoping they would finish up soon.

“Hopefully he didn't cause any trouble,” Grace said putting a hand on top of Colton's head.

“None at all,” Valerie said with a smile. “He's a little darling and is welcome here any time. You come back soon okay Colton.”

“Um thanks for having me,” Colton said with a twinge of embarrassment at the childish praise he had just received.

“How did you get him to be so polite?” Valerie asked with a grin.

“I didn't do much” Grace said with a chuckle. “Oh is this your daughter?” Grace asked noticing the girl standing on the stairs.

“I'm Maya,” she said extending her hand forward with all the confidence of a salesperson as Grace shook it. “I just wanted to let you know that I babysit for some of the kids in the neighborhood so If you ever need someone to look after Colton for the night I am available.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Grace said taken off guard by the sudden sales pitch but remaining pleasant. Colton felt his face flush red at the thought. Grace said her goodbyes before they finally left. Grace was a little disappointed with Colton's greeting she had been hoping for something similar to how he had greeted her at the ceremony. She was hoping that all his anxiety and apprehension about coming would have disappeared but she could tell that it had not worked out that way. Colton opened the back door and threw his stuff in.

“Mom, can I sit in the front, please?” Colton asked looking up at her with an unsure look. Grace took a quick glance back at the house wondering what Valerie would think if she saw him in the front seat, before dismissing it. Valerie wasn't like that after all.

“Sure,” Grace said. They got in the car. Grace was eager to hear how it went but hesitated a moment.

“Mom,” Colton spoke up first.

“Yes,” she said with baited breath.

“Don't send me to anymore sleepovers 'kay.” Colton said. Grace sighed a little. Her suspicions being confirmed that this had not been the positive experience she had wanted for him.

“Okay,” Grace said starting up the car. “I won't.”

Chapter 15

Summer of the Tiger: Chapter 15 - Chapter 15

Chapter 15

A Wounded Tiger

Grace walked into the trailer after her workday had come to an end to find it quiet. She could only surmise that Colton was off, once again in the backwoods where he seemed to be spending a lot of time. No doubt he was out collecting more specimens to add to his bug collection. It had been a minor shock for Grace to have opened her freezer a couple of days ago to find several plastic bags with bugs in them. But she was at least pleased to see that Colton was still working on scouting things in his free time. That he hadn't completely abandoned it.

She had tried to get him to talk about what had happened at the sleepover the previous week but Colton had been tight lipped about the whole thing giving only answers that seemed to dodge the question all together.

She heard a slight bump come from his room signaling that he had been home this whole time. Grace took a look at the clock on the stove noticing that it was nearly time for them to leave for the meeting. Grace opened his door to see him at his desk. A tree log was sat on his desk as she looked closer she could see some of his specimens were pinned onto the wood,

small little labels underneath them identifying what they were.

“Whats with the log?” Grace asked walking into the room. Colton looked up with a look of surprise not having noticed her walk in.

“Its nothing, just something I'm working on.” Colton said with some evasiveness. Grace already had gathered what he was doing, but she had come to enjoy listening to him talk about the things they did at scouts, something which Colton had been more open to do in the past couple of weeks. It had been a nice change from his usual M.O of keeping what he was up to veiled in an air of vagueness and secrecy. She watched as Colton grabbed some papers and threw them quickly into a desk drawer. Grace pursed her lips a little at seeing that he was going back to his old ways and was in some ways pushing her back a little.

“Well its almost time to go to the meeting so hurry up and get your uniform on,” she said deciding not to push the worrying issue further at the moment as she turned to leave.

“Um Mom,” Colton said calling after her. Grace turned around to look at him. He stood with his shoulders slumped his mouth was curled down into a strange unsure frown.

“Do you think I could skip the meeting tonight?” he asked as he averted his gaze. Grace crossed her arms. The request seemed strange to her as if he didn't want to ask it himself. Not too mention he had just been working on a scout project, so why did he all of sudden not want to go?

“Why don't you want to go?” she asked opting to hit the issue head on. Colton seemed to take a moment to himself as he fidgeted with the bottom of his shirt.

“I just need a break, for one night,” he said after some time. Grace closed her eyes. She didn't have any objections to his request, it wasn't as if he was under any obligation to go. After all it was Colton's choice to participate as it had always been, but she had reservations that this was the beginning of the end and that pretty soon he was going to be asking to drop out altogether.

“I suppose everybody needs a break sometimes,” she said with a sigh as she walked over and pulled him into a hug, of which he did not return. “I'll get dinner started,” Grace said as she went to leave only receiving some quiet acknowledgment from Colton.

The rest of the night had gone on much the same as Colton seemed to clam up tight only giving one word responses to any of Grace's attempts at starting a conversation.

Later that night Grace had gotten a call from Valerie, the two having struck up a nice friendship. Valerie asked about Colton having heard from Grant that he had not shown up. Grace gave the excuse that he hadn't been feeling well. The talk then turned to work something else Grace didn't really want to talk about. Her project was falling behind schedule and there was talk of having to extend the timeline by another month, something she hoped to avoid as it would open up a whole other can of worms.

The next morning Grace came out to the kitchen to find Colton splayed out on the couch watching tv. She had been thinking about him all night and it was clear to her that something had happened at the sleepover that had so deeply effected him that he had been ripped out of the normalcy of his everyday life that he had gotten comfortable with. Grace was torn at how to feel about the situation.

It was true that Colton's behavior had been regressing and he had been acting closer to a little kid than a burgeoning teenager in many ways which had stirred some worry in Grace that this was turning into a negative outcome of everything. But on the other hand it had made her happy to see him so carefree for once, and wasn't that what she wanted for him? Colton hadn't seemed to take much notice of this change but perhaps the sleepover had been his wake up call and that is why he had been pulling back into his shell, unsure of how to proceed.

As Grace looked at him part of her wanted to confront him about this theory, but she knew it would only cause him some embarrassment to actually admit it to her. She went to the fridge trying to think of something she could do for him. As she sat looking over the contents of the fridge she noticed they were out of milk. That's when an idea sprang to her mind. Perhaps it was just the thing Colton needed, a chance to assert some independence that was afforded to a kid his age in the outside world.

“Hey we're out of milk,” Grace said standing between the kitchen and living room.

“Sorry,” Colton said sitting up on the couch. “I used the last of it this morning.”

“Well if that's true than I guess you won't mind going and getting another,” Grace said retrieving her wallet from her purse.

“You mean by myself?” Colton asked a little surprised at the request.

“Of course,” Grace said. “There is that little grocery store right on the outskirts of town. Should be a fifteen to twenty minute bike ride from here, why you don't think you can do it?”

“I can do it,” Colton said getting off the couch.

“Here,” Grace said handing him a twenty dollar bill. “Get yourself a soda and some snacks if you want, but I want change back.”

Grace followed Colton outside as he gathered his bike which was sat up against the side of the trailer.

“Helmet,” Grace reminded him. Colton rolled his eyes picking up the dinosaur helmet and snapping the straps to secure it to his head before he took off down the road.

As Colton rode down the road he found himself happy to have something to do. He had been bored out of his mind being cooped up in the trailer and he had found that he had developed somewhat of an aversion to working on scout related things as it only seemed to bring up the negative

thoughts he had experienced at the sleepover. To be honest he was halfway considering that he should just drop out of the scouts all together but try as he might to convince himself, something was holding him back. The bike ride had been nice and breezy no doubt helped by the fact that it was a practically perfect day out. He came up to the street where the grocery store was located situated between some other small shops. He put his bike up against the wall in between two of the stores in an alleyway before walking in. He found the milk and picked up some sodas and snacks for himself making sure he would still have plenty of change to return to his Mom. He brought his stuff up to the counter as a young cashier that looked to be college age scanned his items. The clerk gave him a once over as he gave Colton his total. Colton gave the guy the twenty dollar bill.

“You here alone?” the guy asked handing Colton back his change.

“Yes,” Colton replied gathering up the bag with his stuff.

“How old are you?” the clerk asked with a raised eyebrow. At first Colton was about to say his real age, there was no reason to lie to this guy anyways. That was before he looked down at his outfit of a pair of blue and white striped shorts and a green shirt with a smiling whale on it that caused him to hesitate. It would be beyond embarrassing to admit his real age given his appearance but he still didn't want to lie and cement the idea in the cashier's mind that he was just a little kid.

“Old enough,” Colton said in a more defensive tone than he had meant.

“Sorry, didn't mean any offense,” the cashier said taking Colton's rather brusk reply in good humor.

“Just curious was all.” Colton only nodded before making his way back outside. As he was figuring out the best way to handle his extra baggage for the return trip he heard a familiar voice behind him.

“Well, well if it isn't my little buddy Colton.”

Colton spun around coming face to face with Robbie, the bigger than average bear scout he had gotten into a fight with a few weeks prior. He was accompanied by two other of the younger boys who seemed to follow him around like an entourage.

“What do you want?” Colton asked with some ire, putting on a tough front hoping the kid would back off.

“You come out here all alone?” Robbie asked with a smirk.

“What of it?” Colton asked annoyed more than anything.

“That's pretty big for a baby like you,” Robbie said in a mocking tone.

“Just leave me alone,” Colton said going to turn back around and leave but was stopped as Robbie grabbed him by the shirt and pulling him further into the alleyway before pinning Colton up against the brick wall.

“Don't leave we have something we gotta talk about first,” Robbie said. “You know I got into big trouble because of you.”

“That's your own fault for being an idiot.” Colton said as he tried to break free.

“No its your fault,” Robbie said as he shoved Colton to the ground losing the grip on his bag sending the contents scattering out across the pavement. Colton went to get up but was stopped as Robbie sat on top of so that they were facing one another. “If you hadn't come along nobody would have found out anything.”

“So what are you gonna do, beat me up?” Colton said still maintaining an air of defiance.

“No, you are,” Robbie said grabbing one of Colton's hands and using it to hit Colton's face as he told him to stop hitting himself. Colton broke his hand free of Robbie's grip as he began to push at the boys face in an attempt to get him off of him. The boy however was too large for Colton's meager strength. Robbie grabbed both of Colton's hands moving to pin them to the ground but Colton didn't stop as he flailed his arms wildly. In the ensuing scuffle of tangled arms Robbie's elbow made contact with Colton's eye hitting it hard. Colton yelped as he went to cover his eye with his hands.

“That's what you get for struggling,” Robbie said with some satisfaction.

“I think thats enough,” one of the younger boys said with a

tinge of nervousness.

“Nah, not yet,” Robbie said as he looked around. “Get me some of that dirt, lets make him eat it.” he ordered.

“I don't think...” the other boy began to say.

“Get it now,” Robbie growled cutting off his cronies concern which was enough to spur the younger boy into action. Robbie was handed a handful of dirt from nearby as he looked down at Colton.

“Open wide,” Robbie said as he smushed his hand onto Colton's mouth. Colton had his mouth closed tight as he tried to move his face out of the way, but no matter what he did Robbie held the dirt to his mouth pushing down hard. Colton could nearly taste the dirt as his lips began to separate his eyes shut as he could feel some tears start to well up. Just as he felt his resistance fade and braced for the clump of dirt to be shoved into his mouth he felt Robbie's weight be lifted off of his chest. Colton sat up and now saw Robbie had been lifted off of him and was pinned against the wall by someone. Colton blinked a few time before recognizing his rescuer was none other than Charley the boy scout who had been put in charge of Colton's group at the pool.

“We were just messing around,” Robbie said his face painted with fear now that he was faced with someone stronger than himself. “Its a game.”

“A game?” Charley asked before grabbing Robbie's hand still clutching the dirt and rubbing it into Robbie's cheek. “You're

right, this is a pretty fun game." Charley said before heaving Robbie off the wall as he stumbled back a little. "If I hear about you picking on any other kids I will personally hunt you down, got it," Charley barked. Robbie and his gang scuttled off down the alley beating a hasty retreat. Once they were out of sight Charley turned towards Colton as he took a knee next to him.

"Colton right? You good?" he asked. Colton nodded his head as he crawled over to his stuff and gathered it back up into the plastic bag moving his hand away from his eye as he did so.

"Woah, did he do that to you?" Charley asked as he now saw the injury that had been inflicted on Colton. "Let me take a look at that."

"I'm fine," Colton sputtered as he got up and turned quickly to walk towards his bike. He felt Charley grab him by the shoulder.

"Your eye looks pretty bad. Are your parents around I could go and get them for you." Charley said with some concern.

"I'm fine really," Colton said as his voice cracked and he held back his tears. He got to his bike slipping the bag onto one of the handlebars as he got on.

"Colton wait, Charley said.

"Leave me alone," Colton yelled not able to take another second, wanting to get as far away from this place as possible.

He took off down the street without another word as tears

rolled down his face. As he rode home he let the air dry his tears. His eye hurt something fierce as he found he could barely keep it open. He was beyond frustrated with everything that had just happened. It seemed no matter where he was he couldn't escape it. Not only had he just been beaten up by a kid half his age he had been saved by another kid his own age. Why did things like this happen to him? Just as soon as he decided to try and start climbing out of the hole he had been in did something seem to show up just to kick him right back down into it. As Colton arrived back home he got off his bike throwing it down onto the ground in anger. The dinosaur helmet he had snapped around the bottom of the seat while he had gone in the store came undone. Colton looked at it with a sneer as he kicked it across the yard. He took a few deep breaths. The only thing he could feel good about was the fact that he was able to open his eye fully now however it still stung and was pulsating. He looked around hoping that his Mom had left for the worksite already so that he could be alone. He walked into the trailer to find her seated at the kitchen table a laptop open in front of her, it seemed he would not even be afforded privacy.

“Oh my god,” Grace gasped catching sight of him as she rushed over to him. “What happened?” she asked holding his head in her hands as she looked at his injured state.

“Nothing,” Colton said pulling his head away. “I fell.”

“This was not a fall,” Grace said dismissing his excuse. Her face then dropped as a darker cause came to mind.

“No way, did you get mugged?” she asked her voice rising into a new state of alarm.

“I didn't,” Colton barked. “I just... it was nothing... I'm fine,” he said letting his voice shrink down. Grace grimaced, she had been in this situation with him before and the answer was clear. She knew Colton was not going to tell her anything, never once in the past had he ever given up the names of his bullies. Although Grace had a pretty good idea of who had done this to him.

“C'mon lets get you cleaned up,” She said leading him to the chair she had been sitting in at the table. She wetted a washcloth in the sink before kneeling down to wipe the dirt from his face. As she moved near his eye Colton winced as she brushed up against it. Grace got up and made up and ice pack before returning. She handed it to Colton who took it from her placing it over his eye.

“So you're not going to tell me what happened?” Grace asked resting her hands on his knees.

“You don't have to worry it won't happen again,” Colton said. He knew that Robbie had been scared of Charley and the older boy's threat would probably be enough to make Robbie think twice about trying anything. Although Colton felt completely humiliated by the fact that a kid his age had to be the one to save him, especially from a younger kid. How completely helpless could he be?

Grace pulled Colton into a hug, it was the only thing she could do. As she held him she glanced over at her laptop with

the email she had been writing. She closed it not wanting Colton to see it. There was nothing there but bad news. She had been hoping to sit down with him and have a discussion about it but right now wasn't the time. She needed a plan first, somehow she was going to figure it all out first before she let him know that their summer was about to get a little longer.

Chapter 16

Summer of the Tiger: Chapter 16 - Chapter 16

The Intelligence of a Tiger

Grace double checked her emails making sure that everything was confirmed and she had the times right before closing her laptop. She let a out a breath of air. Everything was ready, there was one last thing to do. But this time would be different, she was feeling confident that she had taken care of every problem before it had a chance to spiral out of control.

“Colton can you come here,” she called out ready to dispense the news. Colton came trudging into the kitchen. His black eye had healed somewhat and the dark purple had lightened up quite a bit in the matter of a couple of days but it was still incredibly noticeable.

“Take a seat,” she said gesturing to the chair. Colton took a seat feeling a little on edge by his Mom's seriousness. These sorts of talks were never a good thing. He figured that she was going to grill him about the events that had taken place when he had gone out to get milk. He had already insisted that it was a settled matter, but that never seemed to satisfy her and he wondered why this time she was seemingly not letting this one lie. Was she trusting him less to know what was best for himself?

“I have some things to tell you,” Grace said with a calm

demeanor. “I want you to listen to everything first before you freak out.”

Colton frowned a little, this certainly wasn't sounding good.

“The project is behind schedule,” Grace said calmly. “Which means we will be spending another month here.”

Colton's head snapped back as if he had just been slapped in the face. His mind began racing. Another month! He had to put up with this for another month.

“But that would mean the end of September, I have to start school,” Colton sputtered. “I can't go to the middle school here.”

“I have no intention of sending you to middle school,” Grace said putting her hands up in calming manner. As Colton listened a terrifying thought crossed his mind.

“You can't mean...you're not going to send me to elementary school,” he said for a moment fully believing that was her plan. It would make so much sense. He had already spent so much time masquerading as a six year old, why not just go all the way and send him to the first grade.

“That's your first thought,” Grace said with a laugh. “I don't even think that would be possible,” Grace said to dismiss Colton's thought. “I've already contacted your new school. They actually have a rather robust online system. They said it would be fine for you to do your first month of courses virtually as to make your transition easier when we do move.”

Colton took a deep breath. It had been a rather outlandish idea, he couldn't help but laugh a little to himself at how convinced he had been that his Mom would actually do that to him.

“The only problem is that they wanted you to take some assessment tests before you started,” Grace said. “They said its not possible for you to do it online since someone needs to supervise it. I got in touch with the local middle school here and they were more than happy to facilitate it since they use the same test for their new incoming students. The appointment is tomorrow.” Grace said as she sat back in her chair. Colton sat for a moment digesting everything his Mom had just told him. She had really done a lot of legwork to try and make this as easy for him as possible but he still had some

worries.

“I still have to show up in person at the school,” he said as he bit his lower lip.

“Its the middle of the summer, I doubt their will be any other kids there,” Grace said in a reassuring manner.

“I suppose,” Colton said seeing the logic in her statement. “But still,” he said gesturing towards his clothes. The t-shirt he was wearing was a rather juvenile looking shirt with some cartoon fish on it from the local aquarium. He didn't really have anything in his wardrobe that wouldn't cause some raised eyebrows given that the people at the school would be fully aware of his real age.

“Already thought of that,” Grace said as she grabbed a shirt from the counter and tossed it at him. “I grabbed it from one of the contractors I work with.”

Colton unfurled the shirt to find it was a long sleeve gray shirt that had the logo of the contractors business on it. It was actually perfect for Colton.

“I guess this will work,” Colton said folding the shirt back up. He felt good about the situation as it was, perhaps this wasn't going to be a total disaster.

The next day came as Colton walked up to the middle school with his Mom. He was fussing with the bottom of his shirt. Earlier in his room as he looked at himself in the mirror. He had come to find that the shirt was a couple of sizes too big for him. He was wearing a pair of blue shorts that came to just above his knees. The shirt covered everything except for the very bottom of the of the shorts. He had tried to gather up the excess fabric and tuck it into the shorts but that had only made it look all puffy as if he were wearing a diaper, a look he certainly didn't want.

“You look fine,” Grace said looking back at him as he finally stopped messing with the shirt in a huff. They made their way to the front office as Grace sidled up to the front desk. “Hi we're here for Colton Hendell to do some testing,” she said to the receptionist.

“Oh sure, you'll be with Mr. Mays, let me page him,” the receptionist said picking up the phone. Colton looked around nervously to make sure there were indeed no other kids

around. As far as he could tell the school was pretty much abandoned. A few minutes later a bald headed man with a red beard came walking into the office. He was wearing a t-shirt and some cargo shorts with his employee id hanging around his neck.

“Im Mr. Mays, you must be Colton,” he said.

“Yeah, that's me,” Colton said taking a step forward. Mr. Mays gave him a once over no doubt noticing just how much younger Colton looked when compared with the other middle schoolers he was used to working with. “And you must be Mom?”

“Grace,” she said as the two of them shook hands. They were lead out of the office into the hallway.

“Okay so I'll just take Colton down to my classroom. The test should take about two and half hours to complete, so if you have somewhere else you need to be,” Mr. Mays said addressing Grace.

“I guess I can wait here,” Grace said taking a seat on a nearby bench as she took out her phone.

“Alright then, shall we get going,” Mr. Mays said as he began to walk. Colton gave one last look at his Mom as she shot him a thumbs up.

