Tanner

by andlat

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The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

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Tanner stormed into the house, as furious as he could be with his bare feet slapping on the linoleum. All he knew were the facts: Derek and Kevin had cornered him and held him down as they teased their ‘widdle cousin’. When they saw that they couldn’t get him to whine and beg for them to let him up like they used to, the younger boys had resorted to meaner tactics: Derek had taken his shoes and run in one direction while Kevin stole his shorts and laughed as Tanner had given chase while trying to keep his gray tank top down over his Spongebob underoos as he wove between groups of chatting adults. He had retrieved his shorts, though he hated that it had taken Kevin’s mom intervening to get them back with a mumbled apology, but now Tanner was on a mission to get his shoes. He knew Derek had come inside, but where had he taken his shoes?

“Great, my hair’s a mess.” Tanner muttered as he passed a mirror. He tried to smooth it down, to no avail. Whatever. Between the hair, the matching tank top and shorts, and just about everything else about him, he knew he looked like he was five, not thirteen. He had begged mom to buy him more mature outfits, which was why he had Player of the Week on his tank top, but there was only so much negotiating power one had when they were sitting in the little seat in the cart.

Where the heck had Derek gone? He figured he went back outside, but he needed to check the whole house first. Uncle Neil had a giant mansion, which was the whole reason why he hosted these things. It made it tough to find a missing eleven year old.

Hearing voices, he figured it did not hurt to ask if anyone had seen Derek. He walked down the hall. Wasn't the playroom down here? Maybe Derek had tried to hide among the little kids. The more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Derek would totally make him go into the playroom to get his shoes back. He confidently strode to it, only to discover a baby gate in front of the door. Geez, these kids were like in prison, he thought. He stood there, trying to see if Derek or his shoes were in there. He suddenly became aware of a smiling woman in a denim skirt looking at him as if she had been expecting him.

"There you are! Derek said you'd be coming. You're TJ, right?"

"Tanner." She smiled.

"No, he told me it's TJ." She came over and, without even asking, lifted him up over the gate and into the playroom. "He said a little boy in a tank top that says Player of the Week who's missing his shoes would be coming to join us."

"Join you?"

"Yep! We're doing fun activities." Tanner looked around the room. Not a single one of the kids looked a day over five.

Well, maybe Courtney. He was pretty sure she was five.

“I think I’m a little old for this. I’ll be fourteen next month.”

“Your big cousin Derek told me you’re three.” Three? That would make him one of the youngest in the room.

“It’s a joke. Derek likes to play”

“I’m sure the big boys will play hide and seek with you another time, TJ.” She said. “We’re finger painting right now and I know you’ll find that oh so fun!” She took his hand and half led, half dragged him over to the table. She only let go just long enough to pull a paint-splattered vinyl smock over his head. He could not help but feel like he was wearing an enormous bib as she gently pushed him into a red plastic chair and pushed it – and him – in so that he was right at the art table.

“I don’t want to finger paint.” He tried to remain calm, even though it felt like a volcano of rage was growing inside him with every passing second.

“Feel the paint. It’s fun!” She dunked his hand into the pot of green finger paint.

“I” he did not even know what to say. How would he get this paint off his hand?

“Tell you what.” She squatted down to meet him eye to eye for the first time. “If you paint me a nice picture, I’ll let you go find your big cousins, kay?” Tanner knew it was a trick, but what could he do? That gate blocked his only means of

escape. He sighed and nodded. “Attaboy, TJ! Show me the kind of painting a big boy three year old can do!” He frowned, but maybe he could prove his age through painting.

“Guess I gotta use green.” He said, looking at his hand. He moved it across the paper, but heard a noise from the door. Standing there was not just Derek, but Kevin too. Derek held up Tanner’s shoes while Kevin held up a phone, getting Tanner at just the right angle to fully show him finger painting in the smock. There was no way he would live this down.