“Kind of a bummer you have to come in and do tests during summer?” Mr. Mays said as he and Colton walked down the hallway.

“I don't mind,” Colton said. In truth he was actually happy. For once he was going to be treated like his actual age, if anything this was a breath of fresh air for him.

“Couldn't help but notice that shiner you got there,” Mr. Mays said making note of Colton's black eye.

“Oh yeah,” Colton said. “I got hit in the face by a tree branch,” he said with a weak smile.

“Yowch,” Mr. Mays said with a wince. “Then again I guess its good to see you kids still go outside and you are'nt all glued to a screen all day,”

Colton nodded knowing that if he had not joined up with the scouts that exactly what he would have been doing. Mr. Mays came to a stop in front of door and opened it to let Colton in.

It was a rather normal looking classroom with desks all in a neat row. Colton took a seat as Mr. Mays gathered up some test packets.

“So we have three test for you today. Math, English, and then Science and social studies. You'll have forty five minutes to complete each one. Any preference?

“Math's fine,” Colton said as Mr. Mays set the booklet along with a scantron sheet in front of him with a pencil.

“You can use this calculator,” Mr. Mays said grabbing a calculator from the desk. “Also once you open the booklet you will not be allowed to leave the room until you are done, sound good?”

“I'm ready,” Colton said. With a nod from Mr. Mays, Colton opened the booklet and began to work through the questions. Colton found it rather easy. He figured since these were assessment test that this was stuff he was already supposed to know anyways. In the end it only ended up taking him about twenty five minutes to get through the whole test.

“I'm done,” Colton said putting his pencil down. Mr. Mays looked up from his desk.

“That was fast,” he said as he glanced at the clock. “Sure you don't want to double check your answers?”

“No,” Colton said shaking his head. “I'm confident.”

“Alright then,” Mr. May's said as he got up from his desk and gathered up the test booklet. “You get a five minute break in between each test if you want to stretch your legs or use the bathroom.”

“I'm fine,” Colton said. He was actually enjoying the test. For some reason working through the problems was making him feel normal for the first time in a long time. In a way this was proving to himself that he was still a capable thirteen year old. As Colton began on the English portion of the test Mr. Mays sat at the desk scoring his math test. Colton found the English portion just as easy as the math portion and he was finished with it in no time.

“You're plowing through these,” Mr. Mays commented.

“I mean its stuff I'm already supposed to know, right?” Colton said.

“I suppose you're right,” Mr. Mays said. “So you want a break?”

“If its all the same I'll just take the next test,” Colton said as he remained seated at the desk.

“Eager to get out of here, huh,” Mr. Mays said with a smirk as he gave Colton the last test booklet. Colton actually found some of the questions in this section a little more difficult and he did end up making some wild guesses but still finished with time to spare.

“I should be done scoring this in a few minutes if you want to wait,” Mr. Mays said taking the booklet. Colton nodded and sat back at the desk. He looked around the room for a little bit. If things had been different this is where he would be starting the new school year. He wondered if he had been able to join up with the boys scouts would he have been able to make friends with some of the very same kids who would be sitting in this classroom come fall?

“Okay,” Mr. Mays said after a few minutes. “I gotta say you did really well, but I do got some bad news.”

“What's that?” Colton asked.

“You were one point away from acing the math portion.” Mr. Mays said with a smirk. “You added a two instead of a three in one of the equations.”

“Oh,” Colton said with a grimace a little disappointed that he had made such a tiny mistake.

“Its the little stuff that get's ya,” Mr. Mays said with a chuckle.

“So I'm done though right,” Colton said getting up from the desk.

“Yep, you're free to go. But I was wondering if you could humor me for a moment,” Mr. Mays said as he got up from his desk and took a marker in his hand before writing an equation out on the board.

“Think you could solve this?” he asked holding the marker out to Colton.

Colton took the marker with a frown to show that he had no objection to the man's request as he began to work out the equation on the board. He was unfamiliar with the problem but felt he was able to muddle through it as best he could.

“Is it like this?” Colton said as he took a step back from the board.

“You were close,” Mr. May's said plucking the marker from Colton's hand as he explained where he had gone wrong.

“Oh I see. So I should have added these two and then divided,” Colton said as he now understood the proper way to get the solution.

“Exactly right,” Mr. Mays said. “Don't feel too bad you wouldn't have learned this stuff yet.”

“Guess I'll know it for this year,” Colton said with some optimism.

“You won't learn it this year,” Mr. Mays said with a chuckle. “This is high school level stuff. Its a shame really, after looking at your test scores you would be a shoe in for AP classes here. That's my department and we need more students. Sure I can't convince you to stay?”

“Its not really my choice,” Colton said somewhat bashfully after having received some high praise.

“Yeah I get it,” Mr. Mays said.

They returned to his Mom who was surprised to see them so soon. Mr. Mays gave her his report and recommended that they look into AP classes when they got to Colton's new school.

As the rest of the week wore on Colton felt some of his confidence return. It had been a great boost to his self esteem however it wasn't quite enough to completely dispel his mixed up feeling about where he truly fit in. He had always done well in school, there wasn't much else to do since he didn't have the distractions of a social life. So in some ways he felt like the needle hadn't really moved all that much for him, he was still in the same hole. Perhaps that's why he appeared in the kitchen on Monday night dressed in his uniform with his insect project in his hands.

“You're going,” Grace asked a little surprised to see him ready to go having half expected him to have asked to drop out of scouts.

“Um yeah,” Colton said feeling a little self conscious for the

first time in front of his Mom wearing the cub scout uniform. “I finished the project, so I figured I should at least turn it in,” he said placing the log that was the display for his insect collection on the table. Colton could not really explain why he wanted to go, or rather didn't want to admit that he had been feeling somewhat down that he had missed last week. Having social interactions with people who actually seemed to enjoy having him around was like a drug to the attention starved kid.

“You did put in the work,” Grace said with a smile as she grabbed her keys.

Brady had been happy to see Colton return as well as Grant and the rest of Colton's friends.

“This is impressive work,” Brady had said upon looking over Colton's work. “You definitely earned your insect research badge.”

The rest of the meeting proceeded smoothly as the tiger scouts were engaged in making origami figures. Colton was feeling a little hesitant about having made the decision to return. Yet as the meeting went on he was starting to feel a little better. He was still in the same old hole but there was a security to it. Colton didn't see much trouble with it. The testing at the school had truly confirmed to him that this was all temporary whereas before it had felt like this was going to be forever. He allowed himself to relax a little, that was until someone he had been hoping to avoid walked into the room.

“Charley,” Brady boomed seeing the boy scout standing by

the doorway. “To what do we owe the pleasure. I thought the boy scouts were off tonight?” Brady said noticing that Charley was not wearing a uniform.

“I'm helping Ms. Sandy get fliers out for the zoo trip,” Charley said.

“How responsible,” Brady said with a chuckle.

“I need some helpers though, Ms. Sandy said to get some tiger scouts since the rest of the dens are doing the Olympiad tonight.” Charley informed.

“I think we could help out,” Brady said seemingly enthused by the idea.

“I really only need a few,” Charley said. Brady nodded seeing that a smaller number would be more manageable.

“Take your pick,” Brady said as he stood next to Charley looking out over the tiger scouts who had all stopped what they were doing to see what was happening. Charley glanced out over the crowd with an awkward look.

“I guess I'll take Karson, Levi...and,” Charley said pausing a moment as he scanned the room before he and Colton's eyes met one another. “Colton,” Charley said.

Colton was none too pleased with being picked, although he had had a feeling that he was going to be singled out. He wondered if Charley wanted to talk to him about what had happened at the store a couple of days ago, but as Colton got up with the two other boys that had been chosen he realized

they were the ones who had been in his swimming group. Colton concluded that they had been chosen because they were the only kids whose names Charley knew.

The group was lead down the hall into a room that was an office with a desk that had a computer and printer set on it. There was also a large round table in the middle that had some manila folders and staplers on it.

“Alright,” Charley said. “We're putting together the flier that has all the info for the zoo trip, its two pages so we'll need to staple them together and then we'll pack them into the folders and deliver them to each den. But first I have to print out the pages,” Charley explained as he walked over to the computer. He clicked around for a moment and then looked over to the printer expectantly yet the machine did nothing. Charlie made a face as he turned back to the computer he clicked around again and turned back to the printer which once again did nothing.

“Great,” he groaned as he stood up. “This things not working. I'm going to have to go get someone.” Charley said going to the door.

“Colton can fix it,” Karson, one of the others scouts said.

“Yeah Colton's really smart,” Levi the other scout chimed in. Colton was a little surprised to hear that this was his reputation among the other tigers, Its not like he went around displaying his obvious superior intellect over the others but sometimes when the others were having difficulty with something he found himself giving out little suggestions,

something that had not gone unnoticed by the rest of the den.

“I'm sure he is,” Charley said skeptically. “ But this might be a little above all of us.”

Colton went around to the other side of the desk and took a seat at the computer. Colton didn't want to be stuck here doing this all night. Scouts was his one opportunity to forget about all his problems for a little while, yet being around Charley a kid his own age only brought all those insecurities to the surface. Not to mention Charley's comments stirred something familiar in him. It was the same as it had been at the pool when he had tried to prove himself during the contest when they had competed treading water. The perceived inequality between the two of them seemed to bother Colton to the point that he just had to do something to prove himself.

Colton felt confident that he could fix whatever the problem was. He had spent a good deal of time at the local library in the last place he lived to the point where one of the librarians had taken a liking to him and would give him little odd jobs to do, even give him a little money on the side for his trouble, this wasn't the first time he had to troubleshoot a printer. Within a few moments Colton had figured out what the problem was, the printer had simply disconnected from the Wi-fi. With two clicks he had it reconnected and printed the pages out.

“Told ya,” Levi said with a smirk as Charley looked on in surprise.

“How did you know how to fix that?” Charley asked looking at Colton with a raised eyebrow. As Colton looked back he could see that the other boy's reaction was more suspicious than surprised. He thought for a moment that perhaps he had been a little too forward.

“My Mom has the same printer,” Colton sputtered as he thought on his feet. “It has the same problem.”

Charley nodded slowly as he took his spot back behind the desk as Colton retreated back to the other tiger scouts. He printed out the other page and then made a stack of copies. He then instructed Liam and Karson to put the pages together while he and Colton would staple them together. The group worked diligently and after some time they had worked through the large stacks. Charley then packed the fliers into the envelopes.

“Okay you two take these and drop one off at each of the dens, when you're done you can go back to the tiger den,” Charley said handing the envelopes off to Liam and Karson who scampered off. Colton was happy to be done and return back to the tiger den as he didn't want to be alone with Charley lest he try to bring up the incident with Robbie.. As he went to leave the room Charley called out to him.

“Wait,” Charley said taking the remaining papers and stuffing them into another envelope. “You can take these back to the tiger den.”

Colton approached to grab the envelope.

“Thanks for the help,” Charley said holding the envelope out to Colton.

“No problem,” Colton said grabbing the envelope. Charley stood for a moment still holding onto the envelope looking at Colton before he finally let go with a shake of his head. Colton could tell that Charley obviously wanted to say something about his eye. Charley turned away and went back to the table to put somethings away. A strange awkwardness having descended between them.

“Thanks,” Colton said piercing through the heavy air. Charley looked back at him. “For helping me the other day, I mean,” Colton added.

“Oh that,” Charley said with a grin. “Don't mention it. That kid is a huge jerk so I didn't really mind putting him in his place. Does your eye still hurt?”

“No its fine,” Colton said.

“That's good,” Charley said as he leaned up against the table. “You know there is something I did want to ask you, just something I was curious about.”

“Sure,” Colton said just a little curious as to what Charley would want to ask him.

“Its just I was talking to my Uncle the other day, he works at the middle school,” Charley began.

Colton's heart immediately dropped.

“He said he did some testing for a kid my age named Colton

so he was just curious if I knew him or not. I told him I didn't know anyone by that name around my age," Charley said. Colton took in a deep breath.

"Oh," Colton said with a nervous laugh. "Guess we have the same name," he said knowing he needed to end the conversation fast.

"Yeah, I thought the same thing" Charley said. "My Uncle was only bringing it up because he was disappointed. The kid was apparently not going to be attending school here and he would have been a good candidate for the AP courses."

"I gotta get back to the meeting," Colton said turning to head for the door. This conversation was becoming too uncomfortable for him. He felt that if he let Charley keep talking he would no doubt zero in on him.

"I just thought it was funny after seeing you at the computer tonight that there are two Colton's running around here that are really smart," Charley said with a laugh.

"Yeah I guess," Colton said reaching the door and gripping the handle.

"He also said something else," Charley said his words freezing Colton in place as if his words had triggered a trap immobilizing him. "Turns out this Colton also had a black eye, told my Uncle he got whacked in the face with a tree branch."

Colton turned his head, his face filled with panic as if he were

about to collide into a wall and their was nothing he could do to stop it.

“There aren't two Coltons are there?” Charley asked. “That was you wasn't it?”

Chapter 17

Summer of the Tiger:Chapter 17 - Chapter 17

A Cunning Tiger

Colton stood frozen as he felt sweat form on his back. He looked at Charley who stared back with a confident look, he knew that his accusation was true. Colton took a big gulp.

“That's not it,” Colton croaked. Charley put a hand up.

“Look dude, there's no use lying. Or are you about to try and tell me there are two Coltons who are only here for the summer and both of them have black eyes.”

Colton bit his lower lip. Charley was right, there was no use in trying to deny it. He had been found out.

“Yeah it was me at the school,” Colton said confirming Charley's suspicion.

“So you're actually thirteen then?”

“Yes,”

“But on the stage at the all troop meeting they said you were six.” Charley said.

“That's because they all think I am six,” Colton mumbled pulling his hat down low as his face went red from actually having to admit his lie out loud.

“Okay, why don't you just start at the beginning,” Charley said as he took a seat and crossed his arms. Colton felt he had no choice. Charley was not going to let him simply walk away. Colton told him everything. He explained the initial misunderstanding and how he had tried to correct it, he told him how everything had just snowballed and then about the mishap with the movers and how all his clothes had gotten lost.

“So you like being treated like a little kid?” Charley asked with a raised eyebrow.

“No, I actually hate it,” Colton yelped, before he took in a big breath calming himself down. “I know it sounds crazy,” Colton said. “And it was a crazy idea, but given the situation it was just easier to let people think what they wanted at that point. If I went along with it people treated me normally and I didn't have to feel like the weird kid for once. Its been a long time since I've been able to do that.” Colton said as he finished his story. Charley sat back in his chair as he closed his eyes.

“That's an interesting story,” he said with a nod.

“Look, I'm just asking for one night. Please don't tell anyone. I'll leave and never show my face here again and then you can tell whoever you want.” Colton pleaded throwing himself before Charley's mercy.

“Woah,” Charley said with an alarmed look. “I'm not here to blow up your spot. I can see you had your reasons and I kind

of get it.”

“You mean you won't tell?” Colton asked surprised to hear the other boy's intentions.

“Your secret is safe with me,” Charley said as he got up and went to the desk. He wrote something on a piece of paper and tore it off before walking to Colton and giving him the slip. Colton looked down at it and saw it looked to be an address.

“Whats this?” Colton asked.

“That's where I live,” Charley said. “Its close to the grocery store so I know you can make it there on your bike. Come over tomorrow.” Colton looked at Charley with some apprehension. Not quite sure how to process all of this.

“You want me to come over?” Colton asked growing suspicious of Charley's motivation.

“Yeah, come around ten but not before. That's when my Mom leaves for work and she doesn't want me having people over when she's not there.” Charley said.

“But why?” Colton asked.

“Oh I don't know I guess she's paranoid that the first thing I'll do if I have people over is that we'll raid the liquor cabinet or something,” Charley replied nonchalantly.

“No I mean why do you want me to come over?” Colton clarified.

“I don't know,” Charley said. “Sounds like you've had a rough

go of things since moving here. I figure you'd want to blow off some steam with someone your own age for once. I could show you a good time."

Charley walked over to the door.

"Remember, not before ten," Charley said before walking out of the room leaving Colton alone.

It was the next day as Colton stood in front of the house at the address that had been written on the piece of paper. For a second he thought about getting back on his bike and going back home, this was insane. There was no way that Charley simply wanted to hang out, not with him. This was all some elaborate plan. How could it not be? Charley had him cornered knew his greatest secret and was now all set to really humiliate him for it. Maybe Charley had invited a bunch of other kids over and they were now waiting for him inside, ready to laugh at him the minute he walked in as if anyone would actually want to socialize with him, the teenage tiger scout. They would probably tell him to run back to his little friends where he belonged.

Yet even though these doubts swirled within Colton he just couldn't see Charley doing something like that. This had been the kid that had came up to him at the pool worried that he had upset him. The person who had ran off some bullies. Surely if Charley was the kind of person to do that he couldn't also be the person that would pull the rug out from under him. Colton didn't feel like he had much to lose. Even if Charley had ill intentions, so what? It would just be another

chalk mark in a long line for Colton. But if Charley did just want to hang out like normal kids than that was something Colton couldn't pass up.

Colton walked up the steps to the porch where the front door was and rung the doorbell. He fidgeted a little with his shirt. It was a t-shirt with realistic t-rex on it roaring. It was the best thing Colton had at the moment. He had wanted to wear the long-sleeve shirt he had worn to the middle school but the day was sweltering hot and Colton would have been a puddle of sweat after riding his bike in the heat.

The door opened as Charley appeared in a tank top and a pair black athletic shorts.

“Perfect timing,” he said with a smile as he opened the door. “My mom just left.”

Colton stepped into the house. Living in this area he had gotten used to walking into buildings and being hit with a blast of cold air coming in from the outside heat, yet as he walked into Charley's house there was no such blast. The inside of the house was warm.

“Sorry about the heat,” Charley said wiping a little sweat from his brow. “The ac is busted, it should be fixed by tomorrow though.”

“Its fine,” Colton said being glad he had decided against wearing the long-sleeve shirt.

“I got a fan in my room,” Charley said as he beckoned Colton to follow him. They walked further into the house and entered

into a room. As Colton looked around he could see it was nothing but a normal bedroom. There was a bed in the corner that was unmade and a few stray clothes on the ground. There was a tv set up on a desk with a game console hooked up and a game already displayed on the screen as well as a box fan near the side going at full blast. Charley took a seat picking up two controllers and handing one to Colton.

“You play?” Charley asked.

Colton took a seat next to him with the controller in hand. He looked at the screen and saw Charley was playing Call of Valor. It was a game Colton played a lot and was pretty good at.

“Yeah, but I usually play on pc,” Colton said.

“Oh so is that going to be your excuse when I kick your ass?” Charley said with a grin.

“Just start the game,” Colton said with a smirk.

The first couple of matches Colton found himself near the bottom of the leader boards as he was still figuring out the controls. The more they played he found himself moving up as he had picked up on the differences in sensitivity for aiming rather quickly. Before long Colton was dominating the matches so completely that none of the other players could even touch him. They had been at it for about an hour before Charley let his controller flop to the ground.

“Dang, I thought I had you when I came up from behind in the house,” Charley groaned as he sat back in his chair.

“Yeah but you came at me with the assault rifle and I had two shotguns,” Colton laughed.

“You should join my clan, with you we would be unstoppable.” Charley mused.

“I guess I could,” Colton said smiling a little to himself, no one had ever invited him to join their group before.

“Ahh man,” Charley groaned. “Its too hot in here.”

“Yeah it is,” Colton agreed.

“Well we should get out of here, grab some food and then head down to the lake and go swimming.” Charley suggested.

Swimming sounded good to Colton as he was starting to feel a little sticky from all the sweat as the fan could not keep up against the heat.

“Great so we can swing by your place so you can get your suit and then we'll head out from there,” Charley said laying out the plan.

“I don't know if I can swim,” Colton said realizing the only swimsuit he had was the one piece green frog suit that he had worn to the tiger swimming outing. Even if Charley had already seen him in it, to Colton it would be all the more embarrassing to wear it now that Charley knew the truth about him.

“I first met you at a pool, and you seemed to be a pretty good swimmer then,” Charley said with some confusion.

“I..just don't have a suit,” Colton mumbled. Charley's mouth twisted up a little before he nodded understanding what Colton was so hesitant about.

“I probably have something you can borrow,” Charley said getting up from his chair and heading into his closet. He emerged a couple moments later and tossed a pair of swim trunks at Colton.

“They might be a little big, you'll have to tie them tight. Bathroom is down the hall.”

Colton took his backpack and went to the bathroom. He took of his pants and underwear and pulled on the suit. Like Charley said they were pretty big on Colton as they went halfway down past his shins. Colton pulled the strings as tight as he could and tied them finding that they stuck to his waist just fine. They were red and blue with a black and white checkered pattern going up the sides. Colton stashed his clothes into his backpack and walked back to Charley's room. He entered seeing that Charley had already changed into his own plain black swimsuit.

“They don't look too bad,” Charley commented looking at Colton wearing the big trunks.

“I look ridiculous,” Colton said holding his arms out as if he were on display.

“No one's going to care, besides we'll be swimming,” Charley reasoned. Colton grimaced a little still feeling a little silly in the over sized suit.

“Well I also found these,” Charley said holding up another pair of swim trunks that were red and had Lighting Mcqueen prominently displayed on them. “They would probably fit you better.”

“These are fine,” Colton said as his face went a little red matching the color of the offending garment.

“Suit yourself,” Charley said as he tossed the old trunks aside.

“Thanks for these,” Colton said. He really shouldn't be so picky. Charley was treating him as an equal if anything Colton should be relishing the opportunity.

The boys made their way outside as Charley went into his garage. Colton got on his bike and put his dinosaur themed helmet on. Charley appeared a moment later with his own bike.

“What are you doing?” Charley asked with a laugh.

“What?” Colton asked not understanding the question.

“C'mon man, nobody wears a helmet,” Charley said with another laugh.

“Oh,” Colton said a little frazzled as he took the helmet off and instead hooked it around the underside of the seat. It had become so second nature for him to always wear the childish looking helmet that he hadn't even thought about what it actually looked like anymore.

The boys took off as Colton followed along behind Charley as he lead them into town. They came to a stop outside of a

restaurant on a street.

“What are we doing here?” Colton asked looking up at the establishment.

“I figured we could get something to eat first. This place has the best fries in town,” Charley said as he leaned his bike up against the wall. The two of them walked in. There was a smattering of people around but not too crowded.

“Get us a booth, I'll get the food,” Charley said. “You okay with coke?”

“Yeah, that's fine,” Colton said before walking near the back of the restaurant and sliding into a booth. As Colton waited for Charley he pondered his situation. In some ways it felt weird to him. He never imagined he would be doing something like this. But then again this was the kind of thing he was supposed to do. It felt great as if things were finally going his way.

“Colton?” a familiar voice said. He looked up to see Maya, Grant's older sister standing at the table. Colton felt his voice catch in his throat in shock. If there was anyone he really didn't want to run into it was her. “Are you here alone?” she asked looking around.

“No I'm uhh,” Colton stammered not really sure what to say.

“You here with your Mommy?” she asked as she slid into the booth next to him.

“No, I'm with...” Colton began to say being cut short as

Charley returned setting a tray of french fries and two drinks on the table before taking a seat across from them.

“Charley?” Maya said with some surprise at seeing a kid around her age being Colton's companion.

“You two know each other?” Charley asked quizzically.

“Of course,” Maya said with a smile as she looked at Colton. “He's friends with my little brother. In fact it was only a couple of weeks ago that Colton was over for a sleepover.” she said as Colton's face flushed red. Why did she have to bring that up in front of Charley? A simple yes would have sufficed.

“I didn't know you baby-sat,” Maya said.

“I don't,” Charley said with some gruffness.

“Oh, well I just thought...” Maya said as she looked to Colton and then back to Charley with some confusion. Colton didn't know what to say. She thought he was six he had no business being with Charley unless it was the sort of arrangement she had presumed it was, that Charley was his babysitter.

“His family and my family are old friends. We're just hanging out for a bit since neither one of us had anything better to do today.” Charley said.

“Hanging out eh,” Maya said with a raised eyebrow.

“Like I said, I don't babysit,” Charley said with an air of animosity, putting out the feeling that Maya was not welcome at the table.

“Well I'll say,” Maya said clearly not picking up on the cue. “You're going to let him have a soda and eat this junk food?” If I let my brother eat stuff like this when I watch him he'd be bouncing off the walls, you sure this is okay?”

“Who cares,” Charley said with some annoyance. “Its not like anyone asked for your input you know.”

“Its just some friendly advice,” Maya said. “Anyways I gotta go,” she said getting up from the table. “Colton don't forget to remind your Mommy that I'm still available if she needs a babysitter,” she said turning back around to the table. “I'll even bring Grant along so you guys can play,” she said with a little smirk before she made her exit leaving the two boys silent.

Colton was beyond mortified. The only way that conversation could have been worse would have been if she had found some way to bring up the fact that she had zipped him up in a pair of footie pajamas that night at the sleepover.

“God that girl always sticking her nose where it doesn't belong,” Charley said with a scowl.

“Are you friends with her?” Colton asked still reeling from the humiliation that had swept over him.

“Nah, not really,” Charley said. “She's best friends with this girl that's dating one of the my friends, so our paths cross.”

The boys were silent again before Charley spoke again.

“Did you really go to a sleepover at her house?”

“It... was..well...ummm” Colton sputtered as his face went red again. Charley already knew Colton went to the meetings but to be confronted about this was causing his stomach to twist up into a knot. “My mom had already said yes,” Colton finally said. “I just went to keep up appearances.”

Charley nodded.

“Must have sucked though.” Charley said. “Having to hang out with a bunch of little kids all night.”

“They're not that bad,” Colton said. He felt a little guilty letting Charley draw his own conclusions as to how Colton felt about having to hang out with the other tigers and felt he should stand up for them a little. “For kids I mean,” Colton added.

“Eat some fries,” Charley said pushing the basket towards Colton. “Before they get cold.”

The boys ate and drank as they continued to talk about normal things, like upcoming video games and movies they had seen as well as music they liked. The normal sorts of things teen boys talk about. They finished and went back to their bikes finally ready to head for the lake. As the boys began pedaling they were once again stopped by a familiar voice.

“Look who I run into you,” Brady the scout leader said as he rode his bike up to the two boys. “If it isn't Colton and Charley.”

“Hey Brady,” Charley said in a friendly tone. Brady was

wearing a button up plaid shirt that was only buttoned up about halfway and a pair of ratty cargo shorts. It was the first time Colton had seen him out of a troop leader uniform. He looked like he was on his way to the beach.

“What are you two up too?” Brady asked.

“We're going down to the lake to swim,” Charley answered. Brady laughed.

“Its a scorcher today,” Brady said. “I'm actually headed that way my self a little further on though. Told my friend I'd help him with his car today. You boys don't mind if I ride with you do you? That is if you think you can keep up with me.” Brady said in a competitive tone.

“With that junk heap?” Charley said commenting on Brady's bike. “I think we'll be fine.”

“Alright, alright,” Brady said with a chuckle. “But before we race off, you boys weren't about to go riding without helmets, right?” Brady said with a raised eyebrow.

“Ahh c'mon on Mom,” Charley groaned.

“Hey now Charley, we're still scouts and you should be setting a good example for your young friend here, right Colton?” Brady said as he looked at Colton.

Colton quietly unhooked his dinosaur themed helmet from underneath the seat and put it on knowing that now was one of those times he was going to have to comply. Charley looked at him with some pity in his eyes, owing to the fact

that he had now witnessed two events where Colton was all but forced to go along with the assumption that he was six.

“I don't have one,” Charley said with a little defiance in his voice.

“Here I have an extra,” Brady said unsnapping an extra helmet from the back of his bag and tossing it towards Charley. Brady just smiled not picking up on the tense attitude that had fallen between the two boys. As Charley put on the helmet Brady started going. “Don't eat too much of my dust,” he said before speeding off leaving Colton and Charley to double their speed just to catch up. Even with the whole helmet situation Colton found he was enjoying the bike ride. Brady wasn't going as slow as he had been during the tiger's road safety event. In fact he was going almost too fast as he rode along. To Colton it actually felt like he wasn't treating him like a little kid but as an equal to Charley. Colton smirked a little. There was no way Brady didn't believe he wasn't a little kid, but maybe he could also sense that Colton wasn't like the other kids in the tiger den, maybe that's why he had made him the junior leader. After a bit of a ride the group finally came to a stop at the lake.

“I'm impressed,” Brady said taking a swig from his water bottle. “I wasn't holding back and you both kept up pretty well.”

“For a piece of junk, that bike is pretty fast,” Charley said mockingly. Colton wasn't really sure why Charley kept saying that as he looked at Brady's bike. It didn't look too

bad. Sure there were some dings and chipped paint on it, signs that it had been well ridden. Colton then thought what Charley would say if he knew what Colton's bike looked like under the paint.

“Sometimes its not about the machine, but its operator,” Brady said playing it cool.

“Anyways here's your helmet,” Charley said taking the borrowed helmet off of his head.

“Keep it, you'll need it for the return trip,” Brady said with a wink. “I'm off, you guys have fun,” Brady said as he started to leave before stopping. “Oh Colton I'll see you on Monday, right? We'll be going on a scavenger hunt in the woods, should be fun.”

“Yeah, I'll be there,” Colton said forcing a smile. A scavenger hunt seemed rather childish not the kind of thing that that a boy scout like Charley did in his own meetings, which seemed to embarrass Colton a little. Its not as if Charley didn't know what sorts of things Colton got up to with the tiger scouts, heck he had even witnessed it once or twice. However to have it just put out in the open like that made Colton a little self-conscious. It seemed that as determined as he was to keep the details of his life under wraps from Charley the world kept finding ways to shove it in his face.

“Tell Naomi I say hi,” Brady called out as he left with a smile.

“Whose that?” Colton wondered out loud.

“My older sister,” Charley said. “She and Brady were friends

back in school so I've known that guy for a long time.”

Finally it sunk in why Charley and Brady were so casual and friendly with one another.

Colton and Charley made their way down the hill towards the pier that extended into the lake. As they stood on the end of the dock Charley took off his shirt. Colton was once again reminded how different he was from his peers. Charley's torso revealed the beginning traces of a muscular build. Colton hesitated to remove his own shirt which would show a slender scrawy body with small hints of residual baby fat.

“You going to swim?” Charley asked noticing Colton just standing still.

“Oh um yeah,” Colton said a little flustered as he removed his shirt. There was no getting around it. He wasted no time in jumping in the water to give himself some cover. Charley followed soon after. The water felt so refreshing against the heat.

“Damn, that feels good,” Charley said coming up from under the water as she shook the water from his hair.

“I'm kind of surprised we're the only one's here,” Colton said.

“The public beach is probably packed,” Charley said. “You can only swim here if you have lake rights.”

“You mean we're trespassing?” Colton said shooting an alarmed look towards Charley.

“Nah, my aunt lives there,” Charley said pointing up the hill

to a small little cottage. “She won't mind.”

Colton nodded having his worries put to the rest. He watched as Charley swam around a little going underneath the water before coming back up.

“Can I ask you question?” Colton asked as his curiosity had finally gotten the better of him.

“Sure,” Charley said as he came to a pause.

“Why did you invite me out today, or rather why didn't you tell anyone the truth about me?” Colton asked. “I mean I just feel like anyone else would have.” Colton asked.

“Its like I told you,” Charley said. “I get why you did it. You know I've experienced a similar situation.”

“What, you also had everyone believing you were six years old at one point?” Colton said with some sarcasm

“No, its just...” Charley paused for a moment unsure if he should continue. “When I was born my back was kind of messed up. But I got by okay, that was until I was eight and I got into a car accident which really messed it up. So the doctors decided fit me with a back brace. It was big and bulky and I couldn't hide it under my shirt as anyone who looked at me would be able to see it.”

“That must have sucked,” Colton commented.

“Yeah it did,” Charley confirmed. “I got bullied a little bit about it, but the worst thing was the people who were trying to be nice. I just remember how they would look at me with a

smile plastered on their face, but I could tell they pitied me. I would have given anything just to feel normal in a room and not have everyone look at me."

Colton was silent. For the first time someone had truly understood what he felt like all the time. Although he felt a little guilty at hearing what Charley had gone through in his mind it didn't really compare. He started to feel as if he didn't really have that bad.

"Anyways, " Charley said. "You got yourself into a situation and you were just trying to make the best of it."

Charley then shrunk down in the water a little as he looked past Colton towards a dock a little further down.

"Oh man," Charley said.

"Huh, what?" Colton asked as he followed Charley's gaze. Walking down the other pier were two girls who appeared to be a little older than the boys. They were both dressed in bikini's and shades talking loudly with one another having not noticed the two of them yet.

"That girl on the right is Claire Wheeler," Charley said.

"Is she a friend, do you want to say hi?" Colton asked becoming suspicious that maybe Charley didn't want to be seen with him in front of this girl.

"No," Charley said with some alarm as he pulled Colton to the other side of the pier hiding from sight. "She's going to be a freshman and well I kind of have had a crush on her since

sixth grade," Charley said looking a little embarrassed. "I tried talking to her a year ago, but I got so tongue tied that I couldn't even say a word."

Colton chuckled a little. It was kind of funny to think of the ever confident Charley be so nervous.

"You should try and talk to her again," Colton suggested. "She probably doesn't remember."

"Maybe," Charley said as he pursed his lips a little. "But its not like I can just swim over there, what would I even say? Not like they would come over here either."

Colton thought for a moment before a grin spread across his face. Maybe he was just what Charley needed.

"I'll be back," he said as he swam a little forward.

"Wait, dude what are you doing?" Charley hissed. Colton turned around to face Charley as he swam backwards.

"I have powers," Colton said ominously with a smirk. "Just go along with it."

Colton was swimming over to where the two girls were sitting on the edge of the pier. He wasn't quite sure what he was going to say, but he wanted to do something. Charley had done him a major solid so he felt he should try and pay him back a little.

"Hello," Colton said as he swam up to the girls. They both looked down at him with a smile.

“Hey there yourself,” Claire said. She had long auburn hair and was wearing a round pair of white sunglasses that looked large against her tiny slender face. She was wearing a black bikini with white polka dots all over it.

“Are you going to swim?” Colton asked.

“We were thinking about it,” the other girl replied with a grin. She looked a little older than Claire. She had blond hair that was pulled back into a ponytail. She had a round face with high cheek bones that accentuated her smile making it seem bigger than it was. She was dressed in blue bikini.

“How's the water?” Claire asked taking off her sunglasses.

“Its really nice,” Colton answered.

“Feels nice,” the other girl said kicking her feet a little in the water.

“What's your names?” Colton asked emulating the tone and cadence in which the tiger scouts often asked questions during the den meetings.

“I'm Claire and this is my friend Steph,” Claire said pointing at the other girl. “What's yours?”

“Colton.”

“And tell me Colton, how old are you,” Claire asked. “You look a little young to be out here all alone.”

“I'm six,” Colton said feeling a twinge of embarrassment. He realized it was the first time he could remember actually

saying the lie out loud. “And I'm not alone I'm with my errr...” Colton came to a pause. He couldn't very well call Charley his friend. It wasn't exactly normal for thirteen year old kids to hang out with six year olds. He also didn't want to call Charley his babysitter as that would be so humiliating that Colton might actually wither away if the words passed his lips. Charley had told Maya that their families were friends but still there was a trace of the implication that Charley was watching him for the day.

“Cousin,” Colton spat out not being able to come up with anything better. “You should come swim with us,” Colton said quickly moving on.

“What do you think Steph?” Claire asked looking at her friend.

“Sounds fun,” Steph said with a laugh. “I mean how can we refuse an invitation from a cutie like Colton here?”

Both girls got into the water and followed over to where Charley was who had been watching the whole scene play out wondering what in the world Colton had possibly said to the girls to get them to come over.

“So you're Colton's cousin?” Steph asked.

“Cousin,” Charley repeated back confused. He looked at Colton who just winked at him. “Uhh yeah he's my cousin.”

“Wait a minute, I think I recognize you.” Claire said looking at Charley whose face had gone a tinge pale. “You go to Wilson Middle right? I remember seeing you around. What

was your name again?”

“Charley,” he replied his voice cracking a little. Colton smiled a little. It seemed Claire had no recollection of her's and Charley's previous encounter.

“So what should we do?” Steph asked looking around.

“Lets have a chicken fight,” Claire suggested.

“Sounds fun, Colton's on my team,” Steph said as she put her hands on Colton's shoulders. She went under the water and got under him before rising out of the water with him on her shoulders. “You okay up there squirt?” Steph asked.

“Y-yeah,” Colton stammered, a little surprised at the turn of events but then again what was he expecting? Its not like he could have put her on his shoulders.

“Well c'mon,” Claire said motioning towards Charley who seemed to shake himself out of daze before going under the water and putting Claire onto his own shoulders. Colton looked down to see Charley with a overwhelmed look on his face. The two teams moved towards one another as Claire and Colton clasped their hands together in a struggle, the girls laughing in delight.

“You think I'll let you win,” Claire said with a mischievous smirk as she let go of Colton's hands and then began to tickle his sides. Colton let out an embarrassing squeal as he couldn't help but flail against the girl's ticklish onslaught. He fell back into the lake as water shot up his nose. He came up coughing and a little flustered.

“Oh buddy, are you okay?” Steph cooed as she grabbed him and held his head against her chest and gave him a couple pats on his back. Colton's eye's went wide as what his cheek was being held against was not lost on him. He stared back at Charley. He could see Charley's own eyes practically bug out as a silent expletive escaped his lips.

They did another match and this time Steph used her hands to tip Claire into the water. The group then swam around together for a little bit. The girls were all over Colton and were doting on him as they both couldn't help themselves from grabbing him into a cuddle at random moments. Steph even tossed him up in the air at one point. Colton felt a little awkward with all the attention. Surely if they knew he was really a teenager only couple of year's younger than them, they would think differently about all the affection they were giving him.

“We gotta go,” Steph finally said after a bit.

“I suppose you're right,” Claire sighed.

Oh really,” Charley said a little bummed.

“We'll miss our shift at the coffee shop if we stay longer,” Steph explained.

“But this was fun,” Claire said.

“Yeah totally, thanks for inviting us over Colton,” Steph said as she patted him on the head as she swam past lifting herself out of the water onto the pier.

“Thanks for playing with us,” Colton said laying it on extra thick, which elicited some more giggles from the girls.

“If you ever see me working at the coffee shop come say hi,” Steph said kneeling down towards Colton from up on the dock. “I'll make an extra sweet smoothie for my new friend,” she said giving Colton a boop on his nose. Colton felt his ears go a little hot.

“See ya around Charley,” Claire said with a smile and a wave as the girls turned and walked towards the shore.

The boys were silent in the water. Colton was feeling all sorts of embarrassed as he thought that Charley was surely going to make fun of the way the girls had treated him. He turned to look at Charley who had a sort of far off look in his face.

“Umm so I guess...” Colton started to say before Charley turned towards him slowly.

“Dude,” he said slowly. “She knows my name...not only that she was on my shoulder's, I touched her leg. Did that really just happen?” Charley said with a look of disbelief. “I can't believe you even managed to get them over here. You're a legend.”

“Well I guess it worked out,” Colton said with a smirk.

“I'll say,” Charley said with a grin. “I didn't know you were such a ladies man,” Charley said as he splashed a little water at Colton.

“Shut up,” Colton said with a chuckle.

“They were all over you dude,” Charley said. “Maybe you should ask your Mommy to have Steph babysit some night, betcha she would say yes in a heartbeat,” Charley said mockingly making a kissy face at Colton.

“At least I had the balls do go up to them,” Colton said splashing some water at Charley. Both boys continued to splash one another laughing together. They were nothing more than two friends enjoying the hot summer day.

Chapter 18

Summer of the Tiger Chapter 18 - Chapter 18

A Victorious Tiger

“You should come,” Charley said in a pleading tone. “Its gonna be fun.”

Colton was sat across from Charley at the kitchen table. He had just told him he didn't have any plans on attending the scouts zoo sleepover.

“August is almost over, and I wasn't planning on doing scouts into the school year anyways,” Colton said with a shrug. In Colton's mind he was sticking to his original plan he had never planned on staying in scouts past the summer.

“Oh come on, its a joint thing between the boys scouts and the cub scouts,” Charley mused. “So we would be able to hang out a little.”

Colton gave his friend a muddled look. They hung out enough together didn't they? Colton guessed Charley meant hanging out somewhere else than one of their houses. As fine as an idea as it was Colton didn't think he needed to spell it out for Charley that it might look weird for a tiger scout and a boy scout to be hanging out so much, especially since Charley didn't treat Colton like a little kid. What would people say? Plus Colton didn't really like the idea of people

raising an eyebrow at his and Charley's friendship as it would only serve as a reminder that everyone though he was so much younger than Charley in the first place, not that he ever really forgot that fact.

“You know I already signed up to help with the morning session,” Grace piped up from the sink overhearing the boys conversation. “It might look kind of weird if you don't go.”

“See, now you gotta go Colt,” Charley said with a smirk as gestured towards Grace. Colton pursed his lips as he rolled his eyes. Why did it feel like once again he was becoming a victim of circumstance.

He put his arm on the table resting his chin on his hand with a tired looked on his face.

“Whatever,” Colton said as he waved his hand through the air.

“It'll be fun,” Charley said with a grin. “You'll see.”

A week later Colton was in a large room with the rest of the tiger scouts. He was standing next to his Mom with a sleeping bag in his arms and a backpack on his back. Brady was going over the schedule and telling the parents when they could return to pick up their kids. Colton was starting to feel a little strange standing in the room. A couple of weeks ago he would have been fine but things had started to change for him. For one he had been finally able to abandon his temporary wardrobe as his Mom had taken him clothes shopping since she had saved up enough money to get him a whole new wardrobe. It had been a welcome surprise to

Colton when she had told him where they were going in preparation for their upcoming move. Colton had gone wild buying all sorts of new clothes for himself. To Grace's surprise he didn't go for his usual style. He mostly picked out clothes that fit him well. Most of them being athletic wear which just had simple logo's on it. She was happy to see that he was no longer trying to get clothes that in Colton's mind made him look more mature. Of course it hadn't worked in Grace's mind it just showed that Colton had some more confidence in himself that he didn't need to try so hard to to make up for how his appearance made him look. He didn't need to hide behind the clothes anymore.

However none of that really mattered in the moment as it was mandatory for the scouts to wear their uniforms which meant Colton looked like all the other tigers in his uniform with the bright orange neckerchief. The silver lining for Colton being that he was able to wear a normal pair of boxers and had a normal set of pajamas in his bag for the night. In some ways he was looking forward to actually going to sleep.

“Okay so I think I went over everything,” Brady said as he came to the end of his speech. “We will see all of you at ten a.m tomorrow morning.”

With that parents and kids started saying their farewells.

“Okay I'll be here bright and early to chaperone,” Grace said kneeling down to Colton's level.

“Yeah, okay,” Colton said with some gloom about him.

“Hey now whats with the storm clouds?” Grace asked.

“Its nothing,” Colton mumbled.

“Try to have some fun,” Grace said squeezing Colton's arm. “Charley's here too so its not like this is just for little kids.”

“They'll probably keep the scouts separated so its not like it matters,” Colton said frowning.

“Well you have other friends here too,” Grace countered. Colton casted his eyes down. Grace leaned in closer. “You know this is probably the last time you'll see some of them so try to go out on high note.”

Colton gave her a weak smile as he nodded his head. Colton felt just a smidgen guilty about his plans to up and disappear from the scouts. What would the boys he had come to call his friends think, especially Grant. On the other hand Colton felt like this was a band-aid he was going to have to pull off at some point.

“I'll see you in the morning,” Grace said as she pulled Colton into a hug and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Mom, stop,” Colton said pulling himself away. “Stop treating me like a little kid.”

“I'm not,” Grace said with a sarcastic look. “It doesn't matter how old you are, I'm gonna kiss you and hug you all I want.”

Grace then got up and gave Colton one last wave as she left the room. Most of the other parents were starting to make their exit as well. Brady then got the attention of the rest of

the tigers and got them all sitting on the ground in front of him and Sandy who was standing up front with a little boy next to her.

“Okay guys we have a special guest with us tonight,” Brady said. “This is Jordy he is Ms. Sandy's and Mr. Darius's son.” Brady said motioning to the young boy. “Now he is only four but we thought he could be an honorary tiger for the night.”

“You boys don't mind do you?” Ms. Sandy asked. None of the kids raised objections.

“He can sit next to us,” one of the boys said patting the ground next to him.

“Yeah, yeah, over here,” said another boy close by.

“See honey, they are really nice here,” Sandy said kneeling down next to the small boy. Jordy gave a shy smile as he went and took a seat among the tigers.

“Okay guys,” Brady said. “Here is what's happening tonight. First we'll be having some zookeepers who have some animal based activities for us, then we'll be joining up with the rest of the groups for an animal presentation, and finally there is going to be a little trivia competition among the whole troop so that should be fun.”

As Colton listened to the plan he didn't find himself all that excited. He liked animals just as much as the next kid, but it sounded like they weren't even going to see the zoo. Then again maybe they would do that in morning?

As the boys talked for a bit eventually two woman came into the room. They were both dressed in tan shirts that denoted them as zoo keepers.

“All right guys I need your full attention,” Brady said as the two women stood next to him. The kids quieted down curious to see what they would be doing first.

“Hi I'm Naomi,” the younger of the two women said. She had frizzy black hair that was held back by a bandanna and she had a big wide smile.

“And I'm Yolanda,” the other woman said with a thick accent wearing a thick pair of horn rimmed glasses.

“We are keepers here at the zoo,” Naomi said. “We both work with the penguins so we thought it would be fun to come and share some things with you all.”

“So the first thing we need from all of you is a volunteer,” Yolanda said. Some hands immediately shot up. “We need someone who will set a good example, who do you think?” Yolanda asked turning to Brady. The leader grinned a little.

“Well if you need someone who can set a good example I think there is no better candidate than our junior leader,” Brady said as his gaze settled onto Colton. “Whaddya say Colton?”

Colton shrugged a little. He didn't really want to get involved anymore than he had too. Yet it seemed to Colton that Brady had some faith in him and if there was a job to be done he was the one for it, a sentiment Colton didn't want to

disappoint.

“Great, why don't you come with me and I'll help you get dressed,” Naomi said as she put a hand on Colton's back and lead him out into the hallway. Colton was a little hesitant upon hearing her words. Just what had he gotten volunteered for? In the hallway was a bag and Naomi began to pull things out.

“We're going to have you be our penguin,” she said as she pulled out a bodysuit that resembled a black and white penguin.

“A penguin?” Colton asked sounding a little nervous.

“Yeah, it will be super easy, we'll tell you exactly what to do,” Naomi said. “But first you need to take off those shoes.”

Colton took pause for a moment. He really didn't want to do this however he took off his shoes as he was asked. Naomi then helped him step into the suit before zipping him up in the back. Colton held up his hands as they were now encased in fabric sleeves that were supposed to be flippers. Looking down at himself it looked like he was wearing a very baggy sleeper reminding him of the pajama's he had worn at Grant's sleepover. Naomi then had him sit on the ground and put on some slippers that looked like webbed feet. She finally helped him onto his feet and then pulled a hood up that had a beak and eyes on the top which pushed his hair into his eyes a little. Colton used his flipper to push it out of his eyes.

“You look great,” Naomi said with a grin. “Lets get in there,”

she said. Colton took a step and felt his feet slip on the tiled floor since the flippers had no grip to them.

“Woah there,” Naomi said as she caught him. “Its a little slippery on this floor. You're going to have to walk like a penguin.”

Colton sighed a little getting what she meant as he began to waddle keeping his legs straight. Walking to the door Colton felt completely foolish. Even with his feelings he knew inside the room were just the other tigers so it probably wasn't going to be so bad. Its not like he had to do this in front of the whole troop. They entered the room and the sight of Colton done up like a penguin elicited a huge laugh from the rest of the group as Colton and Naomi made their way to the front. Standing in front of the group like this was giving Colton flashbacks to his first night in the tiger scouts when he had gotten his face painted. Some part of him wanted to quit right there, but he didn't want a repeat of what happened last time. He was just going to have to try his best to get through this.

“Okay here is our penguin Co...” Naomi began to say before she paused. “You know as great a name that Colton is , I don't think its a good name for a penguin, anyone have any suggestions?”

The rest of the boys began to shout out suggestions.

“Pengi”

“Mr. Flipper,”

Popper,”

Colton listened to the suggestions feeling embarrassed with each new suggestion.

“Crackerjack,” someone shouted out.

“We have a winner,” Yolanda said as she tossed a piece of candy into the crowd. “Okay so Crackerjack here is going to demonstrate the special way penguins walk.”

Colton felt his stomach twist up a little. The costume was bad enough the name only served to make him feel all the more foolish. Colton straightened up a little. As embarrassing as all this was he was not going to run away like he had before. He straightened up his legs and did a waddle towards the two keepers.

“Very good Crackerjack,” Naomi said giving him a pat on the head. “Now penguins walk like this for very specific reasons mainly so they don't slip on the ice as this manner of walking gives them the best stability.”

“Now we need our egg,” Yolanda said as she produced a large white plastic oval and set it on the ground. She motioned Colton over and whispered some directions in his ear. Colton grimaced a little at the suggestion but obeyed nonetheless, after all he didn't want to ruin the show. He crouched down over the egg enough so that the bottom of the suit covered it.

“You see Crackerjack is now sitting on the egg so that he may hatch it.” Yolanda said explaining to the group.

“But he is a boy penguin,” one boy said. “Don't girl's lay the eggs?”

“Thats true,” Naomi said. “The girl penguins do lay the eggs but it is the males that sit on them so they hatch.

“Crackerjack is going to be a mommy,” another boy said which sent a snickering through the crowd. Colton felt some heat come to his cheeks. Something was telling him that even when he got this costume off he was still going to have to deal with being called Crackerjack. The keepers went through some more penguin facts using Colton as their model even making him squawk like a bird at one point which the rest of the tigers found uproariously funny.

“Okay, I think our penguin deserves a reward for being such a good sport,” Naomi said as she took out a bag of Swedish fish candy. “We toss out fish for the penguins to eat and they catch them with their mouths, lets see if Crackerjack can do it,” With that she tossed a fish at Colton who tried to catch it but missed.

“Whoops, one more try, lets cheer him on,” Naomi said. The rest of the tigers began to shout out encouragement. Colton steadied himself not wanting to disappoint the crowd. Naomi tossed the red candy fish in the air and Colton caught it in his mouth and was met by hoots and hollers from the crowd.

“Great job,” Naomi said with a clap. “Alright I think our penguin has done enough, everybody say bye bye to Crackerjack,” she said as she walked over and lead Colton back out into the hallway. Back outside Colton slipped off the feet as Naomi unzipped him from the back. “You did great in there,” she said. “ A total natural.”

“Thanks,” was all Colton offered in response as he gathered up the rest of the suit handing it back to her. Upon entering back into the room Colton saw the rest of the tigers all sitting in a circle marker's strewn across the floor as they all seemed to be working on something. Colton took the open space between Grant and Jordy.

“What are you doing?” Colton asked looking at Grant who was laying on his stomach.

“Oh, hey,” Grant said as he sat up. “They gave us penguin badges,” Grant said holding up a piece of paper with a picture of a penguin on it which Grant had started to color in. Brady came over and handed Colton his own piece of paper.

“Color it in and then cut it out,” Brady instructed. “Its not an official badge or nothing but I think you guys can pin them onto your shirts for tonight just to show we are all penguin experts now.”

Colton took the picture from Brady. Colton found that he wasn't particularity interested with the task in front of him, something that had been becoming a little more common. Before he had participated just fine not really seeing much issue with it. Just the fact to be do something in the group seemed to give him some sort of feeling of contentment but lately it just wasn't the same. He might have found this to be a little saddening in the past but now it seemed to be just fine. He was going to stop coming to the scouts soon enough anyways. Colton picked up a marker and spun it around in his hand for a few moments before he was about to start coloring

thinking it would be a good way to calm down from his embarrassing performance before the small boy next to him let out a loud grumble.

“I messed up,” Jordy said as he pushed his paper away. Colton looked at Jordy's penguin he couldn't really see what Jordy was all up in arms about. The penguin looked like it had just been scribbled over with a bunch of random markers.

“What is the problem?” Colton asked picking up the picture and giving a smile at Jordy. The boy regarded him with some wariness before he frowned.

“I put the wrong color on it,” Jordy said. Colton smirked a little not even trying to hazard a guess as to what color Jordy could possibly have a problem with.

“Here, you can take mine,” Colton said handing Jordy his own penguin.

“Really?” Jordy asked looking at Colton with an awestruck expression.

“Sure,” Colton said taking Jordy's discarded penguin with a smile. “I'll just finish this one.”

Jordy hummed a little as he dove back into coloring the fresh picture. Colton took a yellow marker and colored in his own penguin's feet since it was the only spot Jordy had not already done. Colton then saw that some kids were cutting theirs out which he followed along with.

“That's some interesting artwork there Colton,” Brady said as

Colton looked up to the see the leader standing in front of him. Colton was about to offer an response before he was cut off by Jordy.

“I did that one,” Jordy said wanting to take the credit before his brow furrowed. “But then I messed

up.”

“So Colton gave you his?” Brady said as he looked at the new penguin in front of the boy that looked similar to the one Colton had in his hands.

“Yep,” Jordy said holding up his paper. “This one is much better.”

Brady knelt down taking the cut out penguin from Colton's hand before he put it to Colton's chest and pinned it on his shirt with a safety pin.

“That was pretty kind of you Colton,” Brady said with a smile. “Just what I expect from our junior leader.”

Brady moved on to help other kids pin their finished penguins onto their own shirts. Colton looked down at the bird on his own shirt. In some ways he felt like it was kind of a symbol of the responsibility Brady had given to him as the junior leader. The person that was supposed to act in a manner more mature than the others. In a way it showed Colton that he wasn't like the other kids he was on a different level, as he should be. Maybe all those worries about him acting more like a six year old rather than his real age had been overblown in his mind.

Brady brought the activity to an end as the group thanked the two keepers. The group with their penguins pinned to their shirts was then moved to a much bigger room for the next presentation. Colton and the rest of the tigers were sat up front as the rest of the cub dens filtered in. Shortly after the boys scouts filtered in and Colton spotted Charley among them. Their eyes met and Charley gave him and acknowledging smile. Colton couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed at Charley seeing him sat with the rest of the tigers. Not that he hadn't seen it before but now that everything was out in the open there was something just a tad bit embarrassing about the whole thing.

Mr. Darius the scout leader got in front of the group with some zookeepers at his side. He introduced them before letting them start their presentation. They began by bringing out a large tortoise. Colton found himself enjoying the presentation and for once being in the tigers had an advantage as he had a front row seat and got to see all the animals up close. The grand finale had the scout leaders coming up and holding up a large python that stretched out to about ten feet. After the presentation came to an end Mr. Darius calmed the crowd down.

“So for the rest of the night we got a little competition happening,” the leader announced. “Its an animal trivia contest. You will form teams of two which must consist of one boy scout and one cub scout, and the winning team will get a really cool prize,” Mr. Darius said pausing for a moment to let the anticipation simmer a little. “The winning team will

get to sleep in the keeper's quarters tonight and in the morning will get to help the zoo staff with the morning feedings."

There was some chatter from within the group. Mr. Darius put his hands up to quiet down the group.

"That's right you will get up and close with the animals in the zoo. Now we are going to divide the group up here and then you will be able to get into groups."

With that people started getting separated Colton found himself in a group that Brady was leading. He looked around, he didn't really recognize anyone around him save for Dom who was the only other tiger in the group. Colton was just thankful that Robbie was not in the group whom he had spotted earlier that night. They were taken to another room that had been similar to the one that the tigers had done their penguin activity in. Brady then instructed everyone to get into the group. Alot of boys began moving around as they all seemed to be pairing off.

"Too bad we can't be on a team together," Dom said. "I mean we would win. You're pretty smart and I know a lot about animals." Colton gave Dom a smirk.

"Yeah, but we gotta be paired up with a boy scout," Colton said. He could see why certainly. If they didn't do it this way no doubt the boy scouts would steamroll over the cub scouts. Yet Colton only guessed that the tiger scouts weren't exactly going to be any of the boy scouts first choice. As Colton stood to the side he figured they would just have to wait until

everyone else paired up and then he and Dom would just be put with whoever was left over. Colton then felt someone grab him from behind and put him in a headlock.

“Found ya,” the familiar voice of Charley said as he gave Colton a playful noogie on the top of his head before releasing him.

“Charley,” Colton said a little surprised that he had not seen him before.

“So we're gonna be partner's right?” Charley asked with a smirk. Colton nodded. Of course there was no one else to choose. “You looking for someone too?” Charley asked looking at Dom. “I think that dude is looking for someone,” Charley said pointing out another scout. Dom scampered off towards the other boy. Colton and Charley watched as the other kid smiled and gave Dom a fist bump.

“So do you know a lot about animals?” Charley asked looking at Colton.

“I guess as much as anyone else,” Colton said with a shrug. Charley nodded as he hummed a little.

“Well I'm gonna need that big brain of yours if we are going to win,” Charley said.

“I'm not that smart,” Colton said with some humble reservation.

“According to my Uncle you are a whiz kid,” Charley responded.

“Um...well...thats school stuff,” Colton stuttered. “This is different.”

“We'll see,” Charley said with a skeptical look that showed he was placing some faith in Colton.

Before long everyone was paired up and Brady and the other parent in the room began organizing everyone. The rounds would be between three teams at a time and then the winners from each of the three groups would face off in the final in front of everybody. Colton and Charley were in the first match against two other teams. Colton was a little nervous at first as he didn't like the fact that Charley seemed to be putting him up on some pedestal. Just because he was good at math and reading didn't mean he suddenly knew everything. However as the match went on Colton's nerves settled. The questions were multiple choice which helped out a lot, and as the match went on Colton found he was answering them pretty easily and Charley was no slouch either. The competition went on. Colton was happy to see that Dom even made it to the second round but got eliminated in the next round. In the end Colton and Charely were crowned the winners of their group and would be going on in the finals. The rest of the scouts were then taken back to the big room while Charley and Colton waited out in a hallway with Brady who was giving them a pep talk.

“You guys can win this,” Brady said with a smile on his face. “I'm not supposed to have favorites, I don't think anyone expected someone from the tiger den to make it into the finals,” Brady said as he gave Colton a playful punch on the

shoulder. “We'll all be rooting for you,” Brady said before walking into the room himself. Colton and Charley stood in the hallway waiting to be called in as they were still waiting on one of the groups to finish up.

“We're gonna take this,” Charley said his competitive side going full force. Colton leaned back against the wall an awkward look on his face. “Whats with you, nervous or something?” Charley asked taking notice of Colton's withdrawn demeanor.

“Don't you think we are kind of...cheating?” Colton asked.

“How so?” Charley asked as he crossed his arms. Colton tilted his head giving Charley a raised eyebrow. Charely knew full well what Colton was getting at.

“The rules were clear,” Charley tutted. “The team had to be one boy scout and one cub scout, I'm a boy scout and you're a tiger so as far as I'm concerned we're following the rules to a tee.”

Colton twitched the side of his mouth as he looked to the side. He didn't really like it when Charley had called him a tiger scout, even if it was true.

Just then another group of kids came walking out of a room. Most of them filed into the big room no doubt those who had been eliminated, Mr. Darius was at the back.

“Alright we got our finalist,” he said calling out to Colton and Charley. What Colton saw next made his heart drop a little. Standing to the side was one of the finalist teams. It was one

of the boy's Colton recognized from the pool and next to him was none other than Robbie.

“I knew Gio would make it,” Charley grumbled a little. “This is a problem.”

What?” Colton asked pushing aside his anxiety at seeing his tormentor for a moment.

“Gio is really into animals. He actually wants to be a zoo veterinarian so he probably really wants the prize of getting to help with feedings,” Charley explained.

“Maybe we should just let him have it then,” Colton said. “It sounds like a good opportunity for him.” Colton really did mean what he said but it had less to do with Gio's aspirations and more to do with the fact that he didn't really want to have to face Robbie again. Maybe if he could convince Charley that his friend was more deserving of the prize he would go along with just stepping aside. Charley gave Colton a slightly exasperated look.

“No way,” Charley said. “We've come so far we cant give up now, where is your competitive spirit?”

“I guess I don't have one,” Colton said with a middling tone. Charley looked at him for a moment before giving a sigh.

“Its that Robbie kid right? You scared of him?” Charley asked having also taking notice of Gio's teammate.

“No,” Colton yelped a little louder than he had meant to. He looked around seeing that no one else seemed to have taken

notice before he crossed his arms. “He's just some stupid kid,” Colton mumbled.

“Thats right,” Charley said seizing upon Colton's animosity. “This is your chance to get back at him, think how mad he'll be if you beat him. He's probably walking around here puffing his chest out like he's all that since he made it to the finals, I suspect Gio has been carrying him the whole way.”

Colton gave a sigh to signify he was on board.

“Plus I'll need you if they ask a penguin question,” Charley said.

“Huh,” Colton said not having any idea where that comment was coming from.

“Don't you like penguins?” Charley asked pointing to the penguin picture pinned to Colton's shirt.

“That's nothing,” Colton said as his cheeks went red and he quickly tore the penguin off his shirt and stuffed it into his pocket. Charley merely chuckled.

“Lets just do this,” Colton grumbled.

They were then called into the room as Colton walked across the front to the their table as the tiger den cheered him on. He smirked a little realizing they were pretty excited that one of them had made it. It was new for Colton has he had never had a group of people actually cheering him on. The finals steamed ahead and Charley's suspicions about Gio were found to be true as he seemed to be answering most of the

questions for his team. Charely and Colton however were keeping up. Things began to wind down as the third team was eliminated leaving a tie between Colton and Charley and Robbie and Gio. They were in sudden death.

“Okay,” Mr. Darius said as he turned to Colton and Charley with their question. “I actually only have one question left, so lets see what happens.” He brought the card up. “Where does the world's only marine lizard in the world hail from?”

Since it had gone into sudden death they were no longer giving multiple choice and the teams had to come up with the answer on their own. Colton looked questioningly at Charley who just gave him a frown and shrugged. Colton furrowed his brow. He sat there thinking about what answer would make sense. It would be something tropical right? Mr. Darius began a ten count. Colton was wracking his brain. Obviously if it was the only one of its type then it had to come from a specialized environment. Mr. Darius was on three when Colton looked up.

“The Galapagos islands,” Colton suddenly blurted out. There was a murmur throughout the room.

“That's right,” Mr. Darius said with a smile obviously not expecting a tiger scout to have known the answer. “Looks like we have a tie,” Mr. Darius said. Another chatter went through the room as now it was undecided who would get the prize. Mr. Darius excused himself to the side while he and some of the other leaders along with Naomi the keeper from earlier had a discussion. After a few minutes Mr. Darius walked

back in front of the group.

“Okay after some deliberation we have come to a decision. Its getting late and it seems our competitors aren't letting up one bit. So we will have to end with a tie and both teams will be receiving the prize, lets give our winner's a round of applause.”

The room erupted with clapping and some hoots and hollers. Naomi came over to the two tables.

“All right you boys go get your stuff and then meet me at the entrance and I'll take you over to the keeper's hut.”

The boys got up and exited the room to go and get their things from their respective rooms. Charley and Colton were walking down the hallway when Colton spoke up.

“I don't think I'm going to come,” he said with some gloom in his voice. Charley stopped and turned around with a shocked look.

“What do you mean? We won, you have to come,” Charley said still completely startled. It wasn't that Colton wasn't happy to have won, he was ecstatic about it, yet thinking about the fact that he would now be sleeping in a room with Robbie of all people gave him some anxious hesitation. Colton knew that a kid like Robbie would fully seize on the opportunity to mess with him, something Colton would rather not deal with. As much as he hated to admit it he would feel a lot more comfortable with the rest of the tigers. He felt a little angry at himself. He was once again running away, but it had

become such a normal reaction for him at this point that it was hard to fight against.

“Look, I'm not really a morning person so I don't really want to get up early,” Colton said not even convincing himself. Charley gave him a somewhat disappointed look as they sat in silence for a moment.

“Get your stuff Colt, and quit being a wuss,” Charley said before he walked off. Colton put his hands in his pockets as he watched Charley walk off. He deserved that one. He turned and walked into the room where his stuff was. He grabbed his backpack and sleeping bag. Colton then walked out of the room. He felt that Charley had been a tad bit harsh, but maybe that's what Colton needed. Charley wasn't going to let him take two steps back to retreat into a safety net that Colton had swore up and down he didn't particularly enjoy. Colton decided that he was going to push forward, he didn't want to run away any more.

Colton arrived at the front entrance. Charley and Gio were talking yet Robbie was nowhere to be seen.

“And here is the other thorn in my side,” Gio said as he regarded Colton. “I seriously thought I had this one in the bag. You're pretty smart for a little kid.”

“Um thanks,” Colton mumbled.

“He is,” Charley said with a smirk “Too smart to be a tiger cub”

Colton shot Charley a nervous glance which Charley

shrugged off.

“So you excited to help feed the animals in the morning and getting to sleep in the keeper's hut? Pretty cool, huh?” Gio asked his tone showing that he had no doubts about Colton being a little kid.

“I mean I guess,” Colton said sounding somewhat nervous yet it was simply a reaction to being talked to in the overly excited way older people talked to little kids.

“You don't sound very excited are you nervous or something? Is this the first time you've slept away from home?” Gio asked in a completely innocent way.

“Wha...No,” Colton said a little flummoxed. Gio looked at him with some curiosity before he narrowed his eyes a little.

“Is it Robbie?” Gio asked. Colton looked back shocked. He didn't really know what to say as his voice caught in his throat. “I heard about the fight you two got in,” Gio started. “Charley also told me about what he did to you as revenge.”

Colton looked at Charley with a stunned look as Charley leaned back against the wall not seeming to be bothered. Why would Charley tell people about that? Had Colton been wrong about him were his suspicions about this being one big con to humiliate him been right? Colton quickly dismissed the thought. He knew Charley long enough by this point to know that was a ridiculous notion.

“Robbie is kind of a jerk sometimes,” Gio concluded. Colton

almost wanted to ask him why he had taken him as a partner. “But family is family so I still gotta look out for him,” Gio said answering Colton's question as now he understood why Gio had known about the incident.

“He's your brother?” Colton asked a little curious as he didn't exactly see a strong resemblance.

“Nah just my cousin,” Gio said with a wave of his hand. “But you don't gotta worry about him, I'll make sure he doesn't mess with you.”

Gio gave Colton a reassuring smile. Colton was glad to hear that Robbie was going to be contained yet he still felt a little humiliated at having to be protected from and eight year old by a kid his own age.

Before any more could be said on the subject Mr. Darius appeared with Robbie and Naomi in tow.

“Okay gang,” Mr. Darius said calling the attention of the boys. “Since you are the winners you get to sleep in the keepers hut. Now remember you are all scouts and should show proper respect while out and about, so listen to Ms. Naomi here.” Mr. Darius then tossed a bag of candy into Charley's hands.

“Its part of your prize,” the troop leader explained. “It was meant to be split between only two of you but I trust that you'll all figure out a four way split fairly.” The boys nodded as Naomi smiled before leading them out of the building.

“The keeper's hut isn't too far,” she said. As they walked out into the evening Colton could see that the sun had gone down and the moon was out. However it was eerily dark as some storm clouds were rolling in. Thankfully the pathways were lit up up by lamps. Naomi lead them through the zoo proper. As Colton looked at some of the habitats he could see they were empty, the animals no doubt had been housed away for the night. They walked over a wooden bridge Colton peered over the side to see it crossed over a steep embankment that had a small trickle of water running through its center. A sign over head the other end read “African Safari” as they made their way through the new section Colton could see it was decorated like an African village.

“Here we are,” Naomi said coming upon a rather nondescript building. She lead the group inside flipping on a light. They were standing in a room that had a couch on the wall and a small tv along with a counter with a sink and a fridge.

“This is the main room you guys can set up in here,” Naomi said walking in. She then pointed to the the other two doors identifying one has the bathroom and the other as a bunk room where the keepers slept over night. “Well I'll leave you guys alone, if you need anything I'll be back here,” she said as she walked into the bunk room. “Don't stay up too late, remember you'll have to get up early.”

With that the boys were left alone. They laid out their sleeping bags, Gio then disappeared into the bathroom before coming out wearing his sleepwear which consisted of a white tank top and some athletic shorts. The others took his lead

each of them coming out in what they were going to sleep in. Colton went in after Charley putting on his own pajamas which were some flannel pants and a plain black t-shirt. He was happy to get out of the cub scout uniform in some weird way he almost felt as if he was getting back into normal clothes after wearing a costume. Colton walked out into the room to see that the other three boys were now in a circle the bag of candy having been opened.

“Took you long enough,” Robbie said. “Have trouble getting dressed without Mommy's help?”

“Robbie shut up and go get changed,” Gio said throwing Robbie's bag at him. The boy snickered a little to himself as he went to the bathroom. “Don't listen to him,” Gio said with a grumble.

Colton just nodded. In actuality he hadn't really paid much mind to Robbie's comment.

“What are we going to do with this?” Colton asked taking a seat in the circle.

“I guess we can divy it up,” Charley said. “Although I'm not really into candy.”

“I got a better idea,” Gio said crawling over to his bag. He dug around for a moment before coming back to the circle with a deck of cards. “Lets make things a little interesting, you guys up for some poker?”

“Oh I'm in,” Charley said with confidence. Colton gave a little frown as both boys now looked at him.

“I don't really know how to play,” Colton admitted.

“We'll teach you,” Gio offered.

“Its not hard,” Charley said. “Plus you can use your phone to look up the hands.”

“Oh yeah I guess,” Colton said as he opened his backpack and brought out his phone and began to look up the hand combinations.

“Woah that's a nice phone,” Gio said. Colton looked up for a moment a little surprised by Gio's reaction. Its not like it was the newest model or anything, in fact it was a hand me down from his Mom.

“Is it?” Colton asked holding up the phone with some interest.

“Yeah,” Gio nodded. “My parents would have never let me have a phone that nice when I was your age.”

“Oh,” Colton said as he looked back down at his phone realizing what Gio had been surprised by. For a moment he had forgotten that Gio thought he was a little kid.

Robbie reappeared from the bathroom wearing a some pajamas with the skull of a trex on the front and some black plants that had dinosaur bone footprints on it. Colton did a double take having to remind himself that Robbie's pajamas were appropriate for someone his age. The part that stung was realizing that Robbie who had been able to overpower him so completely was in fact much younger than him, however Colton was glad for once that he was finally not

wearing the most juvenile outfit in the room. Gio brought Robbie up to speed as to what they were doing as he started divvying up the candy they would be using for betting.

“Remember poker is a game of deception,” Charley said dealing out the cards. “You're good at that ain't ya Colton,” Charley said with a smirk. The boys began to play.

Colton was a quick study as he picked up on the rules just fine and with the cheat sheet he was actually winning a couple hands here and there. Robbie wasn't having as much luck as he didn't seem to grasp the concept that he was an open book and was making wild bets hand after hand. It came down to a hand where Charley and Gio had folded. Colton looking at his hand realized there was very little chance of him losing. He pushed in most of his candy. Colton had figured out that Robbie's only goal seemed to be taking candy from him. The boy had been absolutely delighted early on when a bad draw had seen Colton losing a large chunk of it to Robbie. Colton knew Robbie wouldn't be able to resist.

“Don't cry when you lose,” Robbie said as he followed along just as Colton had anticipated. The two of them revealed their hands. Charley let out a stifled laughter looking at Colton's hand. Colton went to gather up his winnings.

“I won,” Robbie protested slamming his hand on the pot.

“No you didn't,” Gio said as he pushed Robbie's hands away. Robbie looked on confused.

“But I got three of a kind,” Robbie said. “He doesn't even

have any matches," Robbie said showing just how much he misunderstood the objective of the game.

"Its a straight flush," Charley said. "That beats your three of a kind."

Robbie looked at his his cards and then back to the all of his candy that he had put in the pot as the realization set in that he was going to be left with nothing.

"He cheated," Robbie said.

"Nobody cheated," Gio said. "You made a bad move. You should have looked at the guide like Colton than you would have known that its not just about matching cards, this isn't go fish."

It was true that Gio had offered to let Robbie look on a cheat sheet as they had let Colton. Robbie had refused saying he didn't need help like a baby making sure to give Colton and all too superior look as he said it. Colton found himself actually feeling a little bad for Robbie, even after everything he had done to him.

"This game is stupid," Robbie said with a pout as he put his chin on his hands in a pout. Colton then pushed the candy that Robbie had bet back towards him.

"You can have it back," Colton said. "You're still learning after all," Colton said. It had been meant as a small mercy but it would have been a lie to say that there hadn't been a small dig directed at Robbie in Colton's words.

“Gee Robbie,” Gio said with some exaggeration showing that he was trying to lead him on. “Maybe you should thank Colton for not taking all your candy.”

“He cheated, I'm not thanking him,” Robbie said with a sneer as he grabbed his candy back and scuttled away to his sleeping bag like a greedy squirrel hiding away its nuts.

“Hey,” Gio said as he made a move towards Robbie.

“Its fine,” Colton said playing it cool in a way to show he didn't really care, which was true. He didn't really care about the candy or Robbie. Gio rolled his eyes a little at his cousin before rejoining the circle. The three of them continued to play a little more before they realized how late it was getting and they decided to turn in. As Colton layed back on his pillow he could hear the sound of a heavy rain hitting the roof and some rumblings of thunder off in the distance. He thought of how great the night had turned out. Playing cards with the others had been fun and for once he hadn't felt so out of place. This what it was supposed to be like. These were the kinds of things someone his age was supposed to be doing. Before trying to have an experience like this had seemed so impenetrable to him. Now it was different. In a month he would be moving and he resolved himself to not let this be a fluke. He was going to put in a real effort to make friends no matter what. Colton drifted off to sleep brimming with the resolve that things were going to be looking up for him.

Chapter 19

Summer of the Tiger: Chapter 19 - Chapter 19

A Tiger at its Lowest

Colton came to as his eyes fluttered awake. The room was still dark and the storm outside had picked up. After a moment Colton was struck by the feeling that something was out of sorts. He sat up and put his hands on his sleeping bag. He pulled his hands away immediately upon feeling that the outside was damp. He squeaked a little. A sudden thought crossed his mind, had he wet the bed? He put his hands into the bag feeling his pants. They were dry as was everything inside of the sleeping bag. Colton let out a sigh of relief. No that would have been crazy for him to suddenly have an accident in his sleep. Charley sat up as he looked over at Colton still a little asleep.

“Whats happening,” he said still groggy as he rubbed his eyes.

“My bags wet,” Colton whispered.

“Did you have an accident?” Charley asked as if it were the most normal question in the world.

“Noo,” Colton responded with some panic . Now it was Gio's turn to wake and sit up.

“What are you guys talking about?” he said sounding a little annoyed to be woken up.

“Colton's sleeping bag is wet,” Charley said.

“Oh, did he have an accident?” Gio said his tone instantly changing to a softer and understanding one.

“I did'nt have an accident,” Colton said through gritted teeth, offended and embarrassed that they would entertain such a thought.

“Mine's wet too,” Charely said realizing he was in the same situation as Colton. He got out of his sleeping bag and got to his feet. “The floor is damp too,” Charley said as he walked over to the light switch. The light reveled that they were laying the middle of a rather large wet spot. Just then the door to the bunk room opened and Naomi came out.

“Its in here too,” Naomi said with some frustration.

“Whats going on?” Charley asked.

“The roof is leaking all over,” Naomi said as she walked over to a wall and traced her finger up it showing that there was a steady stream of water coming down it. “Alright, you guys need to get packed up you will have to move you back into the main building,” she said with a sigh before going back into her room. The boys gathered their things as Gio woke up Robbie. Naomi reappeared dressed in a raincoat and had some umbrella's in her hands.

“Its raining pretty hard so lets move fast,” she said handing an umbrella to Charley and one to Robbie. As the boys exited out into the downpour Colton found himself sharing with Robbie. As they walked Robbie would occasionally move the

umbrella a little so that the rain would hit Colton.

“Knock it off,” Colton said after the third time when it became apparent that Robbie was doing it on purpose. Robbie however just snickered a little. As they came to the bridge over the ditch they saw that chains had been put up on either side.

“Hang on a moment,” Naomi said as she went to undo the the chain barriers leaving the boys near the edge. Colton peered over the edge and could see the small stream from earlier had become more like a shallow river now as the rainwater rushed through.

It was then that Colton felt the tiniest push on his back. As he stumbled a little forward his foot hit a mud spot and he slipped. It all happened so fast that before he could even realize what was happening he was splashing down into the water. He sat for a moment at the bottom feeling the water soak every inch of him before he stood up. He immediately got to the side and managed to climb up, Charley grabbing his hand and helping him up the the last bit.

“Oh no,” Naomi said as she came rushing over. “Are you all right?”

“Y-yeah,” Colton said still a little frazzled at what had just happened.

“That edge gets a little slippery,” Naomi said placing a hand on Colton's back. Colton looked at the others. Gio and Charley looked on with concern while Robbie had a wide

eyed look in his eyes. Colton furrowed his brow. There was no way he had just slipped he knew that he felt someone push him. It had to have been Robbie the only question now was had he really meant to send him tumbling into the ditch, could Robbie possibly be that rotten?

“C'mon we better get you inside fast,” Naomi said with some urgency as she lead Colton away as he was still trying to get over the shock of it all. Charley had switched off with Gio and was now walking next to Colton and Naomi with the umbrella while Gio and Robbie walked with each other. Colton didn't really see much need for the umbrella now as he was soaked to the skin. They made their way to the building where the rest of the scouts were.

“All right you boys can find your way back to your rooms on your own while I help out Colton here right?” she asked. The others agreed. “Oh and we should probably tell one of the leaders about this,” Naomi added.

“I'll find them,” Charley said as he gave Colton a sympathetic smile before walking off. Naomi lead Colton into a room. It looked to be a break room of some sort with a counter with a sink and microwave and a fridge as well as a couch facing towards a television. She walked into another room that was a bathroom and reappeared with a towel.

“Here,” she said kneeling down as she began drying his hair.

“I got it,” Colton said a little flummoxed as he took the towel into his hands and did his best to dry himself.

“All right then, it would probably be best to get out of those wet clothes you have a change right,” Naomi said as she grabbed his backpack and unzipped it. “Oh boy,” she said as she put a hand into the bag. “This stuff is wet too.”

“No, no, no,” Colton said becoming panicked as he abandoned the towel and started to pull his other clothes out of his bag. It was just as Naomi said, everything was sopping wet.

Just then there was a knock at the door as Sandy and Brady entered.

“Charley caught us in the hallway,” Brady said.

“Oh Colton honey,” Sandy said rushing up to him and putting a hand on his shoulder. “You just have the worst luck staying on your feet dont'cha.”

Colton frowned a little looking away. The way she had said that had made him feel like she was talking to a silly little boy who couldn't be trusted not to get messy. Colton bit his lip a little upon realizing that was exactly the kind of person she thought she was talking to.

“Are you okay, does anything hurt?” Sandy asked.

“He seems to be okay,” Naomi said as Colton nodded his head confirming that he was fine. “Only problem is all his stuff is soaked.” Brady picked up Colton's sleeping bag seeing that it was also dripping wet something which Colton hadn't realized since when he had carried it with him after getting out of the ditch everything had been wet.

“Well this is a problem,” Brady said sucking some air in through his teeth. The adults in the room all fell silent each one of them trying to come up with some sort of plan.

“We have a washer and dryer on site,” Naomi said. “I can throw his stuff in their so it will be dry in the morning.”

“Oh that would be great,” Sandy said. “We just need to figure out what to do in the meantime.”

“I can go to the gift shop,” Naomi offered. “There will be shirts he could wear in there plus we do sell sleeping bags for younger kids as well, free of charge of course as an apology,” Naomi said giving Colton a wink. “We just don't sell pants,” she finished.

“Hmmm,” Sandy hummed looking at Colton as if she were sizing him up. “I have something that might work,” she said with a nod of her head as she made for the door. “I'll be right back.”

“I'll go grab the other stuff,” Naomi said before she took her leave as well. Colton was left alone now with Brady. He was starting to shiver a little.

“You might want to get out of those wet clothes,” Brady said noting Colton's shivering.

“Sure,” Colton said as he went to the bathroom. He took off his shirt first wringing out some of the excess water, however it did little to dry the shirt out, Colton now saw there was no fixing this problem. A knock then sounded on the door.

“Colton, dear can you open the door for a moment,” he heard Sandy say from the other side. He looked at the shirt not really wanting to put the wet thing back on. He grabbed the towel and put it over his shoulders just so he wasn't bare chested as he opened the door. He saw Sandy standing in the doorway holding something at her side.

“Okay, you're probably not going to like this, but given the circumstances I think you'll just have to bear with it for the night as we don't have a lot of other options.”

Colton braced himself, he certainly didn't like the ominous nature she was talking in. It certainly reminded him of how his Mom had talked to him right before she was about to give him some bad news. He watched as Sandy proceeded to hold up what she had in her hand. It took a moment for Colton to even recognize what it was, she was holding a pull-up in her hand. What was worse is that it was about as babyish looking as it could get. It had bright blue sides on it along with some pictures of cartoon bear cubs on the front, no doubt something she had grabbed from Jordy, Sandy's four year old kid's bag. Colton's eyes went wide as he felt the breath go out of him.

“I'm not wearing that,” Colton finally managed to say. Sandy gave a little sigh signifying that she had fully expected this reaction.

“Its all we got,” Sandy said.

“But I don't need that,” Colton said as his voice shook.

“Well you sort of do,” Sandy countered. “Not for the purpose its used for, but all of your other clothes are wet, we simply cant send you to sleep naked from the waist down.”

Colton took a step back, there was no way this was really happening, it all had to be some sort of bad dream.

“Hey Colton,” Brady said now speaking up as he knelt down to Colton's level. “Nobody here thinks you actually need it, but Sandy's right we don't really have any other options.” Colton looked from Brady to Sandy. It seemed that no one was going to budge, even if what they were saying was true how could they possibly expect him to go along with it.

“I can't do it,” Colton said as his voice cracked an octave and he felt himself on the verge of tears. Brady stood up seeing that no amount of reassurance was going to convince Colton.

“I don't think we have any other choice here,” Brady said looking back at Sandy. “We're just going to need to call his Mom.”

Colton looked up with surprise. Of course why hadn't he thought of that? They could just call his Mom to bring him some clothes although at this point he was probably just going to ask to go home as the night had really taken such a turn that in Colton's mind there was no salvaging it.

“I guess so,” Sandy said as she pursed her lips taking a glance towards the window, the sound of rain beating down on it filling the room. “With this storm though the roads will be pretty bad, I would hate for her to have to drive in this.”

Colton furrowed his brow thinking on Sandy's comment. It really was storming outside. Colton knew his Mom wouldn't hesitate to come rushing out to the zoo in the middle of the night especially if she knew he was in some sort of crisis. The troubling thought then crossed his mind. What if something did happen on her way in. He was brought back to when he had first heard about her accident on the worksite. He remembered how scared he had been. He didn't really want to go through that again, especially if he was the reason for it, he would never be able to forgive himself.

“I have her number in my phone,” Sandy said pulling out her cellphone.

“Wait,” Colton yelped causing Sandy and Brady to look at him. “Don't call her,” Colton said in a small voice. “I'll wear it,” he said completely mortified by what he was about to do.

“Okay,” Sandy said with a nod. “I'll still have to call and let her know whats happening, but I'll assure her you're okay.”

“Just don't tell her about...you know,” Colton said not able to even bring himself to say the word.

“Of course,” Brady said. “We'll be the only three people who know and me and Sandy won't say a word.”

“That's right,” Sandy assured him as she handed him the pull-up. Colton took it into his hands feeling the soft material that let out a slight crinkle. Naomi then walked into the room as Colton hid the object behind his back.

“Okay I found some stuff,” she said set setting the bundle of

stuff in her arms on the counter. “This shirt looks like it will fit,” she said as she held up a green t-shirt that had some cartoon animal mascots on it with the words “Zoo Kids Club” written on it in big letters. “And check this out. She then unfurled a bright orange sleeping bag with tiger stripes all over it. The bag even had a cutesy tiger hood on top that if pulled up would make it look like a cute little tiger. “Perfect for a tiger scout,” Naomi said with a big smile.

“I'll say,” Brady said with a laugh as he looked at Colton. “What do you think of that?”

Colton forced a little smile. In reality though he wasn't pleased. It seemed like he had just gotten out of having to wear clothes like the shirt and use kiddie things like the sleeping bag, yet here he was again being forced into them again. Naomi then mentioned that the storm was causing some damage so the keepers were now monitoring the situation but there would no doubt be some clean up to do once the storm cleared, the bad news being that it would probably not be possible to take the boys out in the morning for the feedings.

“Sorry about that,” Naomi said with an apologetic look towards Colton.

“Thats fine,” Colton said. Its not like he had really been all that enthused by the idea in the first place and at that moment it was the farthest thing from his mind.

“Just set the wet stuff up at the front office when he's done changing,” Naomi said as she went to the door. “I'll make

sure its all dry for the morning bright and early."

"Sounds great, thanks for everything," Sandy said before Naomi finally left. Colton walked over to where Naomi had left the shirt and grabbed it off the counter before he went into the bathroom closing the door behind him. He set the things down on the counter and looked at himself in the mirror. His hair was still wet and with just the towel and the soaking wet pajama pants he really did look like some half drowned mouse. He took off his pants and underwear before picking up the pull-up looking at it. He couldn't believe he was actually going to go through with this. He dried himself off as best as he could before he stepped into the pull-up grimacing as he pulled it up to his waist. It actually fit him perfectly, something which did not offer him any comfort in the moment. He then took the shirt and pulled it on over his head. He looked at himself in the mirror. In his estimation he looked even younger now than when he had been wearing the hand me down clothes. The shirt did little to hide the pull-up as it only came down far enough to cover the top half. The images of the little bears floating around with the colorful balloons was fully visible. Colton closed his eyes hoping that the next time he opened them he would find that this was all just some horrible hallucination. He opened them again to see the same reflection staring back at him. He felt completely humiliated staring at his current state. Just then the sound of his Mom's voice rang in his head the words roll with the punches sounding off within his mind. Colton took a deep breath, there was nothing he could do but bear it as he certainly was not going to be doing any grinning. He gathered

up the wet clothes and stepped out of the bathroom. He was shaking a little as he caught sight of Sandy who looked at him with her phone to her ear.

“Hey, I got your Mom on the phone. She wants to talk to you,” Sandy said holding the phone out to him. He took the phone and put it up to his ear.

“Hi,” Colton said in a near whisper.

“Hey bud, heard you're having a rough night,” Grace said in an overly cheery tone.

“It could be going better,” Colton said feeling just a little better hearing his Mom's voice.

“Do you want me to come pick you up?” Grace asked.

“No, everything's fine,” Colton said quickly. As much as he wanted her to come and get him he didn't want to put her in danger, not too mention his clothes would not be dry by the time she got there and the thought of her seeing him in his current get up was too much to bear.

“It sounds like they found some clothes for you to wear, so I guess everything is under control,” Grace said. Colton felt his heart jump a little wondering if Sandy had kept her promise to remain discreet.

“Yeah, like I said everything is fine,” Colton said trying to sound as if nothing was amiss and she had no reason to worry about him.

“Ok well I'll be there in the morning so hang in there,” Grace

said.

“I will,” Colton said before handing the phone back to Sandy. They continued to talk a little as Brady returned. He took Colton's wet clothes and put them in the backpack with the rest of his stuff.

“Alright, follow me,” Brady said doing his best not to make any reaction to what Colton was wearing or perhaps it was more out of the fact that this didn't seem to be something extraordinary for someone Colton's supposed age to be wearing. As they walked down the hall Colton stayed close behind Brady hoping that no one else would be wandering the halls. They came to the outside of where the rest of the tiger den was sleeping.

“Okay I put your sleeping bag near the door I also checked and it seems like their all fast asleep in there so just be quiet while getting in your sleeping bag and no one will be any the wiser.”

Colton could only nod.

“I'll get this stuff back to you first thing in the morning,” Brady said holing up Colton's bag. “You know I gotta say your are being very mature about all this,” Brady said.

“I guess,”' Colton said finding little solace in Brady's comment. How mature could he really feel wearing a pull-up meant for a toddler?

Brady then opened the door slowly as Colton clenched his teeth a little almost as if he were a prisoner about to walk in

front of the firing squad. He walked into the room. The rest of the kids were spread out all over the place. As Brady had said it seemed like everyone was fast asleep as the only noise that could be heard was the sound of soft breathing. A lamp on the back table was on which cast a dull glow in the room. Colton squinted as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He made out the bright orange of his tiger themed sleeping bag a couple feet away from him. He tiptoed towards it trying to be as quite as possible, yet to him the slight crinkle of the pull-up sounded almost deafening. He got to the sleeping bag and quickly got in. He let out a quick sigh of relief, it seemed no one had seen him. Colton rolled over on to his side to get comfortable. His heart dropped when he found himself staring at Tristan whose eyes were wide open staring right back at him, a small smirk on his face.

“You're back,” Tristan whispered.

“You're awake,” Colton whispered back completely panicked. Had Tristan seen?

“Oh yeah, I woke up when Brady came in and laid that sleeping bag out,” Tristan said. Colton felt his face flush red and he could feel beads of sweat begin to form on his neck. It had just been all but confirmed that Tristan had seen him walk into the room and he had no doubt noticed what he was wearing, how could he not have. Colton looked at Tristan, there was only one option here, he was going to have to throw himself to Tristan's mercy.

“You cant tell anyone about what you saw,” Colton said. As

Colton said it he was trying to convince himself this would work.

“About the pull-up?” Tristan asked his whisper even quieter. Yet in a way it seemed that Tristan had been eager to mention it.

“Shhh,” Colton shushed. “Yeah that. Please I'll do anything you want just please don't tell anyone okay,” Colton said. He wondered for a moment what Tristan would demand of him to keep his secret safe. Tristan stared back with a somewhat pained expression. Colton's heart was beating faster now to him it seemed like his pleas were not hitting the target. He could only surmise that to a six year old this was the absolute height of comedy how could he not say anything with something this juicy. Maybe Colton would just have to accept that it was going to get out. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, this was after all the last time he would be doing anything scout related, after the month he would be leaving this place for good. But as he thought of the embarrassment that he would no doubt have to endure the next morning he decided that he had to do what he could to avoid it.

“I know you probably think its really funny, but I don't want to get made fun of,” Colton said trying to get Tristan to see how bad it would be for him. To Colton's surprise Tristan screwed up his face and laid his head back onto his pillow looking up at the ceiling as if he were somehow offended by what Colton had said.

“I don't think its funny,” Tristan said. “And I'm not going to

tell anyone.” Colton let out some air through his nose. Tristan at least seemed like he meant what he said. Colton was just going to have to trust him.

“Thanks,” Colton said bowing his head. “I've just been having an awful night, this was the last thing I needed.” Colton said venting for a moment. As he did everything seemed to start to hit him. The humiliation of everything he had just had to endure from falling into the water to having to wear a pull-up and a childish shirt and even having to now sleep in a sleeping bag meant for a little kid. Colton began to sniffle a little although he was holding it back as best he could.

“Hey Colton,” Tristan said after a moment of silence. Colton looked up at Tristan who had a sort of apprehensive look on his face. “You know, if it makes you feel better, you're not the only one.” Tristan said as he patted his sleeping bag. All at once a light bulb went off in Colton's head. Memories of the sleepover at Grants house then played in his head. He hadn't given much thought to Tristan's weird behavior back then it hadn't even really registered as strange at the time but now everything seemed to take on a different meaning. Colton gave Tristan a kind of dumbfounded look. He couldn't believe that Tristan had divulged such a thing to him and the fact that he had done it to make him feel better.

“Thanks,” Colton said. “That helps.”

“That's what friends are for,” Tristan said with a little smile.

With that both boys laid back down knowing their secrets were safe with one another. Colton closed his eyes listening to the steady rhythm of the rain outside knowing that for right now things were okay.

Chapter 20

Summer of the Tiger Chapter 20 - Chapter 20

Chapter 20

The Tiger's Final Roar

Colton opened his eyes as he could see that sunlight was now coming in through the windows of the room. He sat up rubbing some sleep from his eyes looking around the room, taking a second for him to remember where he was.

“What are you doing here?” Grant asked as he stood at the foot of Colton's sleeping bag as some of the boys were up and walking around.

“Wha,” Colton said still coming out of sleep.

“I thought you were sleeping somewhere else?” Grant said. The events of last night came rushing back to Colton, not to mention what he was wearing. Colton bunched his sleeping bag around his waist making sure that anything below his stomach was out of sight.

“Oh yeah well there was a leaky roof so we had to come back,” Colton said trying to stay calm. Grant didn't seem to take notice of Colton's flustered reaction.

“We're doing battlmonsters over there,” Grant said switching the subject. “C'mon some kids brought their cards.”

Colton looked to where Grant was pointing and saw some kids huddled together over some cards.

“I'm just going to stay here,” Colton said knowing there was no way he was getting out of his sleeping bag.

“Why?” Grant said cocking his head. Colton pursed his lips trying to come up with a good excuse.

“Its cold out there,” Colton said with a wary look knowing it was a weak excuse. Grant seemed to take it in stride as he walked off. Colton watched the boys from across the room for a moment as he watched more kids waking up. He looked to the door wondering if Brady was going to show up soon since Colton didn't see his bag anywhere in the room. Tristan sat up and let out a big yawn before scratching his stomach as he smacked his lips together a couple of times before looking at Colton with a smile.

“Hey,” Tristan said as he crawled out of his sleeping bag. “Are you okay?”

“What do you mean?” Colton asked.

“You look sad,” Tristan replied.

“I'm just waiting for Brady to bring me my clothes,” Colton said giving another glance towards the door.

“Why does he have your clothes?” Tristan asked. It was then that Colton realized that he had never told Tristan what had happened last night. Upon realizing this Colton actually came to have some more respect for Tristan. He had just accepted

Colton as he was the previous night, he hadn't needed some grand explanation. Maybe it was because Tristan was in a similar boat, but Colton could only feel that even if he wasn't he still wouldn't have made fun of him. Colton thought for a moment how to respond. He could just tell Tristan the truth of why he was wearing a pull-up but on the other hand that would probably make Tristan feel differently about his own secret that he had divulged. Tristan had only admitted it since he had probably felt that he and Colton were in the same situation, but if he knew that this was not a normal thing for Colton would he maybe feel self-conscious?

“Some of my clothes got wet on the walk over here last night,” Colton said as he went on to recount the events of last night to Tristan leaving out the part about the pull-up being a temporary solution only because he had nothing else to wear.

“Hmmm, I see,” Tristan said after hearing Colton's tale.

“I just hope he gets here soon,” Colton said once again glancing at the door. As if he had somehow summoned Brady with his last comment the door opened and the tiger leader strode in with Colton's bag in his hand.

“All right boys, I see everyone is up and ready,” Brady said. “Why don't you all get your stuff so we can get changed and head over to breakfast.”

The boys went and gathered their bags up and lined up at the door. Colton felt a little awkward as everyone else was going to line up and he was still sitting in his sleeping bag. He looked to his side to see Tristan was also still standing on his

sleeping bag a nervous look on his face. Colton could certainly guess why. Changing in a room with the others while trying to be discreet would certainly be a task for any kid. Colton remembered back to the sleep over. Tristan had probably woken up earlier than everyone else to get changed.

Brady opened the door and told the group to head to the bathrooms. The line began to move as Brady came over to Colton and set his bag down on the ground.

“Once their gone you can change here,” Brady said in a whisper and a wink. “Tristan what are you doing hurry up the line's leaving,” he said noticing Tristan still standing still.

“Umm okay,” Tristan said a little shaky as he grabbed his own back pack against the wall and took some nervous steps towards the door.

“Could Tristan change here too?” Colton asked seeing how nervous he was.

“Huh,” Brady said a little surprised that Colton was asking for someone to stay behind with him since it seemed that would be the exact opposite of what he would supposedly want.

“Buddy system, ya know,” Colton said in a small pleading voice. A look of understanding came over Brady's face as he realized what Colton was asking for. There was no doubt that he had been made fully aware of any special needs any of the tiger's had, including nighttime issues.

“That'll be fine, but hurry up,” Brady said with a smile as he

got up and left the room closing the door behind him. Colton finally slid out of his sleeping bag feeling the cold air hit his legs. He felt a tad bit embarrassed now standing in front of Tristan in just a shirt and pull-up, even though he knew Tristan was wearing the same thing, at least he had pants to cover his.

“Oh you wear those,” Tristan remarked. Colton gave him a quizzical look. “Those are for little kids,” Tristan said with a chuckle. “You should ask your mom to get these,” Tristan said as he pulled his waistband down a little to reveal his own protection which had spider man on the front. “they're for big kids like us,” he said with a smile.

“I didn't really have a choice,” Colton stammered feeling his ears go a little hot.

“Yeah my Mom used to do the same thing,” Tristan said with a nod. “But then I told her I was too old to be wearing pull-ups for babies and so she got these ones. She said their disposable underwear.”

“Yeah I'll ask,” Colton said unzipping his bag and pulling out his dry clothes not wanting to bring up that there wasn't much of a difference between the two garments. Colton pulled off his shirt quickly before standing up to undress completely.

“Um where are we going to change?” Tristan asked bringing Colton to a pause. He had been in such a hurry to get out of his pull-up that he hadn't taken into consideration that he was going to have to get completely naked. Colton looked around the room seeing that there wasn't anything in the way of

privacy.

“We can just turn our backs to each other,” Colton offered as the only real solution.

“Yeah I guess, Tristan said with some hesitation. Colton turned to face the door as Tristan turned the opposite direction. Colton got his clothes out laying out his uniform and pants and finally grabbing his underwear. He wanted to be able to change as fast a possible. The door opened and time seemed to slow down as Colton saw Charley standing in the doorway. Colton could only stare back dumbfounded. As soon as Charley saw him he could only return the same look of disbelief. Colton tried to say something but found his voice caught in his throat as he dropped his underwear onto the ground.

“S-sorry,” Charley stammered as he quickly closed the door. Colton stood still frozen in his spot.

“Did someone just come in?” Tristan asked as Colton turned to look at him. He had his shirt off but was still wearing pants which made his position all the more enviable to Colton. Tristan walked over to the door and saw there was a lock on it which he pushed in. “Who was that?” Tristan asked as he walked back towards his stuff.

“One of the boy scouts,” Colton said in a sort of dazed way. “He saw me.”

“He probably doesn't even know who you are,” Tristan said noticing Colton's expression. “Its not like they ever talk to us.”

“Yeah,” Colton said, although he knew full well that everything Tristan was saying to him didn't apply. Colton went back to the task at hand getting dressed in his scout uniform as quickly as possible, yet his mind was racing. What was he going to say to Charley the next time he saw him? What was Charley going to say to him? The only conclusion Colton could concoct in his mind was that Charley wasn't going to want to hang out with him anymore. Who would want to hang out with the kid that wears toddler pull-ups to bed. Colton recalled the previous night when Charley had asked him if he had wet the bed. At the time Colton had chalked it up to Charley once again making some joke about his current situation with everybody thinking he was a little kid. In many ways Colton didn't really mind when he did it as it was meant in a lighthearted way, a kind of inside joke between the two of them. However now that Charley had seen what he saw he wondered if Charley was going to think he did actually wet the bed at night.

Colton threaded his orange neckerchief through the gold clasp and put on his hat. He looked at the ground to see his pull-up on the ground. He looked at the trash can and saw it was just a small one. If he put it in there someone might see it. He wondered for a moment what he was going to do with it. He turned to see Tristan putting a plastic bag with his own nighttime protection contained within in his back pack. Colton picked up the pull-up and stuffed it into the bottom of his own backpack. He would have to figure out a discreet way of disposing of it when he got home. He certainly did not want his Mom to find it.

“I wonder whats for breakfast?” Tristan mused as he put his bag against the wall and headed for the door as Colton followed. They came into the hallway and didn't see anyone else. “Where are we supposed to go?” Tristan asked looking around a little lost.

“C'mon this way,” Colton said taking the lead. He didn't actually know where to go but knew that the rest of the group were most likely still at the bathrooms. As they came to the bathrooms they could see there were people still changing but there was no sign of the tiger den. Colton could only conclude now that they had moved on to where ever it was they were going to eat. It wasn't hard to figure out as the two boys seemed to just follow the stream of people that were moving towards another part of the building. They finally walked into a large room that looked like a cafeteria.

“Hey you two made it,” Brady said coming in standing in front of them.

“You could have waited you know,” Tristan said with some indignation. Colton did agree on some level that it had seemed a little strange that they had been trusted enough to find their own way. During his months living as a little kid Colton had been reminded that adults rarely left kids his supposed age alone without supervision. Brady merely chuckled.

“I was going to swing back with the group to get you guys,” Brady said. “But Colton's mom said he would be able to get here on his own, I guess she was right.”

“My Mom's here?” Colton asked completely forgetting that one of the reasons he even came to this thing was because she had already signed up to help chaperon.

“Yeah she's over at the table,” Brady said pointing across the cafeteria. Colton looked over to one of the tables. He saw his Mom sitting their chatting with some of the other tigers. She looked up at him and smiled with a wave. At that moment Colton wanted to run to her. All the anxiety welling up in him. All he wanted was to hug his Mom. That would make him feel better. Colton immediately shook his head becoming aware of what a childish urge that had been.

“Go get some breakfast and then join up with the rest of the group,” Brady said as he pointed out a buffet station set up across the room. Colton and Tristan made their way across the large room and got in line with their plates. Behind the serving station it seemed that the boy scouts were in charge of dishing out the different options. Colton moved down the line taking some toast and scramble eggs as well as some fruit. He moved down the line further.

“Hey, there's my little buddy,” a voice said as Colton looked up to see Gio behind the line with some tongs in his hand. “Looks like you dried out,” Gio said with some good cheer.

“Oh um yeah,” Colton said not wanting to have to think about last night.

“So you want some sausage,” Gio said holding up a patty.

“Sure,” Colton said lifting his plate up watching Gio slap the

greasy patty onto his plate. “Thanks looks good,” Colton said deciding if he was even going to eat the thing. Colton went to move down the line.

“Hey Colton,” Gio said stopping Colton for a moment. Gio leaned in close.

“Did Robbie have anything to do with you slipping last night?” Gio asked in a whisper. Colton pulled his head back a little looking at the deeply serious look on his face.

“I don't know,” Colton said. It was the truth. At the time he could have sworn he had felt something give him the lightest of shoves but now he was second guessing it. “I don't think so,” Colton said as Gio stood back up with a questioning nod of his head. Colton moved on coming to the end of the line. He was walking past the door that lead to the kitchen when he came to a stop as he almost ran into someone coming out. He looked up to see Charley with a metal bin of scrambled eggs in his hands steam still floating off of them.

“Woah there,” Charley said stopping himself from running into Colton. He looked down only to realize it was Colton. “Oh...Colt...hey,” Charley said with an awkward look.

“H-hey,” Colton stammered feeling just as awkward.

“You gonna eat?” Charley asked looking at Colton's plate.

“Yeah,” Colton said not even able to look up from his plate.

“Well I hope its good,” Charley said.

“I'm sure its fine,” Colton responded. They both stood neither one of them wanting to make a move. Colton was about to move but stopped himself. He had hoped that Charley hadn't really gotten a good look since he had only been there for a second before closing the door. Colton had hoped he would have been able to brush it off as Charley being mistaken in what he had seen. But given how their conversation had went it was now crystal clear that Charley could not mistake seeing Colton in his pull-up. Colton wanted to just walk away. What use was it now? He was gone in a month, but he didn't want to leave things like this. He had to say something.

“About what you saw um well...” Colton began to say.

“You don't have to say anything,” Charley said quickly cutting him off. “If anything I should apologize I didn't know anyone was changing in the room.

“It wasn't my choice,” Colton said. “That's just what they gave me since there wasn't anything else.”

“Yeah I kind of figured that out,” Charley said with a chuckle. “I'm sorry again I really should have knocked.”

“What were you even doing there?” Colton asked.

“I wanted to see how you were doing,” Charley said with a shrug.

“You don't have to check up on me like some little kid,” Colton said frowning at Charley.

“Well excuse me for being worried for my friend,” Charley

said. Colton went to say something but found himself being caught off by Charley calling him his friend. It was reassuring in a way for Colton to hear that Charley still considered him a friend. “Man I do gotta say that must have sucked though,” Charley continued on. “You really do have it hard sometimes. I bet you're pissed at me for convincing you to come.”

“I'm not mad,” Colton said. “I mean its not like its all been bad. It was fun playing cards at least.”

“Oh yeah,” Charley said laughing. “Aaah man when you hit Robbie with that straight flush and then when he realized he lost oh man the look on his face was priceless.”

Colton and Charley shared a laugh as they both recalled it.

“Hey Charley,” a voice called out from the buffet. “We need those eggs.”

“I'm coming,” Charley shouted back before turning his attention back towards Colton. “I gotta go but talk to you later, kay?”

Colton nodded as Charley walked towards the buffet line. Colton couldn't help but feel worlds better after seeing that Charley had been more than understanding about everything. Colton walked over the the table where his Mom was.

“Sit here,” Grant said waving him over as he moved over creating spot between himself and Grace.

“Thanks,” Colton said taking a seat.

“Good morning sweetie,” Grace said. “You sleep okay?”

“Yeah, just great,” Colton said trying not to sound sarcastic.

“That bad huh,” Grace said as she placed a hand on Colton's back and began to rub it softly.

“I'm fine, really,” Colton said as he stabbed into a piece of spongy egg.

“I suppose,” Grace said as her hand moved up and she began to stroke the hair on the back of Colton's head. “Your friends here have been filling me in on all that happened they were telling me about the presentation. So what kinds of animals did they show you guys last night?”

The boys began to shout out their favorites. “What about you, have a favorite?” Grace asked looking at Colton

“I don't know the lemur I guess” Colton said as he pulled his head away from his Mom's hand.

“They also told me you won the trivia competition,” Grace said as she spun Colton's hat around so that it was now backwards on his head. “I knew you had a big ol brain in that noggin.”

“Well I wish I never did,” Colton grumbled as he spun his hat back around. He didn't know what had gotten into his Mom, why was she acting like this, could'nt she just leave him alone? It was really starting to grate on him.

“Anything else fun happen?” Grace asked the table.

“Colton dressed up like a penguin,” Dom said excitedly.

“Oh yeah he even had a penguin name,” Grant said with a laugh.

“Really,” Grace said. “What was it?”

“Crackerjack,” Chris said.

“Crackerjack eh,” Grace said with a small chuckle.

Colton stood up abruptly from the table, silencing the rest of the boys.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” he said before hastily exiting the cafeteria. As he walked down the hall towards the bathroom he muttered under his breath every frustration that was eating away at him. He just wanted this stupid day to be over but it seemed like everybody around him was intent on reminding him about every single thing that had happened. He walked into the bathroom which was thankfully empty and splashed some water on his face. He dried off and then exited to find his Mom in the hallway waiting for him.

“What?” Colton asked with some surliness. Grace just gave him a small smile before she knelt down and held her arms out.

“I think you need a hug,” Grace said with an inviting look.

“I don't want a hug,” Colton said with some gruffness as he made no move towards her.

“C'mon,” Grace said motioning him forward with her hands.

Colton moved forward giving in as he felt his Mom wrap her arms around him. He buried his face into her shoulder as she rubbed his back. For a moment he found a peaceful respite where all his problems could no longer reach him.

“It was a rough one, wasn't it?” Grace asked. Colton knew she was referring to the previous night but in some way it almost seemed as if she was talking about the last three months.

“I don't want to do this anymore,” Colton said.

“I know,” Grace said as she released him. “Just a little more, okay?” she said bringing a hand up to his cheek. Colton nodded, she was right, soon enough this was the last time he would be a tiger scout.

“All right, ready to go back?” Grace asked getting to her feet. Colton displayed an indecisive look. He had managed to eat enough that he wasn't particularly hungry but what else was he supposed to do.

“Lets go get your stuff,” Grace suggested detecting that Colton wasn't quite ready to go back into the fray just yet. “We'll put it in the car so we can leave right after the tour.”

Okay,” Colton said as they walked down the hall towards the room where the tigers had slept. Upon walking into the room Colton went and grabbed his backpack setting it on the ground next to the still unfolded tiger themed sleeping bag.

“This you?” Grace asked picking up the shirt he had slept in with the cartoon animals on it which Colton in his haste had

missed putting in his bag.

“Yeah, this is what they gave me since my stuff was all wet,” Colton said as he began to roll up the sleeping bag feeling a little embarrassed that his Mom was seeing what he had been reduced to. Grace didn't seem to have much of a reaction as she started to unzip Colton's backpack to put the shirt in. Colton's eyes went wide upon noticing what she was doing.

“I got it,” he yelped as he snatched the shirt out of her hand and stuffed it into the backpack before zipping it up quickly. He had pushed the pull-up down deep into the bag but he still felt nervous with his Mom even looking in the bag. Grace just watched him put the bag behind him before going back to rolling up the sleeping bag clearly on edge. Unbeknownst to Colton she had been made fully aware by Sandy of what he had been given to sleep in. With that in mind she could hazard a guess as to what he was trying to hide inside the backpack. When she had been told of the solution part of her had wanted to just come and pick him up without putting him through such an ordeal, but after talking to him on the phone she had concluded that he had mustered up enough resolve to go through with it. Maybe it was better for him to deal with such a thing privately without her having to put herself in the middle of it.

Colton finished gathering up the sleeping bag into his arms and his backpack slung on his back. They got to the car and Colton put his stuff in the trunk. He saw that his actual sleeping bag was already in there. His Mom must have gotten it from Sandy or Brady already. As he put the tiger bag into

the car he wondered why he was even keeping it.

Colton and Grace arrived back in the cafeteria. The rest of the scouts seemed to be cleaning up.

“Looks like I gotta go to work,” Grace commented as they joined back up with the group. Her and Brady began getting the tigers all cleaned up making sure they all threw away their trash and got everyone into a line before Brady took a roll call.

“Okay we're going on a tour, remember to be respectful towards the keepers,” Brady said. “So before we go I think we should give a roar, whaddya say gang?” Brady said as he put his own hands up. He started a countdown as the boys all assumed their poses. Colton put his hands up and let out a roar with the rest of the group. After it was done Colton caught his Mom smiling at the display, he immediately felt a tad embarrassed. He hadn't even given a second though about it as it had become such an automatic response at that point. Before long Colton found himself going along with the group as they got a tour of the zoo before it opened. They were split between different dens of both boy scouts and cub scouts alike. Colton actually enjoyed the tour and found it interesting and it was easy to get a good look at the animals without having to fight through the crowds. The tour came to an end and the two keepers who had been giving the tour now stood in front of them. One of them had a stack of papers while the other held a big plastic bag.

“Now we have a challenge for you,” the keeper with the

papers said. “You are free to wander around for the next hour or so and if you would like we have a little scavenger hunt here for you. If you complete it and hand it in we have prizes here.”

The keeper with the bag then reached in and pulled out two small stuffed animals one was a wolf while the other was a zebra. A line formed quickly as some of the boys seemed eager to get a prize Colton was stood off to the side before he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned around to see Charley.

“Hey man wanted to see if you wanted to come and hang out with the guys while we walk around the zoo?” Charley asked.

“And do the scavenger hunt?” Colton asked. Charley chuckled a little.

“Nah, we were just going to walk around,” Charley said. Colton felt a little stupid, of course they weren't going to do the scavenger hunt, it was off course meant for the little kids. Colton shook it off. He was a little surprised that Charley was inviting him to come and hang out with his friends. On one hand it did sound fun but Colton couldn't help but see a problem.

“Are you sure they would be cool with that, I mean they'll just think I'm some little kid tagging along.” Colton said with some apprehension.

“They aren't like that,” Charley reassured him. “Besides I already cleared it with them and Gio vouched for you being cool. As long as you don't act like a six year old it should be

fine.”

Colton was silent for a moment as he pondered the offer. Charley's assurances were certainly welcome. He was surprised to hear that Gio had even gone as far as to speak up for him. Maybe it would be fine. Colton had enjoyed getting to hang out with kids his age last night even if Gio had been mistaken about his age, it hadn't really gotten in the way of Colton's good time. If this was going to be much of the same he felt he could put up with the fact that he would be thought of as younger than the rest of them.

“Um yeah why not,” Colton agreed seeing another opportunity in front of him.

“Colton there you are,” Grant said appearing from the crowd two papers in his hand. “Me, Chris, Dom, and Tristan are going to do the scavenger hunt together and we got your Mom to take us around so you should come and join us”

Colton found himself standing between the two boys. Grant had a cheerful smile on his face as he extended a paper towards him. Colton then looked at Charley who looked on with a half smile half frown as if he perfectly understood the conundrum that Colton was now in. Colton didn't really know what to do. He would much rather go with Charley. Yet he found that he couldn't deny Grant. What was he supposed to do just tell Grant he was going to hang out with some other kids, older kids?

“Yeah, sure,” Colton said as he took the paper from Grant, yet his tone was less than enthused.

“We're over here,” Grant said as he walked off not even waiting to see if Colton was following.

Colton stood for a moment looking at the paper which had pictures of cartoon animals all over it, confirming to Colton that it was definitely meant for little kids. Charley and his friends would not be caught dead doing something like this.

“Looks like you already got plans,” Charley said with a sigh. Colton felt some shame welling up inside of him.

“No,” Colton said. “I'll just tell them to go on without me,”

“I don't think that's such a good idea,” Charley said crossing his arms. “That kid seemed really excited. If you back out now it would probably upset him, big time.”

Colton knew that Charley wasn't wrong but it didn't help. He had been going along with this little kid stuff for far too long. His tolerance was at its end.

“I'd rather go with you,” Colton said. “I'm sorry.”

“You don't have to apologize, like I said if anything I should be the one saying sorry,” Charley replied.

Colton gave him a quizzical look.

“Look I'm the one that pressured you into coming. I thought I could use this trip as a way to get you to hang out with me and the other guys since I knew there would be some opportunities but I guess that plan kind of blew up in my face and then you had to deal with all that other crap.”

Colton was surprised to hear that this was Charley's motivation all along. Colton could certainly see now why Charley had been so into the competition now. He had seen it as an opportunity to get Colton away from the tigers. Colton now felt all the more guilty about trying to get out of sleeping in the keepers hut and he now understood why Charley had been so blunt with him.

“It was a good plan,” Colton said as he thought about what could have been.

“I'll make it up to you,” Charley said.

“Colton come on,” Grant called out standing in a group with the others as he waved him over.

“Sure,” Colton said as he turned away from Charley and walked over to the other tigers.

“Okay the first clue says a bear who likes Christmas,” Chris said reading off the sheet.

“Easy, that must be the polar bear,” Dom said.

“This way,” Tristan said as he and the rest of the boys began heading off to the polar bear exhibit. Colton walked at the back of the group trying his best not to look bummed out.

“You alright,” Grace asked noticing Colton's disinterest.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Colton said a phrase that seemed to be becoming a catch phrase for him lately.

“What were you and Charley talking about?” Grace said not

buying Colton's answer.

“We were just talking,” Colton said shaking his head.

“You know,” Grace said giving him a pat on the back. “This is probably the last activity you will be doing in scouts. You should try and enjoy it.”

Colton looked up for a moment. What his Mom was saying was true. This was probably the last time he would see these kids that had come to be his friends. As much as he would rather be hanging out with Charley and other kids his age he was still struck by a small feeling of sadness by the fact.

“You're right,” Colton said before he caught up with the group. He did'nt want to ruin their good time. They wanted him there after all so he should try to be happy. He owed them that much. Grace watched as Colton seemed to perk up a little and started helping out with the clues. Colton found it pretty easy to discern where the clues were sending them and then once they got there they would just have to read the information plaque to find the factoid they were supposed to answer. As strange as it was Colton found himself settling back into a groove that he had previously found hard to get back on. He was relaxed again and not worrying so much about how this wasn't what he was supposed to be doing at his age. Before long they were done. They turned in their sheets and each of them were given a different small plush animal as a reward. Colton received an elephant plush for his trouble. Afterwards the boys were all sat on a bench. Chris and Tristan were making their animals fight one another as

they chattered away.

“We should all bring our animals to the next meeting,” Grant said holing up his leopard.

“Why?” Tristan asked.

“Because they are on a team like us,” Grant said. “We should make uniforms for them.

“Ooo,” Chris said. “I'm gonna make a cape for mine.”

“I would make some armor for mine,” Tristan said eyeing his lion.

“They could be like superheroes,” Dom added.

“What are you going to make for yours?” Grant asked looking at Colton.

“I won't be able to,” Colton giving a meek look at Grant. Colton had realized he had never actually told them he wouldn't be attending anymore, but now seemed to be the time. “I won't be coming anymore, since the summer is over.”

“Oh yeah you're moving soon,” Grant said glumly as he frowned a little.

“That stinks,” Dom said as a silence fell between the boys.

“You should stay,” Tristan said speaking up. “Just tell your Mom you want to live here.”

“Yeah,” Grant said excitedly. “Then we can go to the same school and maybe you'll be in the same class as me.”

“I don't think that would be possible,” Colton said as he watched Grant's face soften.

“Our group is going to be one short now,” Chris commented. Colton didn't know what to say. He was surprised to see how sad they all were with him leaving.

“Take this,” Grant said unhooking from his belt loop a lanyard that he and the rest of the tigers had made at last week's meeting. He placed it around the neck of Colton's stuffed elephant.

“Mine too,” Tristan said as he followed suit. Dom and Chris did the same leaving the elephant with four lanyards around its neck.

“Now everyone will know you are a part of the group,” Grant said with a satisfied look. Colton felt a little bad he didn't have his own lanyard to give as he had left it at home opting not to wear it like the rest of the tigers.

“Thanks,” Colton said looking at the elephant adorned with the lanyards of his friends. They were really a good bunch of kids and Colton wished he could have had a group of friends like this when he had actually been six.

“Hey boys,” Grace said appearing from behind. “Brady is gathering up all the tigers right now so lets go.”

The group got up from the bench and joined up with the rest of the den as Brady stood in front.

“The zoo trip was success and I think we all had some fun,”

Brady said as the tigers cheered in agreement. “I'll see you all next week for the meeting but for now I think we need to bring this one to a close with a roar.”

Brady began the countdown and when he reached one Colton let out a big roar, not caring one bit if his Mom was around to see. Summer had come to an end. This was the last time, his last roar as a tiger.

Chapter 21

Summer of the Tiger: Final Part - Chapter 21

Chapter 21

The Last New Start

Colton stood in his room looking around satisfied that he had everything unpacked and set up where he wanted it. He wiped a little sweat from his forehead as he took a seat on his bed and grabbed a soda bottle from his nightstand before taking a swig. He stared off into space for a moment thinking about his current situation. It had been seven months, a whole school year since he had been here, but now they were back in town and this time it was going to be for a lot longer than one summer. He remembered when his Mom had told him that her contract was nearly up and she had been looking for what her next job was going to be. True to her word she had gone ahead and started looking for something more permanent and she had come up with three different options. One was out in California while another would take them to Ohio. The last option was running a refurbishment team in the town they had spent the last summer in, the town where Colton had spent the summer as a tiger scout.

“I can understand why you would be against that last option,” Grace had said. Colton had been silent for a moment.

“Would you like that job?” he had asked hesitant to even

entertain the idea.

“I think I would,” Grace had said not taking him seriously. “I mean it certainly pays the most.” She had continued to look over the other two job offers not noticing the concentrated look on Colton's face.

“Maybe you should take it then,” Colton said as Grace looked up from her laptop. “I mean if you want it,” Colton added.

Over the next week the two of them had discussed it at length and Colton seemed okay with the arrangement and Grace accepted the job not long after.

Colton got up from his bed and walked over to the window which looked out over a yard. His mom had bought a small house for them. Colton was surprised at first but he guessed this meant they were really going to be staying in one place for awhile. His Mom had even remarked that now that they had a house maybe they could get a dog. As Colton continued to look out the window it started to hit him that they were back here and they were here to stay.

“I see you got your room set up,” Grace said standing in the doorway. Colton broke out of his thoughts and looked at her giving her a small nervous smile. “You got enough space in here,” Grace said as she came and stood next to him.

“Yeah, its great,” he replied with a shrug.

“You having second thoughts?” she asked putting her arm around him.

“Kind of,” Colton admitted. He really had started to become a bit nervous. He hadn't figured out what he was going to tell people yet.

“Well its normal to be nervous,” Grace said giving him a squeeze. “But its going to be different this time. No misunderstanding's or anything.” Colton shrugged a little, was that really possible, had this all been a big mistake? Just then the doorbell rang.

“Oh I wonder who that is?” Grace said walking out of the room. A few moments later there was a knock on Colton's door he opened it to find Charley standing in the hallway.

“Woah,” Charley said with some shock as he looked at Colton.

“What?” Colton asked giving Charley a suspicious look.

“I mean I know you told me you had gotten taller but I wasn't expecting you to look this different.

“Oh yeah,” Colton said with a smirk. It was true in the months Colton had been gone he had finally hit a growth spurt. He still got mistaken for being younger than he was of course. He looked more like a fifth grader now. When he and his Mom had stopped off to register for the upcoming school year the office worker had told them that the elementary school was down the road. Grace had been quick to correct and the office worker had been somewhat apologetic when it became clear that Colton was going to be a freshman, yet it still gave him some embarrassment. However in the grand scheme of things Colton was much happier to be mistaken for

a ten year old rather than a six year old. After everything he had went through he knew he could work with this.

“You look completely different,” Charley said still surprised to see the changes of his friend.

“Ya think?” Colton asked holding his arms out as he looked at himself not sure if Charley was just blowing smoke.

“Definitely,” Charley said as he walked into the room looking around. “Looks like your done unpacking.”

“Pretty much, just got to unpack this thing,” Colton said as he walked over to a box and pulled out the latest and greatest gaming console and set it on his dresser where he also had a tv.

“Woah you got one?” Charley exclaimed.

“My Mom bought it just before we moved back,” Colton said. It had been a complete surprise to him when she had. He had been wanting one but he didn't have any money for it. They had stopped at a store to grab some last minute road supplies and that's when she had surprised him with it. She had said to think of it as part of their deal. Colton had been confused by that, he didn't remember any deal.

“You know last summer when I said I wanted you to try and make at least one friend,” she had reminded him. “You exceeded expectations,” she remarked placing the box into his hands.

“Geez lucky,” Charley said as he picked up one of the

controllers and began fiddling with the buttons.

“You wanna play?” Colton asked holding up a game.

“I can't,” Charley said with a disappointed look. “I'm on an errand right now, I only stopped by to say hi.”

“Oh well another time then,” Colton said setting the game down a little bummed as well.

“What are you doing tonight?” Charley asked.

“Nothing really,” Colton said as he saw a small grin appear on Charley's face.

“Great,” Charley said. “Jessica Combs is having a bonfire tonight to celebrate the end of the school year. She invited everybody from class. You should come with me, it would be a good way to introduce you to a bunch of people.”

Colton felt a little awkward about the invitation. He had done alright at his other school, he had even made some friends, yet they had only been people who hung around at school it had never gone farther than that. He still felt a little out of place with lots of people around. As he thought on it more he concluded that it might not be so bad. Charley would be their to introduce him around so he wouldn't be completely alone.

“Yeah sure, sounds cool,” Colton said with a nod.

“Awesome,” Charley said with some excitement. “I'll come back around five and we can ride over there together.” Charley walked to the door and then turned around. “And leave the dinosaur helmet behind,” he said with a toothy

smile.

“Shuddup,” Colton said smiling back as he threw a piece of crumpled up newspaper at the door listening as Charley laughed from behind the door as he walked down the stairs. Colton walked over to his mirror and looked at himself in it. He had been surprised at Charley's reaction. Had he really changed so much? As Colton looked at himself he could see he was taller and he did look older. Maybe this was going to work? Just then his Mom opened the door.

“What'cha doin?” Grace asked having caught him looking at himself in the mirror.

“N-nothing,” Colton stammered a little.

“Whatever you say,” Grace said with a amused smirk. “I'm going to the grocery store, want to come and get some junk food for you to gorge yourself on?”

“Okay,” Colton said without much of a thought to it.

“Great,” Grace said as she turned to leave.

“Oh hey Mom wait,” Colton said causing her to turn back to face him.

“Whats up?” she asked seeing Colton had a sort of cautious expression plastered on his face.

“Charley invited me to a party tonight and I said I would go,” Colton said.

“A party? What kind of party?” Grace asked with a raised

eyebrow.

“Well he said some girl from class is having a bonfire and she invited the whole class, I guess its an end of school year type thing,” Colton said sounding as if he was trying to sell her on it. “I thought it would be good to go and meet people I'll be going to school with.”

“Hmmm,” Grace said putting her finger up to her cheek as if she were thinking.

“Mom, c'mon,” Colton said rolling his eyes.

“Oh alright,” Grace said relenting. “I trust you to behave yourself.”

“Thanks,” Colton said with a smirk.

At the store Colton was walking up and down the aisle's with Grace. He wasn't paying much attention, he was far too caught up in thinking about his plans for later that night. That was until a voice broke him out of his thoughts.

“Well look who we run into, Grace good to see you,” Mrs. Dawes said almost as if she were shouting. Colton's head snapped up to see Mrs Dawes and Mrs. Santos, Grant's mom, standing in front of them.

“Mrs. Dawes, Valerie what a surprise,” Grace said.

“Well isn't this funny,” Valerie said. “I was just telling Mrs. Dawes you were moving back and here you are. Are you all unpacked?”

“Yep, we are finally settled,” Grace said. “I didn't know you two knew each other.”

“I actually just ran into Mrs. Dawes and was talking to her about using that beautiful barn you renovated for the alumuni dinner,” Valerie explained.

“I'm happy to hear its getting some use,” Grace said with a smile.

“Oh hun its been fantastic,” Mrs. Dawes said. “We've already done ten weddings and we hosted the booster club dinner as well. Everyone thinks its just a marvel.” Mrs. Dawes then turned her attention to Colton. “And who is this strapping young lad?” Mrs. Dawes asked with a smile.

“Oh this is my son Colt...” Grace began to say before she trailed off a little.

“I thought your son was a little guy, this one looks a little bigger,” Mrs. Dawes commented with a confused look. Colton shot a panicked look at his Mom. They hadn't really talked about what they would tell people, they had mostly skirted around that problem. Neither one of them having a good solution. Colton felt some of that old anxious energy bubble up in him. He had been hoping to avoid this altogether. It was a modestly sized town he had thought he could have just kept things under wraps without much worry.

“No,” Grace said seemingly recovering. “This is my son Colt, that other one was actually my nephew who was staying with me over the summer. I guess I forgot to clarify since I'm kind

of like a second mom to him and he's called me Mom since he was born. Its kind of a running joke in the family that we sometimes forget its not actually true," Grace said with a laugh. "Colt here was spending the summer with his Grandma."

"They have the same name?" Mrs. Dawes asked a little unconvinced.

"Its a family name," Grace said. "Lots of Colton's in the family."

There was silence. Colton couldn't believe that was the story that his Mom had come up. To be fair though he did understand that she had just come up with it on the spot. Still he couldn't imagine anyone buying it.

"Its the same way in my family dear," Mrs. Dawes said as a smile spread across her face. "Except ours is Jonathan, Oh yes sir we got John, Jonny, Jimmy, even a Nathan." Mrs. Dawes then turned her attention back to Colton. "Well Colt I hope you enjoy the town."

"Yeah it seems nice," Colton said still reeling from the shock that his Mom's story had actually worked.

"Hi I'm Val, its nice to meet you Colt," she said extending her hand.

"Likewise," Colton said trying his best to play it cool. He pulled his hand away quickly hoping it hadn't been sweaty.

"So Colt how old are you?" Valerie asked.

“T-thirteen, but my birthday is in a couple of weeks,” Colton said.

“Thirteen going on fourteen,” Valerie muttered under her breath as she continued to stare at him with an intense look. For a moment Colton thought the jig was up, there was no way she believed the story. “How would you like to earn a little cash?” Valerie asked. Colton blinked a moment in disbelief.

“What?” Colton asked not sure if he had heard her right.

“Me and my husband have to take my daughter out of town for a debate conference this weekend. I have a younger son who was actually good friends with your cousin and well I was thinking of leaving him behind since it would be dreadfully boring for him to be cooped up in an auditorium all day.” Valerie explained. “So whaddya say care to do some babysitting, put a little spending money in your pocket?”

“I don't know if I would be good for that,” Colton said with a great sense of uncertainty. It wasn't a lie he had never babysat in his life.

“Not sure, huh.” Valerie said with a frown as she turned to Grace. “What do you think? Could Colt handle Grant for a couple of hours?”

“Grants a good kid,” Grace said with a shrug. “Colts pretty responsible, I think he could do it.”

Colton fell silent as he shuffled his feet a little awkwardly.

“Well don't feel bad,” Valerie said giving him a touch to his arm. “I did kind of spring it on you.”

“I mean I guess I could,” Colton said making a decision. He knew Grant well enough to know that he wouldn't be trouble and it would be kind of nice to have some spending money.

“Wonderful,” Valerie said with a clap of her hands. “We'll be leaving at eleven and back no later than seven, we'll leave money for pizza and of course you can eat whatever food is in the house. I think a hundred dollars is fair for your time.”

“A hundred dollars!” Colton exclaimed.

“Too little?” Valerie asked.

“No that's fine,” Colton said. “I just didn't think it would be that much.”

“Great,” Valerie said. “I'll see you on Sunday.” With that the two women began to walk off as Valerie told Grace to give her call that night so they could catch up.

As Colton and Grace continued their shopping Colton was feeling a little uneasy about the whole thing.

“Well that went well,” Grace said giving Colton a light punch to the arm. “And you've got a job to boot.”

“Colt?” Colton said side-eyeing his Mom.

“Charley calls you that all that time,” Grace said. “Why do you hate it?”

“No,” Colton said. He actually found he preferred it. He was

surprised the others had seemed to buy the whole story without much fuss. Then again Colton could chalk that up to it being a far more believable story than the truth. The only question now was would Grant buy it? Colton had spent a lot of time around him. If there was going to be anyone to see through him it would be Grant.

Sunday rolled around as Colton found himself in front of the Santos household. He stashed his bike against the garage and walked up to the door ringing the doorbell. As he stood waiting he took a deep breath, he was after all somewhat nervous to see Grant again. The door opened to reveal Mr. Santos standing in front of him.

“You the babysitter?” Mr. Santos asked.

“Yes sir,” Colton said feeling just a tad bit intimidated.

“What was your name again?” Mr. Santos asked.

“Colt,” Colton said watching anxiously as Mr. Santos gave him a once over much the same way he had the night of the sleepover.

“Come in,” Mr. Santos finally said as he opened the door and lead Colton into the kitchen. As they walked in Colton immediately spied Maya sitting at the counter while Valerie seemed to be rushing down the stairs putting on one of her shoes in the process.

“Oh Colt, good you found the place,” Valerie said as she

gathered up some papers. “I realized I had never given you any sort of directions.”

“My Mom told me how to get here,” Colton said thinking on his feet.

“I was sure she would,” Valerie said handing a piece of paper over to Colton. “These are all the numbers of where you can reach us. Money for dinner is on the counter. Let me go and get Grant,” she said before hurrying back up the stairs. Maya got off from the stool and came and stood in front of Colton.

“So you're little Colton's cousin, huh?” she asked crossing her arms.

“Y-yeah,” Colton stuttered a little feeling the sort of nervous energy she had a way of producing in him begin to spread.

“How old are you?” Maya asked as her eyes narrowed.

“Thirteen,” Colton sputtered. He watched as Maya's face immediately brightened.

“So you're going into eighth? Looks like we'll be classmates,” she said becoming excited.

“Actually I'm going to be freshman, I'm turning fourteen next week,” Colton said shaking off his nerves. Maya's lips turned into a pout.

“Oh I see,” she said with some disappointment. “No matter,” she said after a moment. “Since you're new to town if you need someone to show you around I'm totally free,” Maya said as she flashed a look at Colton. The teen instantly felt

some sweat form on the back of his neck. He knew she was an overly forward person but this was getting to be a little awkward. However Colton wasn't really sure if it was all in his head or not. Was she hitting on him?

“I already got a tour from somebody else,” Colton said.

“Who?” Maya said with some interest.

“Charley,” Colton said realizing for the first time he didn't actually know his friends last name.

“Oh I see,” Maya said with a frown. “I guess I remember him saying your guy's families were friends so I guess it makes sense that you know him already.”

Mr. Santos walked into the kitchen.

“Maya should'nt you be going over the debate notes instead of trying to ask the babysitter on a date,” Mr. Santos said with a smirk as he watched his daughters face turn a shade of red.

“Daddy,” Maya yelped covering her face. Mr. Santos could only laugh in response. “He is so dumb,”

Maya grumbled as she uncovered her face seemingly recovering from her embarrassment. “Just so you know my best friend is dating one of Charley's friends so if you hang out with him we'll probably run into each other soon enough, and if you want a second look around town my offer still stands,” Maya said with a small giggle as she grabbed a trapper keeper from the counter and walked off towards the garage. Valerie came back downstairs with Grant following

behind. Colton smiled a little upon seeing him. His hair had grown out a little but for the most part he looked the same.

“Hey dude how's it going,” Colton said in an effort to cover his own nerves. Grant did not reply back and instead stood by his Mom apparently too shy to reply.

“Go on say hi,” Valerie said prodding him a little. “He won't bite.”

“Hi,” Grant said in a voice just above a whisper. Valerie looked at her watch and gave a sigh.

“We gotta go, so I'll leave you two to it,” she said giving Grant a kiss and hug before she and Mr. Santos walked out of the house leaving the two boys standing in the kitchen. Grant was staring at Colton which caused him to feel a little like he was being examined under a microscope.

“Are you really Colton's cousin?” Grant asked finally bringing an end to the awkward silence.

“Yeah,” Colton said bracing himself. Had Grant figured it out?

“I guess that makes sense,” Grant said smiling a little. “You guys kind of look alike.”

“Do we?” Colton said with a nervous laugh. Another pause fell between the boys. “So what do you want to do?” Colton said. “We got some time to kill.”

“I don't know,” Grant said with a shrug.

“Well what are you into?” Colton asked hoping to get Grant

to suggest anything.

“I like BattleMonsters,” Grant said. “Do you?”

“I don't really know much about it,” Colton said. The last time he had done anything related to it had been with Grant. “You got cards?” Colton asked already knowing the answer.

“Sure in my room,” Grant said perking up a little as he lead the way upstairs. As Colton walked into the room he was hit with a strange sense of familiarity. The room hadn't changed at all yet it all looked somewhat different to him. “These are them,” Grant said grabbing a stack of cards from his desk and sitting on the ground. Colton took a seat across from him. Grant was taking out cards and showing them to Colton as he went on about which ones he thought were the best.

“That's a cool one,” Colton said seeing the card he had given Grant sitting on top of the deck.

“Oh yeah, Colton gave that one to me,” Grant said holding the card up and looking at it with some melancholy. “I miss him,” Grant said. Colton was hit by a sense of guilt. He certainly felt bad about deceiving Grant like this. So much so that he actually considered telling him the truth right then and there.

“He misses you too,” Colton said.

“Really,” Grant asked.

“For sure,” Colton said. “He talked about you a lot.”

“I wish he could have stayed,” Grant said as he put the card

on the ground.

“He does too,” Colton said sitting back. “But sometimes people have to move on, they don't have a choice.”

“Yeah I guess,” Grant said frowning a little as he looked down at the floor. “Do you play?” Grant asked looking up at Colton.

“I don't have any cards but I know how to play,” Colton said.

“We should play,” Grant said as he pushed another deck towards Colton not waiting for an answer.

The boys began to play as Colton still remembered enough from his one time duel. As they played Grant became more talkative as he jumped from one subject to the other. Colton listened with a pleasant grin interjecting where he could get a word in edgewise.

“I got you here,” Colton said laying down a card. He watched as Grant furrowed his brow as he realized he had been defeated. For a moment Colton regretted not letting him win. Grant looked up with a smile.

“You're really good at this,” he said as he gathered up his cards. “Did you ever play with Colton?”

“No, I didn't,” Colton said with a chuckle.

“You're much better than him,” Grant said. Colton couldn't help but laugh. Colton then looked to his side and saw the cub scout handbook sitting on the floor. He picked it up and saw the edges were a little curled as the book looked well

read. He flipped through it with a sense of nostalgia.

“You in scouts?” Colton asked hoping to get a little update from Grant on how the others were out of curiosity.

“I'm a tiger but I'm going to be a wolf soon, well hopefully,” Grant said, the last word coming out with some worry.

“Hopefully?” Colton said picking up on Grant's unease.

“We have to complete a project before we can move on. I have to build a birdhouse” Grant said as he grabbed some papers and handed them to Colton. “Its supposed to look like this when its done.”

Colton looked at the papers realizing it was instructions.

“I don't know how I'm supposed to build something like that,” Grant said.

“It looks simple enough,” Colton replied. “I'm sure your parents will help you.”

“That's the problem,” Grant said as a gloomy look spread across his face. “My Dad is out of town next week and he won't be back in time to help. My Mom says she's not good with tools.”

“Yikes,” Colton said with a wince. “That is a problem. But you know its not the end of the world if you do it later, I don't think they would kick you out over something like this.” Colton said in a effort to allay Grant's obvious disappointment with the whole situation.

“They'll still let me come to the meetings, I just wont be able to participate in the ceremony to become a wolf scout,” Grant said. “I really want to do it with everyone else in the den.”

Colton nodded he could certainly see what was bumming Grant out.

“Do you really think it looks easy?” Grant asked as he took the instructions from Colton.

“Sure,” Colton said. “I had to make one in wood shop last year.”

“So you could do it!” Grant exclaimed as his eyes lit up.

“Wha-” Colton said a little taken off guard by Grant's sudden outburst.

“You just said you made one before,” Grant said. “My mom said she was going to ask around to see if one of the other parents could help but if you already know how we could do it today.”

“I mean sure I could help,” Colton said feeling confident enough, he had after all gotten an A on the project himself.

“Great,” Grant said bouncing up and down. “We can use my Dad's tool's in the garage.”

“Hang on,” Colton said thinking better on the whole idea. “I don't think your Dad would appreciate us going through his stuff without permission.” Colton knew it wasn't good to mess with someone else's tools from having grown up with his mom and he was also level headed enough to know that it

might reflect badly on him as a responsible person to do an activity involving power tools without permission.

“Oh,” Grant said as his face fell. “I guess.”

“But hey listen,” 'Colton said having already devised a plan. “I'll talk to your Mom about it tonight. And maybe you can come over and we can use my Mom's workshop. That way we won't have to mess with your Dad's stuff.”

“I'm gonna get to graduate with everybody,” Grant remarked as he showed he found the plan satisfactory. Just then Grant's stomach growled.

“Maybe we should get some lunch, do sandwiches sound good?”

“I want a double decker cheese sandwich,” Grant said with a grin.

“Coming right up,” Colton said.

The rest of the day passed without incident and eventually Grant's parents and Maya returned. True to his word Colton remembered to ask Valerie about the birdhouse. Valerie had of course approved grateful that Colton was willing to help out. Later that week Valerie dropped Grant off at Colton's house. She couldn't stay but was nervous about Grant being around the equipment. Grace assured her that she would keep an eye on the two boys while they worked and would drop Grant off back home once they were done. It took about an hour to put together the house and then another hour for Grant to paint it. The only thing left to do was get Grant's

paper signed by an adult.

“I'm really impressed Grant,” Grace said observing the finished birdhouse on the work table.

“Colt cut out the wood pieces for me, but I nailed it together and painted it by myself,” Grant said with some pride.

“You did a really good job,” Grace said. “In fact I think its better than the one Colt made in school.”

“Really,” Grant said almost in awe that something like that was possible.

“Definitely,” Colton said with a nod. Grant's face lit up with a smile as he looked at the birdhouse.

“Alright why don't you go wash that paint off your hands and then we'll drop you off at home,” Grace said. Colton watched as Grant went into the house followed by Grace. He was happy he had been able to help Grant out. He did feel he still owed him in some way. As Colton began to put some of the stuff away waiting for Grant and his Mom to come back Colton caught sight of the instructions still on the table. He looked at the cub scout symbol displayed at the top. It made him to start to reminisce on everything that had happened last summer. It had been nearly year and Colton couldn't believe how different his life was now. Back then it had felt like he was stuck in a hole he would never get out of. Sometimes it felt as if that summer had happened long ago, instead of just last year.

Colton's phone buzzed as he picked it up seeing it was a text

from Charley confirming he was still coming tomorrow. At the bonfire a couple of days ago Colton had been welcomed into the friend group and they had made plans to go to a theme park an hour away to check out the newest roller-coaster. This was going to be the first of hopefully many group outings with his friends. Colton texted back that he was in before slipping the phone in his pocket. He then opened the garage door and went and stood next to the car as he watched the cars going past on the street. He leaned back on the car and closed his eyes. The days had turned warmer signaling the start of summer as Colton felt the sun on his face. He grinned as if marking this moment. He had a goal in mind. He was going to make this the best summer of his life. The only thing he had to worry about now was how he was going to top it the next year.

THE END